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New bridge OK'd

Tolls could fund project

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When the Lee County Metropolitan Planning Agency approved a 25-year, \$2.3 billion transportation plan on Dec. 7, there was little fanfare about a proposed bridge leading from San Carlos Island to mid-Estero Island.

But according to MPO director Glen Ahlert, the proposed third bridge was approved along with a myriad of road projects designed to try and meet the rapid growth needs of Lee County in the future.

"The plan was adopted with that bridge in it," Ahlert said. "The proposal was for a two-lane bridge to be built off the east end of San Carlos Island to Estero Boulevard."

But exactly where the bridge would come on to Estero Island is not clear, Ahlert said.

"The location of it would have to be determined by a study as to where it would make landfall on the Beach," Ahlert said, adding the funding for the project would come from a toll, "and I understand that requires a referendum."

The MPO is composed of representatives of county and municipal governments. The group sets priorities for



Graphic by DARYL K. TABOR

spending future local, state and federal highway funds in the county.

The bridge proposal is part of a package of proposed projects in the county's 2030 transportation plan.

Ahlert said the plan would call for also placing a toll on the Matanzas Pass Bridge as well, "otherwise people would just use the free bridge and wouldn't accomplish what's intended."

By placing tolls on both bridges, the cost to motorists could be reduced.

"The toll doesn't have to be so

high," Ahlert said. "We're looking at probably something in today's dollars, under a dollar toll would be sufficient to finance it."

Ahlert said the MPO designated the bridge as a county project; it would have to undergo a project development and environmental study as a first step.

Major environmental issues

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See BRIDGE, Page 3

Bridge, from page 1

"I brought that forward and asked them to consider some other means of egress from Fort Myers Beach. They studied all three of them before the election and said this one was feasible. There are some objections to it because it comes across the bay, but it's the least objectionable of the three."

— Bill Van Duzer

mental issues involved, one of which would involve community impacts and the impact on the estuary," Ahlert said, adding that it could take up to five years to complete the study. "But it could be fast-tracked, too, if they choose to do so and given the magnitude of the problems out there, they might choose to do that — it depends a lot on how eager the town is to do it."

The development and environmental study to determine if the project is feasible wouldn't be cheap, Ahlert said.

"It's probably more than \$1 million," he said.

Former Beach mayor Bill Van Duzer was a member of the MPO for four years while on town council and sponsored a \$37,000 study that helped put the project in the 2030 plan, he said.

"I brought that forward and asked them to consider some other means of egress from Fort Myers Beach," said Van Duzer, adding the study looked at three possible scenarios that included building a bridge from

Coconut Road in Estero and from Winkler Road. "They studied all three of them before the election and said this one was feasible. There are some objections to it because it comes across the bay, but it's the least objectionable of the three."

San Carlos Island

Van Duzer said residents of San Carlos Island might have problems with the bridge project.

"They certainly have a little bit of say in this thing too, I think," Van Duzer said, "but it's the kind of thing that needs to be considered. Forever and ever, we've said we need to do something about our traffic situation out here to ease traffic congestion."

"The things the Traffic Mitigation Agency have discussed about rerouting the traffic to get it off the island quicker sort of plays into the same picture," Van Duzer added. "In fact, this may be more favorable. I mean, if you have another way to get off the island, half way down the island it

would probably do a lot to help our traffic."

Criticism

Van Duzer said he has received criticism for sponsoring the bridge study.

"They said I wasted \$37,000 of taxpayer's money because I asked them to do that and they approved it," he said. "I certainly don't look at it as being wasted."

As far as actually building the bridge, Van Duzer said he would like to see the project finally come to fruition.

"Certainly, unless they can come up with something better," he said. "I'd like to see any kind of possible traffic improvement happen."



Van Duzer

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