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Massive project to expand Interstate 595 in Broward County begins this summer

By Michael Turnbull

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

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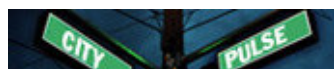
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road work by late July or August.

Some jobs, however, such as relocating utilities and building noise walls, will begin this spring.

Specific construction plans, such as what will be built first, will be announced in the coming months.

In early talks with the contractor, officials said it appears work will focus first on the outside lanes of I-595. After workers finish rebuilding those lanes, they should shift traffic to the new lanes while the inside lanes are constructed.

The most expensive road project in Florida history will shake up Interstate 595 beginning this summer, creating thousands of construction jobs and pumping up to \$1 million a day into the economy.

The downside is that drivers will have to endure five years of barricades, alternate routes and lane closures.

Maybe they'll forget such headaches in 2014, when a new and improved I-595 debuts with reversible express lanes for long-distance commuters, new entrance and exit ramps, and a safer, less confusing Florida's Turnpike interchange.

The historic project will be built by a Spanish construction conglomerate teaming up with local contractors, equipment and workers in Florida's first public-private road deal.

By using the private company's financing up front, state officials hope to finish the project in one-third the time it would otherwise take. Had the state built the project the way construction is usually funded, it would have required more than a dozen separate contracts and taken 15 to 20 years to complete. State officials plan to sign a contract with ACS Infrastructure Development by the end of this week.

A much-needed expansion

When I-595 opened in 1989, the 13-mile road cost more than \$1.2 billion. At the time, it was the most expensive road project ever undertaken in Florida.

But the highway reached its capacity of 120,000 vehicles a day in the early '90s as southwest Broward County grew much faster than planners forecast, especially after Hurricane Andrew fueled an exodus of Miami-Dade County residents into Broward. Traffic mushroomed from 60,000 vehicles a day in September 1990 to more than 125,000 seven months later.

Today, the busiest stretch of I-595 carries more than 180,000 vehicles a day.

By 2030, as many as 300,000 are expected.

Planners say easing congestion on I-595 will take more than adding lanes. They also aim to address the problems that cause traffic backups and hazards that lead to accidents today - such as replacing entrance and exit ramps that are too close to each other with "braided" ramps so exiting traffic can rise over entrance ramps.

Preparations to begin in spring

Once the contract is signed, ACS Infrastructure Development must begin construction in 150 days. That means drivers should see signs of

The entire road won't be rebuilt. In its bid proposal, the contractor curtailed costs by incorporating some existing bridges, such as the University Drive flyovers, into the new design.

Paying for a faster commute will be option

Traffic on the reversible express lanes will flow eastbound in the morning and westbound in the evening between Interstate 75 and State Road 7.

But unlike the new express lanes on I-95 in Miami that are separated from regular traffic by a row of plastic poles, I-595's express lanes will be divided by concrete barriers.

Drivers will use SunPass to pay tolls that will increase when demand is highest at rush hour.

The concept, called "congestion pricing," relies on simple economics: The higher the price, the more likely some drivers are likely to use the regular travel lanes or drive at a less congested time of day.

The state will control the toll rates and retain the toll revenue, which will be used to help pay for some of the improvements.

Financial incentive to finish project

In a public-private partnership, a private company designs, builds, maintains and operates a road over a period of years and pays part or all of the costs up front, then is repaid later. In I-595's case, ACS Infrastructure Development will finance, design and build the project over five years, then maintain the road from 2014 until 2044.

ACS won't get a dime from the state until after construction is finished. The sooner the project is built, the sooner the team can start receiving payments.

The team is to receive a total of \$685 million in "final acceptance" payments spread over seven years plus "availability payments" of \$63.98 million a year for 30 years. The amount of the availability payments will depend on how well the contractor maintains I-595 and keeps lanes open to traffic.

A big boost for local economy

The project is expected to have a huge impact on the South Florida economy.

In Florida, every \$1 billion spent on nonresidential construction will create at least 23,000 jobs, add \$2.3 billion to the state's gross domestic product and contribute about \$748 million to personal earnings, according to Ken Simonson, chief economist for the Association of General Contractors.

That includes 7,800 new construction workers, 3,700 new suppliers and 11,000 new jobs throughout the broader economy.

Construction headquarters for the project team will be an office with 30,000 square feet in Davie, with as many as 200 full-time workers.

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