

County pushes on Ridge Road

By [Jodie Tillman](#), Times Staff Writer

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NEW PORT RICHEY — Last week, Pasco commissioners learned the long-awaited Ridge Road extension could run, literally, into a dead end.

The Florida Turnpike Enterprise is not setting aside over the next five years the \$21-million needed to link the first phase of the proposed four-lane highway to the Suncoast Parkway.

But given their hope that federal approval for the project could be close, commissioners on Tuesday decided to lean on their transportation lobbyist and state legislators to fight for the turnpike funding now rather than later.

"We can't just sit here and twiddle our thumbs," Commissioner Ann Hildebrand said at Tuesday's meeting.

Meanwhile, state Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, called Secretary of Transportation Stephanie Kopelousos last week and asked her to look into getting some money for the interchange.

"We're behind it 100 percent and I've been behind it 100 percent," he said.

His pitch: At least start setting aside a portion of that \$21-million so that it could be available in roughly two years.

Fasano had asked County Administrator John Gallagher when he expected the road to be built out to the Suncoast Parkway.

Two years was the answer — if the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers approval comes through over the next couple of months and if there are no challenges to the permit.

But Fasano acknowledged that it might not be an easy case to make: Transportation officials do not want to reserve that much money for a project with so much uncertainty, especially when the turnpike's revenues have taken such a huge hit.

"It's important for everyone to understand we're talking \$21-million," said Fasano, who has helped keep the Ridge Road interchange project in the state's five-year work plans until this year.

"If Ridge Road was going, this would never have happened," he said.

Envisioned as an east-west hurricane evacuation route, the Ridge Road extension has been plagued by delays, most recently dealing with environmental concerns.

Commissioners were livid last week after learning that Florida Turnpike Enterprise had dropped the Ridge Road exchange from its five-year work plan. Instead, the turnpike has allocated \$33.5-million for resurfacing the parkway.

Back in 2005, commissioners had agreed to let the turnpike put the then-\$13.5-million interchange on the back burner. The understanding? When the county got its permit in hand, the turnpike would move the interchange project back to the front.

Turnpike officials say that their previous investments show they've been committed to the project until the economy forced them to cut \$2.5-billion dollars worth of future projects, including the Ridge Road interchange, from their five-year work plan.

When they were first building the Suncoast Parkway, for instance, they changed their construction plans to accommodate the proposed Ridge Road interchange. That change cost between \$6-million and \$7-million, said Raymond Ashe, director of government affairs for Florida's Turnpike Enterprise.

In addition, turnpike officials spent around \$1-million earlier this decade to design the interchange, "which would have allowed us to move forward quickly once Pasco County had obtained their environmental clearances," Ashe said.

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