

A long road ahead on Manatee County roadway connectivity, mobility

BY BRADENTON HERALD EDITORIAL

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View of Fort Hamer Road, looking north from the Manatee River. GRANT JEFFERIES/Bradenton Herald File

- [Link Construction on Fort Hamer Bridge, linking Parrish and Lakewood Ranch, set to begin in two weeks](#)

The long saga concerning a key transportation link across the Manatee River in East Manatee is coming to a conclusion. The Manatee County commission's approval of a bridge contract on last week puts the Fort Hamer span linking Parrish and Lakewood Ranch on its final track.

This is yet another major project decades in the making. The idea surfaced some 45 years ago but sat dormant until the county became serious about building the bridge in 1998.

This and other transportation connectivity and traffic mobility issues can no longer be delayed as the population here increases once again after a pause due to the great recession and real estate market collapse.

As county Administrator Ed Hunzeker announced last week, Manatee is "on the cusp of another era of substantial growth."

Thousands of new homes are on the drawing boards after numerous subdivisions received county approvals recently.

In January, commissioners warily expressed concern about whether the road infrastructure can handle additional traffic and whether the county is adequately prepared. The issue certainly merits close examination by all stakeholders, including residents, developers and business leaders.

With the influx of seasonal residents and visitors this time of year, the current weaknesses in the county's constrained traffic network become maddeningly apparent again.

Why a Fort Hamer Bridge

The bridge connecting Fort Hamer Road to Upper Manatee River Road will solve several concerns, most notably on public safety -- primarily emergency response times and hurricane and disaster evacuations.

After a 2008 tanker truck crash and explosion destroyed Interstate 75's southbound overpass at U.S. 301 in Ellenton, heavy I-75 traffic was rerouted to the only Manatee River bridges that could handle the load.

The agonizing gridlock in downtown Bradenton and Palmetto paralyzed the cities for two days as vehicles were steered to the DeSoto and Green bridges. County commissioners wisely pushed ahead on the Fort Hamer Bridge, though the Coast Guard delayed quicker progress.

The span should be open to vehicles in about two years, according to the \$32.7 million contract awarded to Johnson Brothers Corp. of Hillsborough County.

Then, Parrish and Lakewood Ranch residents will no longer have to drive out of their way to either the small Rye Road bridge further to the east or over to the I-75 span across the Manatee River, helping to ease traffic on those north-south routes.

Now commissioners can turn to another major transportation link, this one east-west to provide another connection between Lakewood Ranch and Bradenton, specifically connecting Cortez Road to 44th Avenue East.

Thanks to the Coast Guard's "advance approval" of a bridge across the Braden River several months ago, the 44th Avenue Roadway Project can proceed on a faster track -- by some six months to a year. Construction on the \$33 million span could begin in two years or so.

The 44th Avenue extension, part of the county's comprehensive plan for more than 20 years, has been under way for years now. Once completed, this will give the county another major east-west thoroughfare along with the state roads.

Another major improvement project, a new diverging diamond interchange at University Parkway and I-75, is progressing toward groundbreaking later this year.

The state expedited the project with the opening of the Mall at University Town Center and Nathan Benderson Park's growing schedule of sporting events.

A third Manatee River span linking Bradenton and Palmetto has been a topic of discussion for several years but has yet to gain traction. On yet another note, just the idea of a study of replacing the Cortez Bridge with a four-lane version was rejected by the Sarasota-Manatee Metropolitan Planning Organization in October.

The Florida Department of Transportation is also scheduled to widen I-75 between University Parkway and State Road 64 and redesign S.R. 70's intersection with the highway, but that's off in the future.

Smaller projects help, too

On a far smaller scale, last week Manatee County commissioners reviewed infrastructure priorities with most of the nine involving congestion management. Those are simple projects that add separate right-turn lanes at clogged intersections, an important improvement to keep vehicles moving.

Selected projects will be submitted to the MPO for possible inclusion on a future FDOT funding list, though the Legislature's upcoming session looks gloomy for transportation.

Some lawmakers propose shifting \$100 million in transportation funding that comes out of real-estate taxes into Amendment 1 land and water conservation spending.

The big picture shows advances on major projects. But commissioners are right to worry about the future, and soliciting public input is essential.

Indeed, the MPO is currently updating the region's long-range transportation plan, and residents can help set priorities via an online questionnaire, at strategicmobilityplan.com.

Growth will come and the population will increase because we live in a highly desirable place. The county cannot block that reality, so preparation on transportation issues is vital.