

Lee commissioners shelve plans for Collier Boulevard north-south extension

By CHARLIE WHITEHEAD

Tuesday, December 8, 2009

FORT MYERS — After spending \$30 million, Lee County officials will put plans to extend Collier Boulevard on the shelf.

The vote to put the potential \$350 million project on hold was 4-1 today, with Commissioner Frank Mann dissenting. Mann argued the \$2 million left to buy land for the road might be better spent elsewhere. The county's already spent \$28 million on right of way.

"That's \$2 million from the capital budget that may or may not ever come to fruition," he said. "We're desperately short right now and we need to at least weigh the expense."

The Collier Boulevard project would build a four-lane road north from Immokalee Road in Collier County to Alico Road in Lee County. It would create an 18-mile north-south alternative east of Interstate 75.

The county actually applied for federal permits in 2002. That process has dragged to a virtual halt based on changes made in 2007 that require full project funding before approval. With funding not in place and hoped to come from tolls, there would be no up-front federal approval.

Environmentalists praised the shelving of the project.

"We do not believe (State Road) 951 is necessary," said Jennifer Hecker of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, referring to the other name for Collier Boulevard. "And it does cause tremendous environmental damage."

Commissioners decided to keep the \$2 million in the budget because the county is working jointly with the South Florida Water Management District. The selected route for Collier Boulevard would follow the south bank of the Kehl Canal in east Bonita Springs, where the district wants to place a berm for flood control and wetland restoration.

Commissioner Brian Bigelow said he was against spending that money, but joined the majority in shelving the project.

"The immediate funding is desperately needed on other projects," he said.

The county will look at Collier Boulevard again when growth demands it.



© 2009 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online