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Spanish conglomerate will run I-595 toll road

BY LARRY LEBOWITZ

A Spanish construction conglomerate was selected Friday to lead a historic \$1.8 billion project that would expand Interstate 595 in Broward County including new variably priced reversible tolling lanes that could open in 2014.

A state Department of Transportation selection committee awarded the I-595 project to a team headed by ACS Infraestructores to head what will likely be the first major public-private partnership deal in Florida.

If the I-595 contract is executed, the team will be asked to completely finance, design and build the project over a five-year period starting in June 2009, then operate the road until 2044.

Under the plans, there will be three free travel lanes in each direction, plus a reversible SunPass-only two-lane tolling area in the center median.

To ease congestion, the two center lanes would operate eastbound in the mornings, providing a straight shot between I-75 in the west and Florida's Turnpike or State Road 7 in the east, then reverse for the afternoon rush hour.

Prices would rise as the express areas become more congested, and drop as traffic gets lighter.

Based on the bid, ACS Infraestructores will receive 30 annual payments of \$63.98 million regardless of the tolls collected after the road "opens" in 2014.

The second-ranked bidder was seeking a \$144.49 million annual payment.

The SunPass-only tolling area would be built in the center median area and operate similar to the soon-to-open express lanes on Interstate 95 in Miami-Dade County. Prices will rise when congestion is heaviest, and drop during off-peak hours.

There will be one key difference, though: The two express lanes on I-595 will operate eastbound in the mornings and westbound at night.

State officials say they are essentially using the private vendor's financing to get the project finished in one-third of the time.

"We're getting it done in five years," said Broward-based DOT project manager Joseph Borello. "If we had to do it the traditional way, it would take us 15 to 20 years."

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