

Controversial \$2.5 billion Florida toll road through sensitive land approved

The road is seven years in the making.



Disney Wilderness Preserve, pictured on Aug. 7, features scrubby flatwoods among 3,500 acres of restored wetlands in Poinciana. [RICH POPE | TNS]

By Natalia JaramilloOrlando Sentinel (TNS)

Touting it as “a major milestone,” transportation officials on Tuesday approved a controversial \$2.5 billion road project set to reduce congestion but also pave through environmentally sensitive land in southern Osceola County.

The unanimous decision by the Central Florida Expressway Authority in favor of the Southport Connector, a 15-mile tolled expressway that will traverse the Florida Wildlife Corridor and pass near the Disney Wilderness Preserve, marks the final step in a project more than seven years in the making, overcoming lawsuits, public scrutiny and low toll projections.

The scale and investment of the Connector will “rival projects like I-4 Ultimate and the Wekiva Parkway,” said Will Hawthorne, CFX’s director of transportation planning and policy. “[It] will mark a major milestone, opening the door to potential next steps needed to deliver this critically improved, important regional transportation facility.”

However, the project is still expected to fall short in projected toll revenue to cover its cost, the same issue that caused the CFX board in 2018 to abandon the expressway.

Roughly seven years ago, CFX estimated the toll revenue over 40 years to cover only between 17% to 29% of the project's cost, a figure that did not meet the agency's policy of a 50% minimum for project viability. But on Thursday, despite projected toll revenue of \$740 million still only covering 29% of the Southport Connector, the board moved to approve.

"This is a project that's been discussed in Osceola County my entire life and this is the closest it's ever come to reality," said board member Brandon Arrington, who represents Osceola County. "I would ask the board to allow me to continue to work with our staff to look for partnerships and also perhaps phasing opportunities that might be able to bring that percentage a little higher so we can continue moving forward."

The project will offer Poinciana residents a hybrid bridge-and-wall model above congested Cypress Parkway, extending from Poinciana Parkway to Pleasant Hill Road and continuing east to Florida's Turnpike. The project will also improve several intersections along county roads for those travelling locally, a deal that shifted the mindset of many who were in stark opposition.

Still, Janet Bowman, the senior policy analyst at The Nature Conservancy in Florida who manage the Disney Wilderness preserve, said the group has "major concerns" over their ability to conduct prescribed burns that reduce wildfire risk and aid in habitat management. The road project will have a "detrimental impact" for prescribed burns on 3,500 acres of the preserve, she said.

"It will narrow the window of the time of year, the number of days that we can burn," Bowman said. "It's going to reduce it by about 34%."

But many residents who spoke at meetings on the proposal said they're fed up with traffic and are relying on this road project.

"There's about 90,000 people that now live in Poinciana," said George Arnold, a longtime Osceola County resident. "There's one way in and one way out, and it's desperate that we have this highway."