

Wekiva Parkway: Critics look for ways to block toll road that would complete loop around Orlando



In Sanford, Dan Macaluso shows a map of a Wekiva Parkway route his coalition of opponents favor. (August 27, 2010)

By Dan Tracy, ORLANDO SENTINEL

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The \$1.8 billion Wekiva Parkway, the last link in the long-sought beltway around Metro Orlando, has never been closer to being built — a prospect that has road builders and motorists cheering.

But not everyone is looking forward to the new toll road.

Critics contend the 26-mile highway slated for parts of Seminole, Lake and Orange counties would reduce land values and quality of life for some homeowners, as well as threaten the financial stability of the toll agency charged with its construction and operation.

Foes also complain that the Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority would grab too much power from Lake and Seminole by building the road in those jurisdictions.

"Amazing, blatant disregard to the people who put them in office," Wekiva opponent Dan Macaluso said of the recent Seminole County Commission decision to grant the authority construction rights.

Macaluso, president of the Sylvan Lake Reserve homeowners association north of Sanford, represents a coalition of nearly 1,000 home and business owners in Seminole who fear the parkway will come too close to their properties.

He said his group has offered a different route for the parkway, but it was rebuffed by the agency as too expensive and poorly designed.

Though plans for the road have been discussed for years, Macaluso fears the project is gaining momentum to the point that "it just seems like it's being pushed through."

With Seminole's approval in hand and Lake's seemingly on the way, the authority last week picked up another major authorization: a go-ahead from the federal government concerning the road's potential impact to the environment.

Now the authority intends to schedule public hearings — probably in late October — to plot the road's exact alignment in the already-determined corridor. Seminole and Lake would have to sign off on the final path before more in-depth planning and engineering could occur.

Under those circumstances, construction could start as early as 2014, with completion in 2018.

The route is expected to follow State Road 46, at least in part, and would act as a connection between [Mount Dora](#) in Lake with Sanford in Seminole.

Authority Chairman Walter Ketcham is ready to go, arguing the poor economy makes the timing perfect for a major road project.

"There's not a better time to do it," he said. "Prices of property are down; prices of construction are down."

And interest rates are near historical lows, too. That's important because the authority might have to borrow close to \$2 billion to pay for the work. It would be paid for largely by a 25-cent hike in tolls last year, plus future increases based on inflation.

Former Orange County Commissioner Fran Pignone fears Wekiva represents too much debt for the authority, which already is repaying \$2.1 billion spent on building and maintaining a 105-mile system.

"It's a hell of a load to take on," said Pignone, who served on a committee last year that reviewed the authority's inner workings at the behest of board member and Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty.

Pignone would like to see the agency find another financial partner, possibly the state or federal government, to help pay for the project.

Ketcham said he would prefer a partner, too, but has found no volunteers.

"You can sit back and wait for some benefactor to come forward. We haven't seen any evidence of that," he said.

Another foe is Bertina Busch, president of the Pine Hills Community Council and publisher of the Pine Hills Press, which is distributed once every two months.

She contends residents of Pine Hills, a blue-collar neighborhood west of Orlando, should not have to pay higher tolls to build the Wekiva, a road they might rarely use. Most people who live in Pine Hills use State Road 408, which runs along the southern edge of the community.

"I do think this is the most unfair situation I have seen. ... Traditionally, we have no voice," Busch said.

Ketcham counters that no one in Pine Hills is forced to ride the 408, also known as the East-West Expressway. And, he said, toll roads relieve congestion on other streets by taking cars off them.

"If you don't want to use the [toll] roads, you don't have to use them," Ketcham said.

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