



The bridge is 15% complete and still scheduled to be finished in the spring of 2017.

by: [Amanda Sebastiano](#) Staff Writer

When Waterlefe resident Ken Bumgarner makes occasional trips to the golf course in his community, he knows to expect background noise of pile drivers and the hum of construction vehicles.

"It's easy to hear," Bumgarner said. "But it's not any worse than we expected."

Since March, Johnson Bros. Corp., has worked on the Fort Hamer Bridge, which will connect Upper Manatee and Fort Hamer roads. The southern entrance to the bridge is fewer than 100 yards from the second entrance to Waterlefe.

Local residents are beginning to see the bridge, which is 15% complete, take shape. Construction crews are working on the foundation of the 2,300-foot bridge.

Four piers have been completed, including the last pier on the north side of the bridge, and construction on the north entrance, in Parrish, is underway.

Over the next few weeks, more piers will be built, along with the first pouring of the concrete deck. Eventually there will be 19 piers, which are concrete columns and caps, or blocks, that are fastened below the deck of the bridge to provide support and stabilization for the structure.

The deck, which will be poured in November, is the surface on which vehicles eventually will drive.

"A lot of construction has taken place over the last few months," said Trudy Gerena, project spokeswoman. "We're moving forward and the projects are still expected to be finished on time, in spring 2017."

A wooden, temporary bridge, called a bridge trestle, is now set up to provide a platform, or a model.

The bridge is just one piece of the project.

Along with the construction of the Fort Hamer Bridge, improvements are being made to Upper Manatee and Fort Hamer roads to better accommodate access to the bridge, Gerena said.

Improvements currently underway include additional sidewalks on the west side of the roads, four-foot paved bike lanes and grass shoulders, and right and left turn lanes at each intersection. Milling and resurfacing existing pavement on the roads also is taking place.

The project has prompted a range of responses from Waterlefe residents.

The community's Homeowners Association board originally didn't want the bridge built. Members said local traffic would be negatively impacted. "There are people who believe the bridge shouldn't be built," Bumgarner said. "There's concern about its location near our secondary entrance to the community, which is used by emergency vehicles and residents in the event that our primary entrance isn't available."

The noises heard throughout the community and from the golf course are a reminder of Waterlefe's close proximity to a project Bumgarner said symbolizes East County, and Manatee County's, population growth spurt.

Waterlefe resident Ron Myers knows Manatee County's decision to approve the Fort Hamer bridge is an attempt to meet the demand of more residents in East County and farther north in Parrish.

The two-lane bridge might also draw more people to the area, he said.

"Traffic is becoming a bigger issue," Myers said. "The bridge has been a facilitator of more people moving and creating more traffic and congestion. The county is preparing for even more growth."

But Ken Bontrager, bridge project manager for Manatee County, believes the bridge will provide traffic benefits, especially for emergency vehicles.

In a previous East County Observer article, Bontrager said that people using the bridge, especially during rush hour, will have a faster route than taking I-75.

As visible construction continues on the bridge, some residents, such as Myers, are reminded of the additional opportunities the bridge will provide.

"I think I'll utilize the bridge," Myers said. "There's an opportunity to walk across the Manatee River, or to walk to Fort Hamer Park. There are benefits for both sides."

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