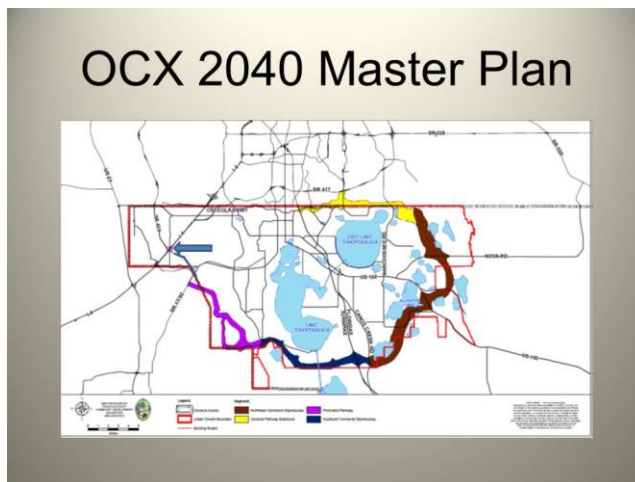




## PRFSC Feb 2017 Meeting Minutes

On Tuesday February 7, 2017 PRFSC hosted Atlee Mercer, Chairman of the Osceola Expressway Authority as our guest speaker. He spoke on the topic of plans for future Poinciana toll roads.

He started out his talk by describing the reason for the creation of the Osceola Expressway Authority. In describing their mission he first described the map below:



For many years the Orlando Expressway Authority which has now become the Central Florida Expressway Authority had a mission and a plan to build a ring/beltway around the northern part of Orlando. That beltway now appears on maps as State Roads 417 and 429. With the completion of the Wekiva Parkway joining those two roads across the north this will form a beltway encircling the northern part of Orlando. As these roads became a reality state officials began to realize that the southern, or Osceola County side of Orlando had no plans in place to build a comparable beltway around the southern portion of Orlando. This did not make any sense because over the next 30 years the growth in the Osceola

suburbs of Orlando was projected to be hundreds of thousands of homes. This projected growth needed proper transportation planning; hence the Osceola Expressway Authority was born.

The first challenge faced by the newly created Osceola Expressway Authority was to provide a southern access to the Orlando International Airport. They began working on that project, more commonly known as the Osceola Parkway Extension which is shown on the above map in yellow. They also started creating plans for the southern Orlando beltway system through Osceola County as shown above.

When looking at the plans for building such a beltway, they very quickly determined that the most challenging portion of road construction would need to build a road crossing the Reedy Creek Swamp located to the north of Poinciana connecting to 17/92 and I4. There had been plans in place for over 30 years to connect the new development of Poinciana to the north. Poinciana was close enough to Disney that in the evening Poinciana residents could hear the Disney fireworks but there was no quick way to get there because there was no way to cross the Reedy Creek Swamp. The demand for such a road was tremendous and kept growing as Poinciana grew. The problem was cost. The road was originally projected to be a privately constructed 45 MPH excavated road across the swamp by the Poinciana developer Avatar. Because it would cross a major north/south natural watershed/wildlife area connecting Central Florida to the Florida Everglades, the environmentalists and nature preservationists interceded and dictated that such a road could only be built as a bridge across the swamp protecting the water and wildlife flows. The cost to build a bridge instead of simply a road dramatically increased the projected costs for such a road. What was projected to be a \$50M project became a \$150M project. The Poinciana Developer Avatar still owned the land and held the environmental permits to build the road but the increased costs projected it to be far beyond the cost capability of the developer. The situation was made worse by the fact that the environmental permits were due to expire in 2018. If the road could not be built by then it would probably never be built at all.

In the later part of 2011 the demand for the road from the residents of Poinciana became so loud that the political leaders of both Polk and Osceola Counties decided to take action. As a result, the Osceola Expressway Authority was asked to take the lead in getting the Poinciana Parkway built as part of their 2040 master plan. The rest is history. Traffic volumes today using the Poinciana Parkway are about 7900 cars a day and with any luck they expect that by 2023 they may be letting out bids to four lane the highway. Today, as a two lane highway state law requires a 55 MPH posted speed limit. As a 4 lane highway the speed limit would be 65 MPH.



From Day 1 the biggest challenge to building Poinciana Parkway was always obtaining the funding to build and maintain the road. Once the Poinciana developer realized they could not build the Parkway as a private road and that the permits would soon run out, the best solution was to turn the Parkway into a public project and to go to the Wall Street Bond market to sell bonds in order to obtain the funding. This was done. \$80M in bonds were sold backed by the good faith and credit of Osceola County and the promise to pay back the bonds over a 30 year period by Osceola Expressway Authority. The only way to obtain revenue to pay back the bonds was to charge tolls for the project. Before the project could even begin a toll schedule was established that required a toll for the bridge segment between Marigold and 17/92 of \$1.75 initially being raised to \$2.00 in early 2017.

Chairman Mercer explained that the revenue from the tolls was not only required to pay back the bonds but to cover the annual maintenance for the road as well. He stated that the annual bill to perform the landscaping exceeded \$250,000.

Approximately one month of toll revenues coming from today's traffic volumes. The pavement will need to be replaced every ten years and most likely the bridge in 30 to 40 years. Not to mention the planned expansion to 4 lanes in the not too distant future. Like it or not the tolls will not be going away unless the voters decide to raise taxes to cover the loss of toll revenues with taxpayer dollars?

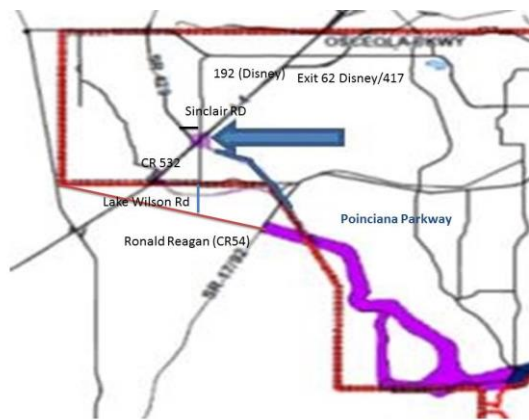
Chairman Mercer spent the remainder of the meeting describing what comes next for Poinciana. With the Poinciana Parkway built the next challenges were to connect it to I4 to the north and Florida Turnpike to the east. These projects are shown on the map below labeled as the Poinciana Parkway I4 segment and the Southport Connector segment:



With the help of funding provided by the Florida Legislature, PD&E studies to look at the planning for both segments were undertaken starting about three years ago. With the studies well underway the challenge became how to obtain the funding to build the roads? Chairman Mercer said that the planned consolidation of the Osceola Expressway Authority and the Central Florida Expressway Authority provided the best solution to that problem. He described agreements in place where CFX would look at the traffic projections for the OCX planned projects and based on those projections prioritize the building of those projects.

He said that the highest priority project in the eyes of OCX was to get started on the Poinciana Parkway I4 segment. He said that the study had started out looking at a variety of alternatives but narrowed it down to two both of which ultimately

connected Poinciana Parkway to the I4/429 interchange. He said that project offered both a long term challenge and a possible short term solution. The long term challenge was that today the interchange is not designed to connect to anything to the south and it would cost as much as \$500M to redesign and rebuild it. He said that long term the interchange will need to be rebuilt as part of the I4 Ultimate project that would be funded by the Federal Government. When that happens to add a Poinciana Parkway Connection would only require about \$25M additional as opposed to \$500M. A better short term solution exists by having the Expressway Authority spend about \$35M to build a bridge extension connecting the north end of Poinciana Parkway directly to CR 532 eliminating the need for traffic from the Parkway to use Ronal Reagan/Lake Wilson or 17/92 to get to 532 as is required today. That solution can be described by using the map below:



A two mile extension would be constructed consisting mostly of bridges crossing US 17/92 and the CSX railroad tracks allowing northbound Poinciana Parkway traffic to go directly to 532. 532 would provide a two mile two lane connection to the Lake Wilson Road intersection by the Publix shopping center where it would become 4 lanes connecting directly to I4 at Champions Gate intersection exit 58. From CR 532 at the Lake Wilson road intersection there would also be alternative to I4 options for traffic heading for Disney or 429. Disney traffic could head north on Lake Wilson which become a 4 lane road directly to 192. Traffic wanting to go to 429 could take Lake Wilson north to Sinclair the making a left on Sinclair to get directly onto 429 without having to use i4. Several comments were also made about using the Poinciana Parkway to get to the airport or eastern Orlando by

getting on I4 at exit 58 and then heading north to exit 62 and getting onto 417 from I4.

The next topic was the Southport Connector. It was stated that the right of way is already owned to expand Cypress Parkway between the Poinciana Parkway and Reedy Creek Bridge to 8 lanes which would support smoother both through and local traffic flow. Chairman Mercer described a higher priority being to build the Southport Connector connecting Cypress Parkway at Reedy Creek Bridge to the Florida Turnpike running below Lake Toho. He stated that the study for that project was well underway and that the options had been narrowed down to one of two routes both very close to each other. The Southport Connector project was described as a much less expensive project and easier to build than the Poinciana Parkway because the land was not an environmentally protected swamp that required a lengthy bridge. He said that it was simply a case of moving the project up to a high enough priority to qualify for the funding allocation. His estimate was that the road would be built within the next 10 years.

Based on experience some editorial comments need to be added to what Chairman Mercer stated at the meeting. Back before the Poinciana Parkway project as we know it was made a reality, then Senator Paula Dockey made the statement that in Florida, road projects seemed to get the highest priority because the developers want them. In the case of Poinciana Parkway it was helped by the developers very much wanting to see the Osceola Expressway southern beltway built and the fact that if the Parkway did not get built by 2018 when the permits expired it might never get built at all. In the case of Southport Connector its priority to get the state funding will depend on the demand generated by development south of Lake Toho. If more development takes place sooner on the Osceola land to the east those segments will get higher priority. If South Toho development takes place sooner then we see the Southport Connector sooner. One other consideration impacting the schedule for Southport Connector will be Florida Turnpike capacity. Many times during morning rush hour the turnpike like all Orlando roads, becomes heavily congested. It won't make a lot of sense to add an additional several thousand cars a day from

Poinciana's Southport Connector until the Florida Turnpike capacity can be expanded to handle the traffic volumes.

Although Chairman Mercer did not include this as part of his OCX presentation it is important to understand what the two counties are doing to speed up the traffic flow on Cypress Parkway. The picture below shows Cypress Parkway and Marigold Avenue in Poinciana and the major intersections.

Poinciana Traffic Bottlenecks



Anybody who has driven through Poinciana soon realizes that many of the traffic bottlenecks are caused because the traffic lights are not synchronized. All too often when a driver stops at one red light by the time it turns green they must stop at the next light that just turned red. Both Polk and Osceola County now realize this and they have committed to perform a Poinciana Traffic flow study and report back a recommended solution within 6 months. That will go a long way towards addressing Poinciana's famous traffic bottlenecks. When they are ready PRFSC will be hosting a meeting to hear their recommended solutions.

PRFSC would like to thank OCX Chairman Atlee Mercer for his excellent presentation and we would like to thank everyone who attended the meeting.