

[orlandosentinel.com/news/local/os-roads-no-money-sunrail-20100419,0,665787.story](http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/os-roads-no-money-sunrail-20100419,0,665787.story)

OrlandoSentinel.com

Key road projects delayed, dropped -- but rail on track

By Dan Tracy, Orlando Sentinel

10:56 PM EDT, April 19, 2010

Dwindling state tax dollars are postponing or scrapping nearly \$119 million worth of road improvements in Central Florida, including extra lanes to a stretch of traffic-clogged Interstate 4 through downtown Orlando.

But the planned \$1.2 billion SunRail commuter train remains on schedule.

"My orders are the same: Keep moving forward on the project," said Todd Hammerle, who manages SunRail for the Florida Department of Transportation.

That's good news for backers of mass transit, but not so great to those who rely on their cars and trucks to get around.

"To maintain our quality of life here — as it is, for better or for worse — means at a minimum maintaining our current road networks," said William Shallcross, a Winter Park developer.

Here's the problem: Collection of several taxes earmarked for road work is off by more than \$75 million this budget year. The worst hit are fees from drivers licenses, vehicle registrations and titles. All together, the state is projecting a drop of almost \$488 million to its five-year work plan.

Florida DOT officials are spreading the pain of the deficit over the entire state. That means the nine Central Florida counties that comprise District 5 are losing or pushing back 22 jobs. Some are just delayed a few months, from one fiscal year to the next.

But the I-4 segment from Orange Blossom Trail to Ivanhoe Boulevard fell out of the five-year plan, saving FDOT about \$42 million. Another \$10 million to buy land on another portion of I-4 was pushed from 2011 to 2012. Both are part of a planned \$1 billion makeover of the freeway.

"You're not really a project until you are in the work program," said Roger Neiswender, Orlando's chief transportation planner. "Bottom line: You're out of the money."

A widening job on U.S. Highway 441 in Lake County also was dropped from the work plan, while some preliminary engineering work on State Road 40 in Volusia County was pushed back to 2014, from 2013.

The financial crunch could worsen, too.

Members of the Florida House are talking about swiping nearly \$460 million from FDOT's \$7 billion annual allotment to balance the state's general budget. The Senate has not seriously discussed raiding FDOT, at least not yet.

Losing even more money would be devastating to the state's road network and its struggling economy, said Bob Burleson, president of Florida's Transportation Builders Association, a Tallahassee lobbying group.

"It's only going to make a bad situation worse," Burleson said. "It will speed up layoffs [in road construction]."

The House briefly considered shelving SunRail for a year, but the idea was voted down. The state is expected to set aside tens of millions of dollars this year for the train, which would link DeLand in Volusia County with downtown Orlando and Poinciana in Osceola County.

Construction could begin next year, with operations of the first 31 miles starting in 2013. The entire 61-mile system could be up and running by 2015.

Legislators contend that the train, a top priority of area leaders for several years, will create thousands of construction jobs, along with providing an alternative for motorists tired of idling in traffic. Adding an extra lane in either direction to I-4 for 61 miles could cost as much as \$7 billion.

Burleson said he understands why SunRail is important to Metro Orlando. But, he said, residents and elected officials need to understand that road dollars are lost for good once they are spent elsewhere.

"The only thing we do is fall further and further behind. It's not a pretty picture right now," Burleson said.

Officials who support SunRail say they are not happy about losing road projects, particularly I-4, the area's main transportation spine.

"That's pretty troubling to the region," said Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty, who backs SunRail and serves on MetroPlan, which sets transportation policy in Orange, Seminole and Osceola counties.

"Robbing Peter to pay Paul should not be the plan," added Seminole County Commission Chairman Bob Dallari, also a MetroPlan member.

George Lovett, FDOT director of transportation development, told a recent MetroPlan meeting that his agency has lost nearly \$10 billion since 2006 because of the poor economy and the Legislature taking road money for other needs.

"We're sort of teetering on the edge," he said.

But there are factors working in FDOT's favor: He said that land and construction prices have fallen because of the recession.

"It's a shame" projects are being delayed, Lovett said. "We wish we didn't have to move them."

Dan Tracy can be reached at dtracy@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5444.

Road work knocked off track

Five key projects being delayed or dropped:

Orange County

- Add lanes and reconstruct West State Road 50, from Florida's Turnpike to Avalon Road, \$12.9 million delayed from 2012 to 2013.
- Add lanes and reconstruct Interstate 4, from Orange Blossom Trail to Ivanhoe Blvd., \$42.3 million, from 2014 out of the work plan.

Lake County

- Add lanes and reconstruct U.S. Highway 441, from Martin Luther King Blvd. to Lake Ella Road, \$32 million out of the 5-year work program from 2014.

Volusia County

- Preliminary engineering work to widen portions of State Road 40, \$12.5 million, from 2013 to 2014.

Districtwide

- Resurfacing, \$8 million from 2010 out of the work program.

Source: Florida Department of Transportation

READ MORE ABOUT SUNRAIL AND ROAD PROJECTS IN CENTRAL FLORIDA -- ON A COLLISION COURSE?

[SunRail could sap funding for road projects](#)

[Scramble is on to link 2 trains: Why no plan?](#)

[Tailpipe tests: EPA pushes smog crackdown](#)

[\\$4.4B question: Will Central Floridians really take the train?](#)

Copyright © 2010, [Orlando Sentinel](#)