

FORT HAMER BRIDGE – SPANNING A CENTURY OF CONFLICT

Debate over the construction of the Fort Hamer Bridge in Manatee County has long been the center of debate. Infrastructure expansion within our growing world is necessary, and there are many factors to consider. On August 17th, 2010, a *Public Scoping Meeting* was held by US Coast Guard. The meeting covered the steps being taken towards the building of the Fort Hamer Bridge including environmental studies, preliminary design plans, and the project schedule.

Since this topic hits close to home, my son decided to do his *2010 History Fair* project on this subject matter, which ultimately won him the award for *Best Historical Research*, from the Manatee County Historical Society. Although he began his project with the usual search for information on the internet, researching articles, and sourcing books, his search evolved into more of a treasure hunt. He began collecting newspaper articles- old and new, studying historic maps, and reading the book **The Singing River** by Joe Warner. These sources led him in new directions. To learn more, he visited the Manatee County Historical Records Library. He discussed his topic with Ms. Cindy Russell, Librarian. After disclosing some information he had discovered during his search, Ms. Russell challenged him to validate his facts with primary source information. The hunt was on! Sitting in the Manatee County Historical Records Library, he and Ms. Russell were surrounded by volumes of exceptionally large, very old books. On a quest to prove the facts surrounding a 1909 proposal for a bridge at Fort Hamer, he investigated the County Commissioner Minutes from that year. Eureka! After a long, but fascinating search, he found the information tucked inside that antique book. To further validate his facts, Ms. Russell suggested that he visit the Eaton Florida History Room at the Manatee County Central Library. The Eaton files were incredible. Here, he was able to peruse copies of the actual letters and documents surrounding Fort Hamer and the proposed Fort Hamer Bridge, dating back to mid-1800. Here is a summary of the timeline he discovered:

FORT HAMER BRIDGE HISTORIC TIMELINE:

- **Circa 1839-1843**
 - A crude path appears on maps by US Government surveyors
 - Originally known as *Fort King Trail*
 - Became a military road
 - After the establishment of *Fort Hamer*, the road's name was changed to *Fort Hamer Road*, north of the Manatee River and *Upper Manatee River Road*, south of the river
- **1849**
 - November 28, 1849 - Fort Hamer was established by the United States Army
 - Built on the southern side of the Manatee River as part of a string of forts built across the state, which were located approximately 15 miles apart to protect and separate settlers from the Seminole Indians, and to keep Indians south of the line
 - Named for General Thomas L. Hamer, Brigadier General of the *Florida Volunteers*
 - Fort Hamer was a fortified supply depot and hospital during the Seminole Indian Wars
 - In operation from 1849 to 1850
- **1856**
 - Fort Hamer was reactivated in 1856 during the third Seminole Indian War or Billy Bowlegs War
 - Starting point for Trail of Tears; the relocation of Indians from their lands to reservations in the West
- **1876**
 - February 26, 1876 - The War Department gave Fort Hamer to the Department of the Interior, who then sold it to William H. Hooker, a cattleman, who in turn sold it to W. B. Henderson, a Tampa cattle baron

- **1878**
 - July 17, 1878 – *The Sunland Tribune*, a Tampa newspaper printed an article stating that the area of Fort Hamer was going to become an important business port; Fort Hamer was the farthest point upriver where ships could reach
- **1909**
 - The Manatee County Commission considers building a bridge at Fort Hamer, as printed in *The Manatee River Journal* on September 9, 1909; proposing a \$250,000 road bond.
 - Met strong opposition; opposition stated that only existing roads, roads that were needed, should be funded; people should be consulted
 - October 9th, 1909 the bond issue was dropped and a bridge was never built
 - **1909-1910 – C.H. Davis, the man opposed to the Fort Hamer Bridge, builds the Davis Toll Bridge between Manatee Village and Palmetto**
...An interesting revelation!
- **1989**
 - Proposal for Fort Hamer Bridge added to county's comprehensive plan
- **1998**
 - County requires *Waterlefe*, a new development at Fort Hamer site, to set aside right-of-way on its eastern boundary for a future bridge site
- **2002**
 - MCC requests a scale back to four lanes with bike path and pedestrian walkway; state complies
- **2003**
 - the Florida Department of Transportation presents a design and engineering report for bridge at public meeting
- **2008**
 - FHB Associates, in which Pat Neal, Carlos Beruff and Michael Jacobson are partners, would have built and owned a toll bridge linking Fort Hamer Road on the north shore with Upper Manatee River Road on the south shore

- The county had intended to give FHB Associates the rights-of-way, which it had already acquired on both sides of the Manatee River
 - In exchange, FHB was to give the county land that could be used for a proposed express highway between Port Manatee and [Interstate 75](#).
- **2010**
 - July 2010 - Notice Of Intent To Prepare A National Environmental Policy Act Environmental Impact Statement; Request For Comments; Notice Of Public Scoping Meeting.
 - The U.S. Coast Guard announced its intent to prepare an EIS for a proposed new bridge (Fort Hamer Bridge) crossing over the Manatee River in Manatee County, Florida. The proposed location for the Fort Hamer Bridge is in northeast Manatee County adjacent to Fort Hamer Park and will connect Fort Hamer Road and Upper Manatee River Road.

So now, here we stand in late 2012, and still no bridge at Fort Hamer. It has been 103 years in the planning. Does it really take that long to connect two shores? There are so many reasons for resolving this matter and constructing the Fort Hamer Bridge now! No more studies! No more yielding to the opposition on the south shore of the bridge site, as when they purchased and built their homes, they should have read their deeds, which stated in 1998, “Manatee County requires *Waterlefe*, a new development at Fort Hamer site, to set aside right-of-way on its eastern boundary for a future bridge site (Karen Ciemniecki, Manatee Herald-Tribune. December 11, 2001).”

The Fort Hamer Bridge is not a “bridge to nowhere (Tom Davidson - Waterlefe resident, East County Observer. July 21, 2010).” Development on the north side of the Manatee River has been tremendous and more development is coming. Roadways are filled to maximum capacity. U.S. Highway 301, now both on-season and off, is continuously congested, and east of Interstate 75, the only option for travelling from north to south remains the Manatee River crossing at Rye Road. Should Interstate 75 suffer extreme traffic, or worse, a closure due to an accident, alternate road options must be available. Also, increased volume of business at the

Ellenton Premium Outlets, while outstanding for our local economy has been detrimental to traffic flow in and around the Interstate 75 and U.S. Highway 301 exchange.

To conclude, in an emergency, access to Lakewood Ranch Medical Center is over 23 miles away. Utilizing the Fort Hamer Bridge, Lakewood Ranch Medical Center would be about 8 miles away...quite a savings of time when every minute counts! This I can personally attest to, as last December, I suffered a cardiac emergency. As Manatee Memorial Hospital's emergency room was filled to capacity, the ambulance took me to Lakewood Ranch Medical Center; almost a half hour ride! While the expansion of essential services is helpful and crucial to support the increasing East County population, access to these facilities must also be evaluated. As such, I implore our Manatee County Commissioners, local politicians, and community leaders to please consider all of these factors when administering to the details of construction of the Fort Hamer Bridge.