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Wekiva Parkway plans are slow going now

By Dan Tracy, ORLANDO SENTINEL

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Metro Orlando's road-building agency asked Lake and Seminole counties six months ago for permission to construct a tolled highway in their jurisdictions.

The Orlando Orange County Expressway Authority is still waiting for a reply.

But that silence should not be taken as a no, Lake and Seminole officials say. In fact, they say, they likely will give the authority written consent to build the so-called Wekiva Parkway on their soil within 60 to 90 days.

"We're very supportive of the parkway," said Lake County Commissioner Linda Stewart, whose district would be bisected by the road.

Added Seminole County Chairman Bob Dallari: "We're hashing it through."

But that's not to say everyone agrees on everything.

Both Seminole and Lake officials want a seat on the policy-setting board of the authority. And Lake wants to ensure that a toll-free road will run along the parkway so that local residents will not be forced to pay, for example, to drive from Mount Dora to the Seminole Towne Center mall.

Agency officials say they cannot accommodate the request to enlarge the five-member board because it was established by the Florida Legislature, meaning a state law would have to be passed for the additions.

State Sen. Andy Gardiner, R- Orlando, has pushed for a regional authority but has not found enough support in the Legislature.

As for the toll-free road, the authority is working on plans for a local-access road, but is wrangling with Lake over who and how to pay for what could be a \$90 million undertaking.

The 26-mile Wekiva Parkway would complete the beltway around greater Orlando by cutting through parts of Orange, Seminole and Lake counties. Construction on the \$1.8 billion project could start as early as 2014, with completion in 2018.

Probably the biggest holdup has been acquiring the necessary state and federal approvals for the road because it would run through environmentally sensitive land, primarily the Wekiva River and surrounding wetlands. Hemmed in by housing and commercial tracts, the river starts at Wekiva Springs in Orange and mingles with more springs as it flows 14 miles between Seminole and Lake counties to the St. Johns River.

Right now, three bridges cross the river, the most prominent being State Road 46 between Mount Dora and Sanford. Wildlife often is killed attempting to cross the road, which rolls through largely rural land.

Ecologists such as Charles Lee of Audubon of Florida support the parkway because they believe a limited-access road would reduce environmental damage by preventing large-scale development that often follows new roads.

But Lee said he is worried the project is in danger because, in his estimation, the authority is moving too slowly on winning permits and getting the signatures of Lake and Seminole counties. He fears the road might get bogged down in administrative hassles and never be built.

"I'm very concerned," Lee said.

Road builders have talked about the parkway for years, but no one had enough money to build it. That changed a year ago, when the authority voted in a 25-cent toll increase, as well as a series of future inflation-adjusted rate increases.



Over time, the agency should have the cash it needs for the parkway, but that has not stopped authority director Mike Snyder from looking for a funding partner. Paying for the entire road would almost double the agency's existing debt of \$2.1 billion, and \$360 million worth of other projects are already in line ahead of the parkway.

Former authority Chairman Rich Crotty recently wrote a letter seeking up to \$450 million from the federal government to pay for the road's planned interchange with Interstate 4. That request helped prompt the agency to undergo the rigorous federal environmental assessment of the project.

Snyder said the authority should finish the federal paperwork within weeks and could begin holding public hearings on the road's alignment by the end of the summer. That could lead to final federal approval near year's end.

"It doesn't look like it from the outside," Snyder said, "but we really have made progress."

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