

TRANSPORTATION

Private I-595 plans put before investors

State highway officials met with contractors and investors on Wednesday to talk about plans for a privately managed tollway on Interstate 595.

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The morning and evening commute could look a lot different for anyone who regularly drives on Interstate 595 by 2014, Florida officials told a packed audience of investment bankers and contractors on Wednesday.

The state is leaning toward asking private-sector investors to help finance, build and possibly operate and maintain a 10.5-mile variably priced elevated toll road in the center of I-595 to increase capacity for Broward commuters.

Florida Department of Transportation officials say they don't have enough money budgeted to get the \$1.5 billion project completely built before 2024.

By asking the private sector to share in the financial and construction risk at the front end, and repaying the vendors over a long-term concession agreement, they can get the project finished a lot faster.

The plan also includes myriad safety and capacity improvements to the existing "free" lanes on I-595, such as fixing the dangerous interchange and merging areas with Florida's Turnpike, completing a missing segment of State Road 84 between Davie Road and U.S. 441 and adding parallel auxiliary lanes to the mainline.

Here's how the elevated tolling area would theoretically work: Traffic would flow eastbound in the morning and west in the afternoon.

A West Broward commuter would enter the express lanes just east of the Sawgrass Expressway and exit at either Florida's Turnpike or just west of Interstate 95. There will be no exits in between.

Motorists approaching the tolling area would encounter electronic billboards flashing a price that will be adjusted higher or lower depending on traffic flow.

The idea is to "guarantee" a 55-mph trip regardless of what is happening in the nontolled general passenger lanes of I-595.

Ed Regan, an FDOT toll revenue consultant, showed an array of scenarios on Wednesday that showed peak hour tolls generally ranging between 25 cents and \$1 in 2014 when the road would open and anywhere from 25 cents to \$2 in 2030.

In a few of his 2030 scenarios tolls would escalate as high as \$4.50.

The state is hoping to select a team of investors and contractors by late 2008. Construction would begin in 2009 and open by 2014.

About 186,000 cars use the busiest segments of I-595 on a typical weekday. That number is expected to exceed 300,000 by 2035.

The express lanes plan is expected to face plenty of local resistance, especially from Davie and Plantation homeowners near the interstate.

Despite promises for improved sound walls along the corridor, those homeowners say the higher traffic counts and the visual blight of the elevated express lanes will harm property values.

Anyone who regularly enters or exits the highway between U.S. 441 and SW 136th Avenue would not be able to use the express lanes. FDOT engineers say those people would theoretically benefit, however, from better traffic flow on the "free" lanes at ground level.