

I-4 makeover has bridge, tunnel for pedestrians, cyclists

By Dan Tracy, Orlando Sentinel
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Toll lanes may be the most-talked-about feature of the \$2.1 billion makeover of **Interstate 4**, but the state is throwing in a couple of perks for nondrivers, too.

The project sets aside \$3.4 million for a pedestrian and bicyclist bridge over I-4 just south of the Maitland Boulevard interchange and a tunnel walkway linking Wymore Road and Douglas Avenue just west of the State 436 overpass.

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"Pedestrians and bicycles are important. They need to be considered," said Loreen Bobo, an engineer overseeing the I-4 work for the **Florida Department of Transportation**.

Construction is supposed to start late next year or early in 2015, with completion by 2020. But nothing will happen until the state convinces a private company to cover about half the cost and be repaid over time with tolls. A meeting with prospective bidders is set for March 4 in Orlando.

Much of the money — about \$1.1 billion of which has already been set aside by FDOT — will be spent to add four toll lanes in the middle of I-4 for 21 miles from Kirkman Road to State Road 434. Outside lanes would remain free, leaving drivers with transponders to pay tolls to avoid traffic jams. Rates would vary depending on time of day and congestion.

Other major enhancements include reconstructing 15 major interchanges; replacing or improving dozens of bridges; and smoothing out inclines and softening curves, including the one at Fairbanks Avenue, the site of numerous wrecks.

Work could take six years to complete, and Bobo said it is impossible to predict what will be done first. That decision, she said, would be made by the company that wins the contract.

Regardless of priority, the pedestrian bridge and tunnel will be built, she said, because one of the ideas behind upgrading I-4 was to "make it better for all modes of transportation."

Marcus Bagnell, who prefers riding a single-speed bike to get around town, said he supports anything that makes life a little easier for cyclists and walkers, especially bridges and tunnels.

"I think those things are great," said Bagnell, a 27-year-old Ph.D. candidate in laser engineering at the University of Central Florida.

Maitland and **Altamonte Springs** were chosen because those areas are difficult for walkers and bicyclists to navigate because of heavy traffic, said Mighk Wilson, a smart-growth planner and cycling expert for MetroPlan Orlando, which sets transportation policy in Orange, Seminole and Osceola counties.

He said the bridge should link the business parks and apartments west of I-4 to the subdivisions on the east. Cyclists who use lightly traveled Sandspur Road on the east, he said, could get over I-4 to other routes on the west.

Maitland Mayor Howard Schieferdecker said the city intends to build bike paths and add bike lanes to roads to take advantage of the bridge.

"We are going to work hard to make it work for our citizens," Schieferdecker said.

The tunnel in Altamonte Springs is especially important to people on foot or a bike who want to get across oft-congested S.R. 436, he said.

"High-speed interchanges are very challenging," Wilson said.

It is cheaper to create a tunnel, he said, because the road is elevated, making it easier to bore through rather than build above ground for a bridge.

Both the bridge and the tunnel, Wilson said, provide the area with mobility options.

"We should make it easier for people to use whatever mode they want," he said.

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