
Officials meet on road-building plan

(Dec 31, 2009 at 10:48 AM) -

The Osceola County Commission hosted a meeting with representatives from Metroplan Orlando and the Florida Department of Transportation.

By Jessica Solis Staff Writer

Florida transportation officials said this week they'll have their eyes set on Osceola County in 2010 to help the county secure state and federal funding for some of its largest infrastructure projects.

The Department of Transportation's five-year work program includes funding for a total of four new Osceola-based projects, two of which county, St. Cloud and Kissimmee officials have been trying to get off the ground for the past six years.

FDOT officials, along with county and Metroplan Orlando officials and representatives, met Monday to outline the state's funding plan for Osceola County.

The reason it has taken so long for FDOT-supported projects in Osceola to move forward is the state's lack of funds, George Lovett, director of transportation development who oversees the county's road project, said.

"We've fallen behind over the last few years, rather than keep up," Lovett said.

When gasoline tax revenues began to decline in 2006, the state had to shelve certain low-priority projects it originally planned to fund, some of which were located in Osceola County.

Now that revenues have remained steady, Lovett said, and combined with a drop in inflation for construction costs, FDOT can resume funding for those projects.

Improvements to Hoagland Boulevard in Kissimmee could begin as soon as July 2011, Lovett said. The state also would try to cover about \$15 million of the construction costs with the help of federal stimulus dollars.

Because of its proximity and connection to the Kissimmee Gateway Airport — the road is currently designated by the state as a strategic intermodal system (SIS) connector road that combines different types of transportation.

The county was hoping to seek state federal stimulus funding to help with the area's redevelopment, including securing funding for infrastructure improvements that could enhance the marketability of the airport, which is zoned as an aviation industrial district.

The airport, because of its proximity to the tourist corridor, could eventually pump money into the county's economy by taking on the overflow of traffic that usually comes into Orlando International Airport, County Commissioner John Quiñones said.

Quiñones said if improved, the road could impact the Central Florida region's economy.

"We can create our own niche here that has tremendous opportunities for the region," he said.

In St. Cloud, a long-standing project to help relieve traffic along U.S. Highway 192 from Aeronautical Boulevard to Budinger Street, also has a similar price tag that will be covered by the state. The right-of-way acquisition portion of the project — about \$15.5 million — has secured FDOT funds and is slated to begin in 2013.

Lovett said the city's project was postponed after revenue projections fell through, and projects had to be shelved.

"If we hadn't seen the revenues fall off in the last three or four years, this project would have already been built," he said.