



Camille

Thank you for agreeing to talk with us about the Southport Connector project. Previously we featured on our Podcast Val Ramos discussing the questions that the community has been asking CFX about the Southport Connector project and the answers that they recently provided.

Before we do that however can you please tell me about you and your background of community involvement for Poinciana? I understand that you are a Solivita resident?

Keith

Yes, I have been a Solivita resident for 14 years. Soon after I moved to Solivita I became involved in a community group that became PRFSC. Over the past 10 or more years PRFSC has been involved in projects meant to make Poinciana a better place to live. Some of the projects PRFSC has been involved in include the Village 7 Community Park, bringing the Valencia college campus to Poinciana and the building of the Poinciana Parkway. More recently PRFSC has been

involved in working with CFX to bring the Southport Connector project to Poinciana.

Camille

Can you describe some of the work your PRFSC group has done in support of the Southport Connector?

Keith

My first recollection of work taking place on the Southport Connector project dates back to year 2011 when FDOT held a meeting at Disney Wilderness Preserve discussing the need for new Poinciana roads connecting Poinciana north to I4 and east to the Florida Turnpike. Those for me were the first discussions I remember of what eventually became the Poinciana Parkway and Southport Connector. I believe that meeting was covered by Orlando TV9 news and I believe there is a Youtube video describing the meeting.

Shortly after that meeting in 2012 there was a large community meeting held at Palmetto Elementary School featuring then State Senator Paula Dockery where the community voiced the need for the long-promised Poinciana Parkway. That meeting is documented on the Poinciana parkway section of our www.prfsc.org website. As a result of that meeting the two counties got together and formed a group called the Poinciana Parkway workgroup that eventually resulted in the Osceola Expressway Authority chaired by Atlee Mercer building the Poinciana Parkway. The rest is history.

Camille

Please tell me more about how the Southport Connector project fits into all of this?

Keith

I recall the first time we invited Atlee Mercer to one of our PRFSC meetings held at the Poinciana library he described how the Poinciana Parkway project fit into the Osceola Expressway Authority long term plan to build a beltway around southern Orlando connecting the Florida Turnpike through Poinciana to I4 somewhere near 429 and Champions Gate. He described the Poinciana Parkway as the most important part of that project because in order to build the road one would need to cross the Reedy Creek Swamp and the only permits that would ever allow that to happen would be the ones that Avatar held to build the Poinciana Parkway.

Camille

Was the Southport Connector discussed at that meeting?

Keith

Only vaguely. The beltway that he described required a road to be built. At that time Poinciana Parkway was supposed to connect to Marigold instead of Cypress Parkway. As they got further into the Poinciana Parkway project, they realized that running all the Poinciana Parkway up Marigold would not be such a good idea because there would be too many schools and local traffic intersections on Marigold. So instead, they built the Poinciana Parkway further south connecting to Cypress Parkway instead. Of course, that also changed the requirements for Southport Connector. Now it

had to connect to Poinciana Parkway farther west running in front of Solivita.

In 2016 OCX received state funding obtained from then State Rep Mike Horner to hire an engineering firm to perform an official PD&E study for the Southport Connector. That resulted in the study presented to the CFX board in 2018 posted on the CFX website

Camille

Were public meetings held as part of that study?

Keith

Yes, there were multiple public meetings held in Poinciana. At those public meetings as in earlier public meetings the question about using Reedy Creek as an alternate route was asked. The answer was always the same. Permits to build the road using Reedy Creek would never be approved and even if they were it would be too expensive to build and cause too much damage to the environment.

Camille

What happened to the 2018 PD&E Study?

Keith

The CFX board rejected the 2018 study because the cost to acquire land to build the road south of lake Toho was too expensive. Improving only Cypress Parkway could not be justified by itself. Osceola County went back to work and tried to negotiate better right of way deals with the owners of land south of Lake Toho. Then Osceola Commissioner Fred Hawkins, who is now State Representative for

Poinciana, led those renegotiations. The result was the new study being performed which is taking place as we speak.

Camille

So the Southport Connector project as has been described by CFX has been studied for many years and during all these previous studies the idea of an alternate route for the Cypress Parkway segment has been suggested and always rejected?

Keith

Yes. As CFX has stated the suggestion for an alternate route has been offered during every study since the project was first being talked about and every time it was rejected as not feasible because it would require permits and an expensive road to be built on Reedy Creek which is a protected wetland preserve.

Obtaining a permit to build a road on Florida wetlands requires approval from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. In order to gain their approval, it must be proven that no other alternative to locate the road exists. That is not the case with Poinciana. While some people may site reasons why building an elevated expressway on Cypress Parkway may not be an attractive solution others, an especially Osceola County feel that Cypress Parkway is the best alternative.

Camille

Can you talk a little about Florida history in this area?

Florida has a long history of attempts to drain wetlands such as the everglades and more recently the Kissimmee river between Lake Kissimmee and Lake Okeechobee. The army corps of engineers spent millions of dollars filling in the Kissimmee River to turn it into a canal only to learn that filling in the wetlands did damage to the Florida Ecosystem.

Florida lies the same distance to the equator as many of the world's largest deserts. What makes Florida unique is that we are a peninsula with water on both sides and lots of wetlands in our center. It is the wetlands combined with the Seabreeze collisions the gives us the rainfall that keeps Florida lush and green. Unless the wetlands can be preserved Florida would become a desert.

The Army Corps of Engineers then had to spend millions of more dollars to undue the damage they had done. Reedy Creek forms the headwaters of the Florida Everglades. The South Florida Water Management District is responsible for protecting that ecosystem essential for the survival of south Florida. They are not going to put all that at risk by allowing a Poinciana Road to be built on top of Reedy Creek.

I am afraid that most people when they first move to Florida are not aware of the importance our wetlands have in preserving Florida as we know it. For years people have tried to create more land for roads and housing development and only recently has the state and federal government taken actions to prevent this from happening. Today lands that are designated for preserved wetlands cannot be developed for any reason without state and federal permits being first obtained by the owners of that land. Obtaining the

required permits is a very time consuming and expensive process.

Camille

How does this relate to Poinciana?

Poinciana is a large community that continues to grow larger every year. Poinciana is located on a set of islands that are surrounded by preserved wetlands that are designated as essential for preservation of the Florida Ecosystem. Poinciana needs more roads to provide better ways for traffic to get into and out of Poinciana.

The Poinciana Parkway provides the best example. For more than a quarter century the Poinciana Parkway was promised to Poinciana homebuyers as another way to access Poinciana from the north. It was never able to be built during all those years. The developer Avatar had permits to cross the Reedy Creek Swamp but those permits required the crossing to only take place by building a bridge. Avatar could not afford the cost to build the bridge, so it was never built. Finally, when the Poinciana Parkway task force was assembled the two counties told Avatar that they had to join into a public partnership in order to build the parkway. If they did not the counties threatened Avatar that unless the bridge was built by a certain date the permits would never be renewed and the opportunity to build the parkway would be lost forever. As a result, the Poinciana Parkway was finally built and it has been an outstanding success.

Today Poinciana once again faces the permit issue. People object to the idea of constructing the elevated expressway

along Cypress Parkway. They look at Reedy Creek and say why not simply build a road along the banks of Reedy Creek. CFX, OCX and Osceola County have said since the Southport Connector was first being discussed that the required permits to build a road on Reedy Creek could not be obtained. Building a road on Reedy Creek will cause too much damage to the flow of water surrounding Poinciana to the everglades. That is a fact that is difficult for some people to understand. Hence, we are facing the controversy today.

Camille

Lets talk about Cypress Parkway? People are saying that building an elevated toll road down the center of Cypress Parkway will forever divide Poinciana and kill the businesses located today in the Center of Poinciana. They say the elevated road is not necessary and Poinciana traffic problems can be solved simply by adding additional lanes to Cypress Parkway.

Keith

Multiple traffic studies paid for by both counties have searched for solutions to the Cypress Parkway traffic congestion problem. Every time the studies came back stating that there is simply too much traffic trying to flow through the intersections on Cypress Parkway specifically at Marigold, Doverplum and Old Pleasant Hill Rd at Reedy Creek Bridge. Because of the traffic volumes flowing from all directions, it is not possible to set signal light timings long enough to allow enough traffic to flow through these

intersections during rush hour in a single light timing cycle. If you lengthen the light cycle in one direction it causes traffic to back up too far in the other direction. The only solution is to build elevated overpasses at the intersections to allow traffic to flow through without stopping. Because there are so many intersections located so close together it requires an elevated highway down the center of Cypress Parkway.

Osceola County has said that their tax revenues will not allow construction of an elevated Cypress Parkway so as a result they have requested OCX and then CFX to build the elevated highway as a toll road.

Both the county and CFX have stated that is the only way to solve the Cypress Parkway traffic problem. They have both said that it will improve the traffic flow on Cypress Parkway. CFX has stated that their design of the elevated Cypress Parkway toll road will preserve all the intersections that exist today and will in fact improve the traffic access to the Cypress Parkway businesses over and above what they have today.

Camille

So in summary are you saying that the alternative suggestions being offered by the group opposing the Current Southport Connector project plans will not work? Are you saying that what is being proposed is the only solution to the Cypress Parkway traffic problems?

Keith

No. I am not the one saying that. I am only the messenger. The Central Florida Expressway Authority are the ones saying that the suggested alternative to build the expressway on Reedy Creek cannot be done and that the only way to solve the Cypress Parkway traffic problem is to build the elevated expressway down the center of Cypress Parkway. Osceola County who is driving this project and who owns the land on Cypress Parkway where the road will be built is saying that they support what CFX is Proposing. Polk County who owns only a portion of Cypress Parkway in front of Solivita has said they are partnering with Osceola County on this and will support what Osceola County decides.