

## Begrudging shift in community mindset paves way for future tolled Osceola expressway

Many residents still not sold on proposed 'Great Wall of Poinciana' to ease traffic congestion



The Southport Connector Expressway is Central Florida Expressway Authority's proposed six-lane elevated toll road to relieve congestion and increase accessibility for Osceola County's community of Poinciana. (CFX)



By [Natalia Jaramillo](#) | [najaramillo@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:najaramillo@orlandosentinel.com) | Orlando Sentinel

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A [controversial expressway](#) finally appears set to run through the heart of Poinciana as the community shifts its mindset — begrudgingly for some — after years of opposition to the toll road in the region's top-growth area.

Poinciana is repeatedly named one of the region's worst areas for traffic by data collection agencies. Unprecedented growth in this unincorporated area of Osceola County — which now numbers 70,000 residents — and across its border with similarly ballooning Polk County has fueled the need for such road projects.

In an effort to ease traffic and offer the community a better connection both to Florida's Turnpike and to nearby Interstate 4, the Central Florida Expressway Authority proposed the

Southport Connector Expressway — a 15-mile, elevated, six-lane toll road built mostly along the middle of and above the Cypress Parkway.

The idea for such a project dates back to before CFX was created in 2014 — with Osceola planning to take the lead initially. Then around 2016 the agency developed the Southport Connector Concept Feasibility and Mobility study.

Longtime Poinciana resident Jerome Windley, 73, works in downtown Orlando and makes the drive one to two times per week. He said in an interview he would “definitely” use the expressway.

“I moved to Poinciana in 1988 and it took me 45 minutes to get to work,” Windley said. “Now I get up at six o’clock and it’ll be like an hour and 20 minutes, hour and 15.”

CFX held a community meeting Tuesday in Poinciana to get feedback from residents — and roughly 180 attended.

Many departed with a gloomy look — including 68-year-old Lorenzo Small. The retired engineer recently moved to Poinciana from Washington, D.C. and said he didn’t expect “this kind” of congestion.

“I was told when I moved in ‘make your appointments between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.’ because that’s the only time to travel,” Small said.

But he said he wasn’t totally convinced regarding the connector.

“It’s just statements,” Small said. “But I just see it bottlenecking onto Pleasant Hill Road and I haven’t heard of anything about how it will alleviate traffic there.”



Lorenzo Small inspects a map detailing the Southport Connector Expressway, a toll road proposed by the Central Florida Expressway Authority to alleviate congestion in Poinciana. Small was one of 189 attendees at a community meeting Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2024, by CFX for comment on the project in Poinciana. (Natalia Jaramillo/Orlando Sentinel)

For years, the community group SCAR (Southport Connector Alternative Routes) vehemently opposed the expressway because it would physically divide the community along its main street — dubbing it “The Great Wall of Poinciana.”

But after group members met earlier this year with CFX and saw the design and intentions of the project, they came around — begrudgingly.

The real shift for some in the group came after Osceola County invested \$80.5 million into widening Poinciana Boulevard to four lanes, a project whose path conflicted with SCAR’s preferred alternate route for the connector. The project is underway and expected to be complete by 2026.

SCAR leader Lita Epstein said members had no choice then but to accept CFX’s plan to improve Poinciana traffic congestion.

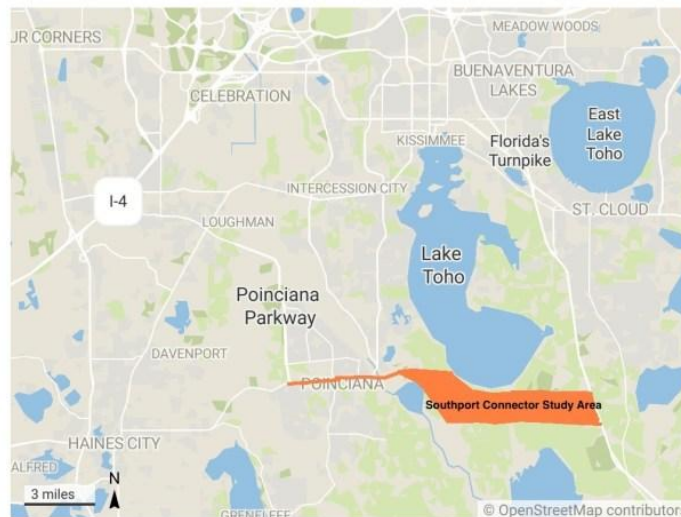
“It didn’t seem like we’re going to politically have enough to push forward that route considering the county and CFX are working together,” Epstein said. “They’re not going to want to see their \$80.5 million investment be shredded and start over.”

But it was a difficult journey to acceptance. Opposition to the Southport Connector had come to a head in 2022 when members of SCAR filed a civil rights complaint with the Department of Transportation alleging the expressway would illegally divide the largely minority and lower socioeconomic community from vital businesses along the area’s main thoroughfare.

The Department of Transportation dismissed SCAR’s complaint in June, saying it was too early to tell if the project would violate Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Epstein said a new complaint is still on the table if CFX doesn’t follow through with its plan for the toll road.

## A new expressway in fast-growing Osceola County

Local leaders are finally zeroing in on a route for the Southport Connector, a 15-mile expressway linking I-4 to Florida's Turnpike through south Osceola County. Part of the connector would be elevated atop the Cypress Parkway.



Map: Orlando Sentinel • Source: Central Florida Expressway Authority • Created with Datawrapper

The controversy over the Southport Connector highlights CFX's challenges to plan new roads across greater Orlando as the region grows. In May, CFX won the right to build a controversial toll road through a portion of once-protected Split Oak Forest.

The Southport Connector will add six lanes atop Cypress Parkway — up from four in the agency's initial proposal — with options for a closed-off wall underneath, a bridge that's open underneath or a combination of the two.

The project also will widen Cypress Parkway to six lanes, a significant benefit for residents traveling in Poinciana and another factor that shifted SCAR's mindset, Epstein said. Side roads that intersect with Cypress Parkway will get upgrades with the addition of dual left-turn lanes.

CFX spokesperson Brian Hutchings said during a recent interview that the agency's ultimate goal is to make the flow of traffic through Poinciana better than it is now.

“We are taking a holistic approach at the traffic patterns on Cypress Parkway and the proposed elevated Southport Connector Expressway,” Hutchings said. “We take great care and are extremely focused on making local and regional trips easier.”

A recent sampling of residents at businesses along Cypress Parkway shows some in the community remain divided. Many said they crave anything to alleviate congestion and believe this project could help, while others were more skeptical of its success.

One skeptic is Joey Roman, 32, who moved to Poinciana four years ago from Puerto Rico. “I think it’s a good idea but I think it’s too late,” he said while pushing his groceries out of Publix across from where the road project is planned.

“I don’t think it will help the traffic from the growth we have of people moving here.”

The road is still in its initial project development and environment study phase but a firm route and conceptual design is anticipated by third quarter of next year. The project and finalized study will then seek approval from CFX’s governing board by December 2025. With no approval yet the expressway is still years away with a cost or construction timetable unknown.

CFX plans to hold another community meeting in the first or second quarter of next year with smaller meetings and public outreach to be scheduled along the way.

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