

# New Span Generates Excitement

Fort Hamer Bridge nears its opening day.

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Felipe Novakowski chose Lakewood Ranch, among the nation's fastest growing master-planned communities, to go into business.

He did so by buying a share of Marina's Pizza five years ago, then purchasing a home in Parrish — another area experiencing rapid growth.

Novakowski knew the two areas, separated by the Manatee River, eventually would be connected.

That should happen on Sept. 23, barring weather delays, when the \$23.5 million, two-lane Fort Hamer Bridge opens.

"It's going to be a good thing for us, definitely," Novakowski said of businesses that will be able to tap into a new market. "Everybody is waiting for the bridge to open."

For those who live in Parrish but work in Bradenton, Sarasota or Lakewood Ranch, it could mean a shorter commute. For Novakowski, it means saving about four miles and a substantial amount of time depending on rush hour traffic along U.S. 301 and Interstate 75 that he uses to make his horseshoe-shaped drive each day.

## BRIDGE OPENING DELAYED

The opening for the Fort Hamer Bridge to traffic had been scheduled for Aug. 26, the same day as the inaugural Fort Hamer Bridge Run.

However, heavy rains in June and July forced delays, and the opening is set for Sept. 23.

**"It's been more than two months** since the county originally set a date for the Fort Hamer Bridge opening. **Since that time, we've received 38 inches of rain** — including Tropical Storm Emily — **and several days where lightning slowed construction,**" Manatee County spokesman Nick Azzara said.

As others also choose to take the new bridge because of easier access to the Lakewood Ranch area, he believes it will bring more customers to his restaurant at the corner of State Road 64 and Lakewood Ranch Boulevard.

Others who work or own businesses along the S.R. 64 corridor, east of I-75, are particularly excited about the bridge's opening. In many cases, they live on the other side of the river, in Parrish, and the bridge will shave off a minimum of 15 minutes of drive time each way.

Kathy Ramjohn, who works at Meadows Family Dentistry in the East Glen Office Park just west of the Lakewood Ranch Boulevard-S.R. 64 intersection, said the bridge will cut her commute from 30 minutes to 15 minutes.

Sunny Daze Preschool owner Donna Desantis said besides cutting down time to drive from Parrish, the Fort Hamer Bridge will allow people to avoid the outlet mall exit, the same exit used to access the Parrish and Ellenton community. She estimates about half the families with children at her school live in the Parrish area, but have jobs in downtown Sarasota, Bradenton or Lakewood Ranch.

"It's going to make it easier," she said.

It won't be just residents of Parrish saving time, either.

Jennifer Meadows, a co-owner of Meadows Family Dentistry, lives in East County on Rye Road. She expects to use the bridge, going north on Fort Hamer Road, to travel to the Ellenton Prime Outlets, and to visit her veterinarian's office in Palmetto. Using the Fort Hamer Bridge will allow her to avoid the outlet mall exit on I-75.

"That exit (on I-75 for the mall) is horrible," she said. "It gets so backed up, and it's dangerous."

She said the Fort Hamer Bridge will benefit her business.

"We already draw a great number of people from (Parrish), but I think the bridge will make us more accessible," she said. "It will make it more convenient."

Meadows said 15% to 20% of the practice's patients come from the Parrish-Ellenton area.

## AT A GLANCE

Manatee County bridges

Victory Bridge: Opened in 1919 and was demolished 1927.

Rye Bridge: Wooden bridge built around 1909 was rebuilt with concrete in 1974.

Original Green Bridge: Opened in 1928 and was replaced in 1986.

Desoto Bridge spanning the Manatee River: Opened in 1958.

Braden River Bridge: Wooden bridge opened in 1923 and was replaced with concrete bridge in 1953.

— David Breakfield, Manatee County librarian

Manatee County spokesman Nicholas Azzara said the bridge will create better options for emergency response vehicles and for evacuation routes, among other benefits.

“It’s a significant point in the history of the county,” Azzara said. “It really connects the fastest growing areas of the county. It’s exciting to see what will be next for Parrish, in particular.”