

CFX paves way for two toll roads through sensitive lands in Orange and Osceola

One project takes land from an Orange County park, Eagles Roost, while the other cuts through the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Both are needed to manage traffic, officials say.



Fishermen troll on the Lake Hart Outflow Canal on the southwest corner of Eagles Roost Park in Orange County, Wednesday, Aug. 13, 2025. (Joe Burbank/Orlando Sentinel)



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Two controversial toll road projects are set to pave through environmentally sensitive land after transportation officials declared a section of protected land in Orange County necessary for a roadway through Split Oak Forest and presented a path for a separate road through a wildlife crossing in Osceola County.

On Thursday the Central Florida Expressway Authority voted 7-3 to label a piece of Eagles Roost, a 232-acre, Orange County-owned park, as “necessary” right-of-way for the agency’s preferred route for a new segment of State Road 534, already planned to run through a southern wedge of the Split Oak Forest preserve.

The agency also endorsed for the first time its preferred route for the Southport Connector, a 15-mile tolled expressway in Southern Osceola County that will traverse the Florida Wildlife Corridor and pass near the Disney Wilderness Preserve.

During a nearly hour-long discussion, ten people spoke against the acquisition of 3.4 acres of land along the southwest edge of Eagles Roost, including a mother with toddler in tow and two Orange County commissioners in a heated debate that highlighted Central Florida's ongoing battle between growth and conservation.

The discussion reignited tensions between Orange County leaders who last year bitterly opposed the toll road through Split Oak, flipping a previous position of support, and Osceola County officials who say their constituents desperately need both road projects to ease traffic and open key acreage for housing.

"Anytime you build a new road ... there are always challenges," Osceola County representative Brandon Arrington said. "It's bewildering to me that we say, 'oh Osceola County, the minority community, should not have the same access and opportunities that the other communities in Central Florida have'."

Eagles Roost was bought by the Orange County in 2006 with \$8 million in taxpayer funds. The issue had been on the CFX board's consent agenda — items generally approved with no debate — but was removed at the request of Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings, one of the two Orange County representatives on the CFX board. Although the proposed route has existed for some time, it has only recently become controversial, and he wanted to discuss it.

"This is a matter that is very important to at least the residents of Orange County and perhaps other counties as well," he said.

The CFX board also heard appeals from several Split Oak Forest advocates and other conservation advocates who are opposed to paving even small

portions of environmentally sensitive or protected lands bought with public funds for preservation purposes like Eagles Roost.

“Conservation land is more than just a line on a map,” Orange County Commissioner Nicole Wilson said. “It’s a guarantee of clean water; thriving wildlife habitat; climate resilience; and places for our families to connect with nature. Once those lands are fragmented or paved over, they are lost forever.”

Demings and Orange County Commissioner Christine Moore, the county’s other representative on the CFX panel, were joined in no votes by Brevard County Commissioner Katie Delaney. The board’s majority vote declaring the land necessary for the SR 534 extension clears the way for CFX’s lawyers to open talks with Orange County for the acres CFX wants or to begin legal proceedings to take them.

Also controversial, the Southport Connector will cut through environmentally sensitive lands over which experts [have raised concerns](#), while offering Poinciana residents a hybrid bridge-and-wall model above congested Cypress Parkway. It will extend from Poinciana Parkway to Pleasant Hill Road and continue east to Florida’s Turnpike with a \$2 billion price tag.

Before Thursday’s presentation, officials were mulling three different alignments for the Southport Connector Expressway. The choice of a preferred alignment is the first step toward a board decision in December on whether to move forward with the road project that aims to change how Osceola County travels.

“It is an integral part to a larger proposed expressway system within Osceola County to address current and future growth” said Will Hawthorne, CFX’s director of transportation planning and policy.

The route features 21 bridges on an 11.8-mile stretch of expressway east of Pleasant Hill Road, a compromise with environmentalists who hoped to have the entire segment elevated so wildlife could cross under.

This section of the route is nestled within the Florida Wildlife Corridor, an 18-million-acre expanse of state land that provides habitat for many fragile plants

Central Florida Expressway Authority presented for the first time its decision for a preferred alternative route, favored among three, for the Southport Connector. The 15-mile tolled expressway in southern Osceola County will extend from the Poinciana Parkway to Pleasant Hill Road and continuing east to Florida's Turnpike and cost over \$2 billion. (CFX)

After Marigold Avenue it will be bridged, offering residents a view underneath. That was the road agency's effort to minimize what was dubbed the "Great Wall" effect for residents concerned the expressway would physically divide the community.

Lita Epstein, the leader of one group opposed to the road project, said the hybrid model is the best choice for Solivita residents.

"The wall structure is nearest the neighborhood which we assume will be less noisy whereas the bridge would echo," Epstein said. "We need road improvements so the county is kind of forcing this down our throat and it's our only option to get the road widened."

Public hearings for the preferred alternative will be held on Sept. 16, 17 and 18 before the CFX board votes on the project in December.