

## **\$4.3B blitz of transit projects may mean thinking small in future**

By Dan Tracy, Orlando Sentinel

*8:58 p.m. EST, July 14, 2012*

If all goes as planned, Central Florida is about to be on the receiving end of more than \$4.3 billion worth of transportation improvements.

Dedicated to two massive road projects and one train system, the money already is flowing and is not supposed to stop until 2021, when the last bit of asphalt is set to be poured.

But all that work will suck up the majority of money spent on transit in the region and, once done, there may not be much left for anything major.

"It's more a matter of retrofitting existing corridors," said Gary Huttman, deputy director of MetroPlan, which sets transportation policy in Orange, Seminole and Osceola counties.

That means local and state officials could end up spending their diminished resources on much smaller endeavors, such as widening streets and filling potholes, building sidewalks and bike lanes, or maybe converting abandoned rail corridors into walking and bicycle paths.

That type of work will not move large numbers of people or connect cities or regions together, but they still improve transportation and, in the case of sidewalks and bike trails and lanes, take cars off the road.

By offering alternatives to people on foot or on bikes, "you get healthier communities, too," said [Osceola County](#) Commissioner Brandon Arrington, also the MetroPlan chairman.

The key going forward, Arrington said, is "we're trying to be realistic. ... Is that the best way to spend money to move people?"

The problem with continually pouring more asphalt and concrete for roads, he said, is "you still have congestion."

It will cost \$200 million a mile to widen and improve a 20-mile stretch of [Interstate 4](#) and \$65.3 million a mile to build the 26-mile Wekiva Parkway. All told, the budget for those projects is \$2 billion and nearly \$1.7 billion, respectively.

An additional \$615 million, or \$10 million a mile, is set to be spent on the SunRail commuter train linking Volusia, Seminole and Osceola counties with downtown Orlando.

Compare that with the \$133,000 a mile, for a total of about \$4 million, that Orlando is spending to install 30 miles of sidewalks. The money came from a federal grant.

Putting down a new layer of asphalt on a mile of two-lane road costs about \$90,000, something that happens all over the region.

Adding 4-foot-wide bike lanes to repaved or new roads checks in at \$350,000 to \$500,000 a mile, experts say. A 12-foot-wide bike path on an old rail lane runs about \$340,000 a mile.

There are three main reasons for the think-small future of transportation:

- Lack of money. The main source for all transportation funding, the gas tax, is faltering and has been for years. It no longer comes close to meeting road needs, much less for mass-transit options such as buses or trains. The future of the gas tax looks even bleaker with consumption falling because of high fuel prices and drivers opting for more-efficient cars.
- Tax-averse politicians in Republican-dominated Florida and the polarized Congress have pledged not to raise the gas levy, which at the national level has not been increased since 1993. There is no consensus on devising another source of funding.
- Central Florida is running out of room for major road projects. The I-4 makeover, for instance, largely uses existing right-of-way. Buying more land, especially in downtown, would be cost-prohibitive.

Orlando City Council member **Daisy Lynum**, for one, thinks spending more money on I-4 is "almost a joke" because adding lanes just attracts more traffic.

That's why she supports SunRail, which eventually will run 61 miles and is designed to attract motorists frustrated by traffic-clogging construction — if the I-4 redo takes place as scheduled.

"I think we are doing the best we can with what we've got," said Lynum, vice chairwoman of MetroPlan.

But roads and the cars that travel on them will not be replaced in the area or country by trains, buses, walking and biking, at least not anytime soon.

The best option is blending all the modes of transportation and making roads "comfortable," said Lawrence Lewis, a planner with the VHB transportation consulting company.

He embraces a concept called "complete streets." It calls for retrofitting and building roads that not only have room for walkers and bicyclists, but encourage such activities.

"Think about all the users," Lewis said.

*dltracy@tribune.com or 407-420-5444*