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Construction on Fort Hamer Bridge, linking Parrish and Lakewood Ranch, set to begin in two weeks

BY CLAIRE ARONSON

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View of Fort Hamer Road, looking north from the Manatee River. GRANT JEFFERIES/Bradenton Herald
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EAST MANATEE -- Philip Michaels and his wife, Cynthia, like to drive south to Lakewood Ranch and State Road 64 to shop.

Right now, the Parrish residents use either Rye Road or U.S. 301, but during season, the couple avoids U.S. 301 because of the traffic congestion.

With the construction on the \$32.7 million Fort Hamer Bridge expected to begin in a couple weeks, Michaels said he is looking forward to an alternate, more-direct route.

"It is absolutely beneficial," said Michaels, who has been a full-time resident for two years. "It seems like every day there is an accident or something goes wrong on I-75 and it is tied up and it's a mess. If we ever get a hurricane again, it is critical for evacuation and things like that."

But not all area residents share the same sentiment as the Michaels about the added benefits of the bridge, which will span the Manatee River connecting two roads: Upper Manatee River Road on the south side and Fort Hamer Road on the north. At its Feb. 24 meeting, the Manatee County Commission awarded Johnson Brothers Corp. of Hillsborough County the construction contract with a 630 calendar days for completion. Construction on the bridge and additional improvements along Fort Hamer and Upper Manatee River roads are expected to take two years.

Fearful of congestion

For neighbors on the north side of the river, the two-lane bridge will be a more direct route to Lakewood Ranch. But some neighbors to the south are fearful about the added congestion to an already-busy Lakewood Ranch Boulevard. Upper Manatee River Road becomes Lakewood Ranch Boulevard.

The Fort Hamer Bridge has the potential to be a disaster, said Alan Roth, Lakewood Ranch Community Development District 1 supervisor who lives in the Summerfield neighborhood of Lakewood Ranch.

"We already have traffic issues on Lakewood Ranch Boulevard," Roth said. "I think it creates a very hazardous situation. I think it already has."

Roth pointed to the number of deaths on the road in the past few years.

"If one person gets killed, how much business it is worth?" Roth asked.

Once the bridge is completed, it will cut travel time to get to the River Wilderness Golf and Country Club, located on the north side of the river, increasing outside business, said Patrick Walsh, the club's general manager.

"There is no question that, from a business perspective, it opens us up," Walsh said. "It is very good for our business. We are the only private club north of Manatee River. It opens us to a new market."

While many residents in Waterlefe Golf and River Club have expressed objection to the bridge since the span will back up to homes in the neighborhood, Waterlefe general manager Joe Rasette said he also could see some business benefits of the bridge.

"From the golf-course perspective, the bridge is going to be, hopefully, a positive thing because quicker access," he said. "From a residents' perspective, there is going to be some inconvenience. I think they realize it is just going to happen. There is not a whole lot (that) people are going to be able to do about it. It is a face of progress."

In emergencies, some residents in Parrish and other areas north of the river must travel south. From a safety perspective, Walsh said the bridge is something that needed to happen.

"From a safety point of view, it is nice to have alternate route in case something happens," he said.

Because of the lack of a bridge over the river, Realtor Brenda Ricchi said she has had potential buyers decide not to buy property on Rye Road because of the bottleneck. Now with the bridge, people will not be pulled away from buying a house in the area, she said.

"We are excited," said Ricchi, who lives in Twin Rivers, a neighborhood on the north side of the river. "It is just one more outlet out of Parrish. ... There is going to be traffic everywhere anyway. We can't get around it."

Bridge is a selling point

The Islands of River Wilderness, a new development close to Fort Hamer Park, is using the bridge as a selling point for potential buyers. The Fort Hamer Bridge is included on the map of the development inside the sales office.

Mike Longobardi, the development's sales manager, said the bridge has been a factor in two recent sales.

"Buyers factor in the new bridge when they decide to buy here," he said, adding that there are still more than 130 homes to sell. "It is the best of both worlds. We will have access to all the nice amenities, but still be in a quiet area. ... Everyone who we've worked with and residents here are positive about the bridge."

Parrish will become a much more desirable ZIP code, Roth said. It is no longer the outskirts of Parrish but the outskirts of Sarasota," he said. "Sarasota gets the major benefit, but we will still get most of the traffic."

With all the new developments on both sides of the Manatee River, Roth said the bridge was built with pressure from developers.

"It was developer-pushed," he said.

Roth said they will be talking to the Manatee County Sheriff's Office about ways to ensure the road is safe.

"We will implore the sheriff's office to put up radars and patrol the issue," he said. "We are concerned about the safety on the road."

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