
Seven road projects moving forward

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Construction work is ongoing for the first phase of the Osceola Parkway improvement project, which stretches from just east of Florida's Turnpike to the parkway's intersection with Buenaventura Boulevard.

By Jessica Solis Staff Writer

When the amount of development in Osceola County began to decline, a long list of projects — mostly funded with transportation impact fees paid by developers — had to be put on hold.

But the county, in an economically bleak year, has managed to move forward on seven large-scale road projects totaling \$163 million.

It happened through what officials are calling the county's own stimulus project in which they rethought how road projects were funded and approved.

Now, road projects are getting started at a pace never experienced before in Osceola County, officials said, paving the way for a countywide stimulus project that continued this week.

On Dec. 11, county officials broke ground to begin the expansion of Old Lake Wilson Road, a \$22.9 million project that will be finished by December of 2012.

It's one of the county's seven major road projects in progress.

"It's very aggressive," County Public Works Administrator Ken Atkins said of the road improvement program.

When the impact fee money stopped flowing into certain districts with upcoming road projects, the county, with approval from the County Commission, had to borrow money from those districts that were receiving impact fee payments, but had no immediate projects lined up.

The shift of funds and construction methods then resulted in 11-road segment improvements scheduled to begin in a one-year period.

One of the methods includes using hired construction managers to oversee the projects. That meant moving the county away from the standard, design-bid-build process and shifting to more projects being completed through a construction management firm responsible for overseeing and subcontracting most of the work.

According to Public Works Magazine, which featured the county's road improvement program in its September issue, the county's road improvement program is the largest one in the United States using the construction management method.

"That's why we've been catching so much attention," County Project Manager Gregg Hostetler said. "It's unusual for a program, especially at a county level, to be so aggressive and get so many projects under construction."

Narcoossee Road, the county's largest project, began late last year and is scheduled to be finished by the fall of 2012.

The \$72-million road expansion goes 7.2 miles from U.S. Highway 192 to Boggy Creek Road, an area that officials are anticipating will be in the beginning stages of growth by the time the road expansion is completed. Currently a two-lane road, Narcoossee Road will grow to a four-lane road, with room to further expand to six lanes, if needed.

The project's three phases are simultaneously under construction, which has resulted in shifting traffic patterns.

"Anytime you have live traffic, it's like building a building with people in it, so you have to shift people over, and work on it, then shift people back," Atkins said. "A road widening project is much more complex than new construction."

The first phase of Osceola Parkway, one of the largest projects ongoing, broke ground in August. The \$11.7-million expansion project involves a 3.3-mile stretch from Florida's Turnpike, to Buenaventura Boulevard. It's scheduled for completion the spring of 2012.

The project has left residents living in portions of Buenaventura Lakes adjacent to Osceola Parkway wondering if they will eventually see a new screen wall go up along the road that would serve as a buffer between their homes and the expanded roadway.

Atkins said public works officials are finalizing the estimates of how much a wall could cost, to take to commissioners for approval next year. Impact fees, which are the county's main funding source for the project, cannot be used to fund the wall's construction.

John Young Parkway also is undergoing a makeover that includes a flyover to help relieve traffic flowing into the road. The project stretches 1.5 miles from Parnell Street at the Orange County line, to Carroll Street.

The project is scheduled for completion in the summer of 2011. It received \$6 million from the state through the County Incentive Grant Program, and an additional \$8 million through the Transportation Regional Incentive Program, Hostetler said.

The second phase of the Poinciana Boulevard expansion that began this summer also is under way, and scheduled for completion in the spring of 2011

Atkins said it's up to commissioners to decide if they'll fund the additional four projects that have been sidelined due to insufficient funds.

Officials have discussed a possible referendum that could allow the county to bond on its general obligation dollars to help pay for the rest of the road program, Commissioner Brandon Arrington said.

"The voters would have to decide if they'd like us to move forward with a bigger road program," he said.