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### Reversible I-595 express lanes will be at ground level, state says

#### Option cheaper; state reveals plans for hybrid buses

By Michael Turnbell

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Interstate 595's proposed elevated express lanes are coming down.

Ending weeks of speculation, the Florida Department of Transportation announced Monday that it plans to build the reversible express lanes at ground-level in the median.

The state also pledged to create and fund a new express bus service with hybrid electric buses that would use the new lanes and build ridership for a future light rail line along I-595.

"The new ground level express lanes will provide similar advantages as the elevated at less cost. The ground level option is estimated to cost \$200 million less," said Jim Wolfe, secretary of the DOT's district office in Fort Lauderdale.

Residents in Davie and Plantation, who vehemently opposed the elevated lanes, were thrilled at the state's turnaround.

"[State officials] listened intently. They responded with creative ideas," said Mitchell Chester, a Davie resident who helped organize 595alert.org, a Web site to inform residents about the project. "It's a perfect example of the citizens reaching out to government and government responding in an appropriate fashion."

The Federal Highway Administration must still approve the new design. But officials say the construction schedule — set to begin in 2009 and be completed in 2014 — won't be changed.

In addition to the express lanes, the \$1.5 billion overhaul planned for I-595 calls for additional lanes between exits, improved entrance and exit ramps to ease merging, a reconfigured interchange at Florida's Turnpike and the completion of State Road 84 between State Road 7 and Davie Road.

The project will be designed, built, financed, operated and maintained by a private contractor for 35 to 50 years, with the firm responsible for maintaining I-595 to state standards during that "lease."

By using private financing instead of the traditional pay-as-you-go method, Wolfe said the entire project — including noise walls — will be finished in five years instead of 15.

In exchange for financing, the state would repay the contractor over a period of years.

Plans originally called for the express lanes to be elevated because the median only has room for two lanes and traffic forecasts showed a need for at least three. By elevating the lanes, officials said they could build three lanes on a bridge and use the ground underneath for mass transit.

To make room for three express lanes on the ground, Wolfe said westbound I-595 and S.R. 84 will be shifted to the edge of the North New River Canal.

The express lanes, which will charge tolls that rise and fall depending on congestion, will carry drivers eastbound in the morning and westbound in the evening on weekdays. Drivers will need SunPass transponders to use the lanes.

The state, not the contractor, will set the toll rates and retain the revenue from the express lanes.

Designed for commuters driving the entire length of I-595, the only access to the express lanes from the general lanes of I-595 will be just east of Interstate 75, the turnpike and near S.R. 7. Officials say they are considering creating more access points to the express lanes, an option that was impossible with elevated lanes.

With express lanes on the ground, the light rail line will have to go someplace else — most likely elevated between eastbound I-595 and S.R. 84. But that's a battle for another day since transit plans still are in flux.

"If we get to that point — elevated or not — there is an opportunity to solve that problem with everybody working together," Chester said.

Michael Turnbell can be reached at [mturnbell@sun-sentinel.com](mailto:mturnbell@sun-sentinel.com), 954-356-4155 or 561-243-6550.

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