

Long-awaited Fort Hamer Bridge opens to traffic

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Posted Oct 18, 2017 at 10:38 AM

Updated Oct 18, 2017 at 1:29 PM

Talk about a span at that location dates back more than 100 years.

MANATEE COUNTY - The long-anticipated Fort Hamer Bridge over the Manatee River opened to traffic Wednesday.

Prior to the removal of barricades on the north and southbound lanes, Manatee County officials and guests gathered at the bridge's peak for a ribbon cutting ceremony for the \$32.7 million project linking Fort Hamer Road on the north shore with Upper Manatee River Road on the south shore.

"This is truly a historic occasion," County Commission Chairwoman Betsy Benac said, noting that talk about a bridge at that location dated back more than a century.

Benac said the span should relieve traffic on the Interstate 75 bridge to the west. She noted that it will prove to be a well-used connection between the county's two fastest growing sectors, Parrish and Lakewood Ranch.

To the south, Upper Manatee River Road merges into Lakewood Ranch Boulevard. The latter is be linked with Fruitville Road in Sarasota County.

County Public Works Director Ron Schulhofer commended the county commissioners for pursuing the bridge project. "They got a lot of flak from people who thought this would be a bridge to nowhere," he said.

Benac credited Schulhofer for seeing the project through. "He never wavered," Benac said.

Prior commissions tried for many years to secure federal and state funding for the project and briefly considered letting local developers build it as a toll bridge. They eventually decided the county would get the span and accompanying roadwork where it would make landfall paid for with a combination of bonds, road impact fees and gas taxes.

Ben Jordan of the Parrish Civic Association said he has always contended the additional bridge is needed for public safety. He noted that residents were allowed to temporarily use it as an evacuation route when Hurricane Irma approached last month and that Parrish residents and first responders will use it in emergencies to get to Lakewood Ranch Medical Center.

“The biggest thing is that it gives you another alternative” for a river crossing, Jordan said.

The bridge, named for a Seminole Wars-era fort on the south shore, extends 2,318 feet across the river. Designed by the firm AECOM and built by Johnson Bros. Corp., the curved span required 1.7 million pounds of steel, 8,125 cubic yards of concrete, 70,427 cubic yards of dirt and 90 beams. It has a navigation clearance of 26 feet.

The two-lane bridge features bicycle lanes in both directions and a sidewalk on the east side with a pedestrian overlook at its peak.

“The magnificent views are unbelievable,” said U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan, R-Longboat Key.

Should traffic warrant, a second span with an additional two lanes could be built later, Benac said.

Parks and Natural Resources Director Charlie Hunsicker said the county recently completed renovations to the boat ramp at Fort Hamer Park, northwest of the bridge. On county land northeast of the bridge, the county intends to build Hidden Harbor Park – a \$4 million endeavor that will eventually include hiking trails, sand volleyball courts, a pavilion, restrooms, restoration of natural habitat from former farmland and possibly a children’s splash park.

Schulhofer called the dedication ceremony “bittersweet” because a person intricately involved in the project died last weekend.

Trudy Gerena worked for a public relations firm and served as the community outreach consultant regarding the bridge, updating a website with information about each phase and conducting media tours of the construction site.

Gerena and her husband, Steven Gerena, both of Brandon, died Saturday when he failed to negotiate a curve on State Road 54 in New Port Richey and their motorcycle collided with a stopped car. The couple died at the scene.

Commissioner Carol Whitmore thanked “the citizens of Manatee County for having faith in us” and patiently waiting for the bridge. The county’s next major transportation priority is getting the aging DeSoto Bridge between Bradenton and Palmetto replaced and addressing congestion between the two downtowns, Whitmore said.



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