

The Road Taken

When it comes to Interstate 4 and its half-century history through Orlando, few motorists have spoken the language of love. Will I-4 Ultimate improve our relationship with the asphalt behemoth? Maybe. But it could take a toll.

BY DAN TRACY

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ROBERTO GONZALEZ AND FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

March 8, 1965, was so unseasonably cold in Orlando that Gov. Haydon Burns stuffed his speech in a pocket, said a few quick words, then cut a ribbon near the west side of Lake Ivanhoe to mark the official opening of Interstate 4.

A little later, Burns talked at length during a catered luncheon, proclaiming that I-4 would usher in an era of unprecedented change and prosperity for The City Beautiful, which had fewer than 100,000 residents at the time and was known primarily as the hub of the state's behemoth citrus industry.

His prediction largely came true, but Burns also knew what only a few select people were in on: Walt and Roy Disney were buying 27,000 acres in Orange and Osceola counties with the intent of building a theme park that would transform metro Orlando

from a largely agrarian-based economy to the tourism capital of the world.





(FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION)

One of the reasons the brothers Disney were interested in the area was because it was at the crossroads of the brand new I-4 and Florida's Turnpike, giving the planned attraction access to motorists from north, south, east and west.

Orlando, as we well know, now hosts a plethora of theme parks and draws 66 million visitors annually—all of them beholden to I-4, which in the last 52 years has become the road we love to hate.

The 139-mile highway that links Florida's east and west coasts, with Orlando in the middle, has become part of our collective identity. It permeates the news with dispatches of wrecks and interminable backups, dominating drive-time updates. No one likes to drive on it, although almost all of us do, typically more than we care to admit. And we always talk about it, much like an annoying neighbor or relative you can't shake from your life or consciousness.

Built to handle 80,000 cars and trucks a day, I-4 is well beyond obsolete. Two weeks after Burns gave his speech dedicating the last section between Marks Street and State Road 436—I-4 was actually built in six segments, beginning in 1958—the highway was already at half capacity, carrying 40,000 autos. Now, it hosts 200,000 vehicles most weekdays, ranging from hulking 18-wheelers and SUVs to motorcycles and sedans.



South of downtown heading north, with express lanes in the middle (FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION)

Even in the midst of a massive six-year, \$2.3 billion overhaul that will double the width of the highway through metro Orlando, the road remains crowded, the grudging route of choice no matter the time of day. The state even spent \$1.2 billion creating a commuter train called SunRail to give harried drivers an escape from I-4, but traffic has not diminished.

And that's with an ever-changing gauntlet of twisting lanes narrowed from a standard 12 feet to 11 feet to accommodate the demands of construction. Drivers already have dealt with 80 lane shifts that entail a jog of just a few feet in either direction to several yards. Hundreds of shifts remain in the offing.

"It's very difficult to ride," concedes John Porter, a 58-year-old insurance salesman who often drives from Celebration in Osceola County to Maitland in north Orange. "You never know where the lanes will be."

The problem for Porter and everyone else is that I-4 is still the most direct, efficient way to get where they are going. There are other roads that mimic the direction of I-4, such as U.S. Highway 17-92 or John Young Parkway, but they are laden with stoplights and traffic, too.

SunRail. Porter says, just doesn't run often enough, potentially leaving him stranded for hours while he waits for the next train.

That means he takes his chances with the construction crews that are adding four toll lanes down the middle of the interstate. Those tolls will be used once work is complete in 2021 to help pay for what is being called I-4 Ultimate.

The Ultimate nickname came about because *this is it* for widening the road, at least within most of our lifetimes. No more stacks of rebar, no more H-shaped, 200-foot-long steel girders being pounded into the ground, no more towering cranes scooping tons of dirt from the earth for a retention pond.

The reason for the future construction ban is simple. There really is no more room, nor, quite honestly, much official desire to pour additional asphalt and concrete through downtown Orlando, where office towers and buildings will be separated from the enhanced I-4 by little more than a city street.

Florida Department of Transportation officials say I-4 Ultimate will be a thing of beauty, or as good looking as a major highway can be when complete. The website i4ultimate.com has all kinds of renderings and video of what the road will look like.



Bless this mess—just four more years of construction remain (ROBERTO GONZALEZ)

The agency has promised to spend \$40 million on a variety of decorative touches, including palm trees, roadside spires and colorful sound walls that likely will be tan—or possibly other colors—rather than an impersonal gray. They also will have patterns rather than smooth surfaces.

The overpasses at Colonial Drive and Lake Ivanhoe will have decorative touches that could include the city name and lighting that's fancier than the utilitarian poles now on the interstate. Palm trees and ground cover will be planted as well.

Roughly \$20 million is to be spent on landscaping in downtown Orlando alone because it is largely elevated and is the most critical section of the 21-mile venture stretching between Kirkman Road to the west and State Road 434 to the east.

Plans call for lighted pylons along the road that will mark where motorists can move from the general, or free, lanes to tolled sections of road. Direct-access ramps will link the I-4 pay lanes with State Road 408.

The precise locations of all the access and exit points have not been determined yet because I-4 Ultimate is being constructed on a “design-build” basis. That means only 15 to 30 percent of the plans were complete when work started two years ago. The state opted for a design-build plan because it saves time and allows for easier modifications if there are unforeseen problems, says Steve Olson, Florida Department of Transportation spokesman.

The biggest obstacle facing I-4 Ultimate is a transportation term known as “induced demand.” Coined during the 1970s, it describes what happens once a road is widened. Quite simply, more traffic is attracted by extra pavement, much like politicians to a wealthy campaign contributor. Over time, a

widened road becomes just as clogged with additional cars and trucks as it was before the expansion. Research indicates that can take months or years, depending on a variety of factors ranging from the economy to community growth.

One day, demand could negate all the work on I-4, says Beth Osborne, a former U.S. Department of Transportation official in the Obama administration and now vice president of technical assistance for Transportation for America, a Washington, D.C., think tank. Road widenings, she says, have “never really proven to be the fix that people expect them to be.”

Osborne is intrigued, though, by the I-4 toll lane concept. She thinks it could help alleviate congestion because people willing to pay to get out of slow-moving traffic will free up space for those left behind.

That's the same argument made by FDOT officials. They point to toll lanes that were installed on I-95 in South Florida several years ago. Studies show speeds on the crowded highway went up as a result of the toll lanes.

Before the lanes set aside for vehicles with two or more passengers were converted to tolls, cars and trucks moved along at 20 mph or less during rush hours, according to FDOT. After the toll lanes were available, the average speeds went up to 50 mph for those willing to pay and more than 40 mph for everyone else.

Tolls on I-95 vary, depending on the time of day, and go from as little as 50 cents when the roads are empty to \$10.50 to ride the entire seven miles when traffic is heavy. A toll schedule has not been set for Orlando, but \$1 a mile or more could be in the offing during times of high-traffic, if I-95 is any barometer.

Along with being a sort of traffic regulator, the I-4 tolls also are making it possible to turn what would have been a 27-year project into a six-year

endeavor, says Loreen Bobo, the FDOT project manager who oversees the private contractors doing the work.

The tolls were used as collateral to borrow money to pay for construction and then go toward paying off the debt once the job is done. Payments could stretch out as long as 40 years.

Bobo sees the tolls as a matter of choice. If you are in a hurry, you can pay. If not, you can roll—or not—with the masses.



Working on road supports along I-4. The 21-mile, \$2.3 billion project adds 53 new bridges along with two tolled Express Lanes in each direction (FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION).

“People’s lives keep going on,” she says. “They need to get to work, to day care.”

Porter, the I-4 commuter, cannot believe he is going through six years of construction so he can opt to ride in a toll lane. “I think it’s ridiculous,” he says. “I will not pay it.”

But Ed Gilbert, who often drives from Lake Mary to the Disney area, would be willing to pay, up to a point. If the toll is 25 cents a mile or even double that, 50 cents, Gilbert says he is in.

“If I can save an hour, or 30 minutes each way, it is just worth it. For me, time is money,” says Gilbert, who owns an advertising and public relations firm.

But jack the toll up to a \$1 or more a mile, and Gilbert—who in theory would be riding the entire 21-mile tolled stretch—says the answer is likely no. “Would I do that every day? That’s stupid money,” he says. “A dollar a mile seems pretty heavy.”

Of course, no one envisioned the amount of traffic I-4 one day would carry when it officially opened on that chilly day in March 1965. The fact that within two weeks it was at 50 percent of capacity came as a shock to some of the engineers involved in the construction during the early 1960s. In a 1990 interview published in the *Orlando Sentinel*, one construction manager recalled being worried that there would not be enough cars for the six-lane highway.

“Where in the hell will all the cars come from?” engineer Bill McKelvy remembers asking a colleague.

All of Central Florida was the short answer. Motorists flocked to the region’s first and only interstate because it was fast. Driving from Altamonte Springs to Orlando took eight minutes, less than a third of the 25 minutes the trip previously consumed using U.S.17-92 and State Road 436, according to *Sentinel* accounts.

By the 1990s, I-4 had hit 140,000 cars a day. The numbers continued inching up through the years, though they declined for a while during the economic recession of 2007-2010.

Ironically, one of the first drivers to ever hop on I-4 was issued a ticket, says Grace Chewning, the retired city clerk of Orlando. It was given to then-Mayor Bob Carr. He was driving to City Hall downtown and decided it would be quicker to jump on the new interstate—before it was officially opened. An FHP trooper thought otherwise, Chewning says.

“You sir, of all people, should know better,” Chewning says the trooper told Carr.

Although few question the need for I-4 now, the route it took was controversial. Many in the community wanted to see it go to the east by Lake Killarney, or to the west, closer to U.S. Highway 441. But the downtown merchants association, as well as an array of Orlando’s power structure back then, including Martin Andersen, the owner and publisher of the *Sentinel*, prevailed and got approval for the current path.

Although residents 50 years ago referred to I-4 as the Orlando-Winter Park Expressway, the federal government considered it a link in a burgeoning national highway system. The road, after all, connected the east and west coasts of Florida, as well as interstates 95 and 75, which also were under construction at the time.

To this day, nearly 60 percent of the traffic on I-4 is local, compared to more than 40 percent going through Orlando. The 1965 price tag for I-4 was \$114 million, with \$42 million spent in Orange County.

What no one knew back then was that the 1960s design standards would be inadequate for today's needs. In addition to the curves and undulations that mark the road—think of the infamous and accident-prone Fairbanks Curve—the builders also filled in a portion of Lake Ivanhoe. All of that is forbidden now.

I-4 Ultimate is supposed to smooth out the hills and straighten out many of the curves, including the one at Fairbanks, but will not reclaim landfill from the lake.

Chewning, who worked for Orlando for 47 years before retiring in 2000, is not a fan of the interstate. "It's more of a minus," she says. "I think Orlando would have survived admirably without it."

I-4 Ultimate construction started in early 2015 and is supposed to be completed by 2021. I-4 Mobility Partners—the international consortium chosen by the state to rebuild the highway—also spent months moving an armada of heavy equipment and workers into place, much like the military arranging divisions of soldiers and tanks before a major offensive.

Adding to the consternation of Porter, Gilbert and their driving brethren are the roughly 50 accidents, broken-down cars and debris that muck up the road each day now. It's something akin to an amateur's version of a wreck-filled Daytona 500, which is little exaggeration because people still speed on I-4, particularly after the morning and afternoon peak commute times.

Try 60 to 80 mph through downtown, where the posted speed limit is 50 mph. That is what speed monitors are routinely recording.

"People are just flying through that downtown area," says David Feise, traffic maintenance manager for SGL Constructors, the company in charge of the I-4 Ultimate construction phase.

Florida Highway Patrol Sgt. Kim Montes says rear-end collisions and sideswipes are the most common accidents because traffic often slows or stops unpredictably.

Both Feise and Montes say they have seen no decrease in traffic since work began. That means people would rather drive I-4 than skirt off onto smaller, often crowded roads slowed by traffic signals or take the SunRail commuter train that was created largely as a relief valve for drivers fleeing the construction.

Feise takes the steady level of traffic as something of a compliment because SGL is keeping the same number of lanes open—usually six to eight, depending on entrance and exit ramps—as were available before the advent of the I-4 Ultimate. Much of the heavy and most distracting construction occurs at night.

SGL also has as many as 12 so-called Road Ranger trucks on the highway at any given time to assist motorists and get whatever is slowing or stopping traffic out of the way. By contract, a Road Ranger must respond within a half-hour of an incident being reported, although they typically show up within 15 minutes, Feise says.

Friday afternoons, he adds, are the worst time for accidents. "People are tired from work and they're looking to go home"—a mindset that makes them more mistake prone, he says.

I-4 Ultimate is broken up into four work zones by SGL: the attractions area from the western border of Kirkman Road to near Michigan Street; downtown, from Michigan to Colonial Drive; the Ivanhoe district, from Colonial to Maitland; and the Altamonte suburbs, from Maitland to the State Road 434 eastern terminus.

The most critical and complex section is downtown. There are two reasons: Much of the highway is elevated, often by as much as 16 feet; and the overrun State Road 408 interchange, where traffic has backed up for years, both east- and west-bound.

Crews are building extensive new bridgework downtown, which takes exponentially longer than simply clearing flat land and paving it. They are working on eastbound lanes first, then will switch to westbound, all the while constructing new bridging in the middle for the toll lanes.

The 408 connection to I-4 remains a mess, with the trumpet-like design that was state-of-the-art when it opened in 1973, but is now overwhelmed by the crush of traffic. The interchange was never meant to handle the 80,000 vehicles that now crawl along it each workday.

SGL crews are building long, sweeping ramps, or flyovers, to replace the old configuration, which is highly banked and forces drivers to weave within a few hundred yards to go in their desired direction.

The new interchange is set to cost \$650 million, with \$230 million coming from the Central Florida Expressway Authority, which owns the 408 toll road. When finished, the interchange will encompass five levels of road. The westbound I-4 traffic to westbound 408 will be 100 feet high, or roughly the same height as the Amway Center on the west side of the interstate.

I-4 Ultimate will serve a region of more than 2 million people and a city that may top 300,000 residents, if growth trends continue. Orlando has gone from a compact downtown made up mostly of two- and three-story department stores, locally owned restaurants, churches and residences to a place with office towers and condominiums, high-rise hotels and entertainment venues like the Amway Center and the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, that together cost nearly \$900 million.

A new interstate will complement the feel and vibe of Orlando, the sense that the town that seems to always have construction cranes dotting its skyline is about now and the future, not the past.

“For me, personally,” Gilbert says. “I can’t wait.”

I-4 Ultimate Fast Facts

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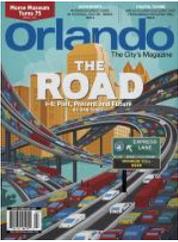
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