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State nixes stimulus funding

Volusia lacks 'construction-ready' projects

By HEATHER SCOFIELD

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DELAND -- The tentative five-year work plan for Volusia and Flagler County roads and bridges presented by state transportation officials during a public hearing Wednesday night wasn't all some local officials hoped for.

Officials in Volusia County have repeatedly asked the Florida Department of Transportation for additional funding in the five-year plan to rectify what County Council members say were inequities in the distribution of federal stimulus funds this year.

But Volusia County received no special advantage in the state funding allocation process nonetheless.

Volusia County missed out on getting more stimulus money because it lacked road projects that were "construction-ready," said Mary Schoelzel, DOT government liaison for Volusia and Flagler counties.

Volusia wasn't the only county in that predicament at the time, she said. And DOT's hands were tied by federal criteria. The department didn't give an advantage in the state work plans to counties that lost out on getting a stimulus windfall, either. That's because the funding is based on what state officials call a "fair share equity formula" that bases allocations on population and fuel-tax revenues, Schoelzel said.

While officials in Volusia had hoped DOT would right a wrong for them, officials in Flagler County may soon feel wronged themselves when news reverberates through the community that no money is in the work plan for a long-sought Interstate 95 interchange at Matanzas Woods Parkway.

"It will be disappointing to everyone in Flagler County," said Carl Laundrie, county spokesman.

Funding to get started on the long process of making the interchange a reality has been among Flagler officials' top priorities for years. Officials say it's a desperately needed evacuation route for thousands of area residents in an emergency.

And despite the county's requests that state officials delay plans to relocate a weigh station from I-95 to U.S. 1, more than \$10 million is programmed for the project in the next fiscal year, documents state.

But amid the disappointments, there were victories for the two counties.

Volusia stands to receive millions to add lanes and reconstruct two sections of State Road 415 between the Seminole County line and just north of Acorn Lake Road.

A portion between Reed Ellis Road less than a mile north of Acorn Lake Road is slated to receive money for design and land acquisition over the next three years and another \$39 million for construction in 2014.

Meanwhile, the portion of S.R. 415 closest to the Seminole County line is also anticipated to be on the work list in the next five years, though not all of the \$53 million construction price tag has been secured yet, Schoelzel said.

And Port Orange officials were happy to see roughly \$5 million to plan and design improvements at several intersections along U.S. 1. The improvements are critical for the city's long-range plans for a nearby community redevelopment effort, said Bill McCord, a transportation planner for Port Orange.

In Flagler, officials will get state funding to replace three bridges along the dangerously narrow County Road 305, a thoroughfare for residents in the western portion of the county. The county is expected to get roughly \$9 million for the bridge replacements and to widen and resurface part of the road over the next five years, according to information released at Wednesday's hearing.

State officials said the five-year plan is subject to changes before its approval by state legislators in July.

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