

State seeks investors to help foot bill to build I-4 toll lanes

By Dan Tracy, Orlando Sentinel

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Section 1512 of the recently passed federal transportation bill is filled with technical jargon, but one part is perfectly clear: The law ends a 7-year-old ban on adding tolls to **Interstate 4**. Now the **Florida Department of Transportation** wants to entice companies to [invest](#) hundreds of millions of dollars to build so-called "Lexus lanes" down the middle of I-4, Orlando's main transit artery.

Without plenty of private [money](#), possibly approaching \$900 million, the long-anticipated makeover of traffic-clogged I-4 will not start in 2014, as FDOT anticipates. In fact, it might not start at all. So far, the state has put aside just 43 percent, or \$857 million, of the more than \$2 billion needed to add the toll lanes and to rebuild 20 miles of I-4 from Kirkman Road in west Orange County to State Road 434 in **Seminole County**. The agency also is seeking money from the Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority to [improve](#) the I-4 interchange with S.R. 408 heading west. But the agency is balking at an FDOT request for more than \$250 million. Based on [financial](#) estimates, FDOT could be \$900 million or more short of paying for the makeover. Officials are hopeful they can convince a company to come up with the additional money. It would be repaid with tolls. No one is certain how the work would be financed, though one possibility is borrowing it through the sale of bonds and repaying it over time, maybe 30 years or more. FDOT is contacting potential investors about visiting Orlando this fall to listen to a pitch about the overhaul and what might be in it for them. "They would be interested in wanting [to know] the return on their [investment](#)," said FDOT spokesman Steve Olson. Toll on interstates have become increasing popular nationwide as politicians look for ways to keep pace with road needs without increasing the gasoline tax, the main source of money for highway construction. At least 10 interstates across the country have pay lanes, including a seven-mile stretch of I-95 in Miami-Dade County that was tolled in December 2009. It attracts 67,000 vehicles a day. The tolling trend is expected to continue and grow because gas-tax collections are dwindling, as high fuel prices discourage driving and motorists switch to smaller, more efficient cars. But tolls were not an option in Metro Orlando because U.S. Rep. **John Mica**, R-**Winter Park**, prohibited I-4 tolls in a law he helped usher through Congress in 2005. He backed off the prohibition in the transportation bill that passed June 29.

FDOT has planned for years to overhaul I-4 through the downtown Orlando stretch because it often backs up, particularly during morning and evening rush hours. Several months ago, FDOT hired a consultant to complete a traffic and revenue study on the proposed I-4 toll lanes. That report has not released to the public because it has been under review since early spring. It could determine whether the project is a go, depending on how much toll money it predicts could be collected. Road builders certainly want to see the project go forward. The industry has been in a slump since the 2008 economic meltdown and slow, uneven recovery. Unemployment among road builders hovers around 20 percent. The project would take years to complete and could put thousands of people to work, said Bob Burleson, president of the Florida Transportation Builders' Association. "Selfishly, obviously, it's great news for us. But it's also great news for everyone who uses I-4 in Orlando," Burleson said. Another proponent of the I-4 work is Thomas Chapman, director of Orlando's Downtown Development Board. The extra lanes, he predicted,

would make it easier for employees, shoppers and people seeking food and entertainment to get in and out of downtown. Ironically, the backups that could be caused by the construction could be a boon for the SunRail commuter train, which is supposed to start carrying passengers by May 2014, or about the time work on I-4 could begin. Chapman is hopeful disgruntled motorists will ride SunRail and get on and off at any of Orlando's four stops, including one in the heart of downtown at **Church Street Station**. SunRail, Chapman said, is "a big deal. It can change our lifestyle and commuting habits". The I-4 work would fix inclines in the road and smooth some curves, including the one at Fairbanks Avenue, the scene of numerous rainstorm accidents. Fifteen interchanges would be improved, too, including busy ones at Colonial Drive, State Road 436 and Maitland Boulevard. Pedestrian bridges over I-4 would be built at S.R. 436 and Maitland Boulevard.

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