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Rough patch ahead for I-595 commuters

Interstate 595 commuters face a long rough patch when construction begins this summer on a huge \$1.2 billion project to upgrade the road. In five years the aggravation will end when a new road with safer ramps and reversible express lanes is completed.

Last week the Florida Department of Transportation signed an agreement with a Spanish conglomerate, ACS Infrastructure Development, to finance, build, operate and maintain the new road. Such public-private deals deserve close scrutiny, and this one is no exception even though it looks promising.

The project is the most expensive in FDOT's history, and ACS will cover its cost upfront. The deal makes sense because it would take the state much longer -- between 15 and 20 years -- to complete such a complicated project, in part, because state funding would come in increments. Another plus: ACS is liable for any cost overruns.

When the express toll lanes are completed, the state will set rates and keep the revenue while ACS operates the lanes. ACS will be reimbursed its cost based on performance measures over the life of the 35-year contract. If ACS performs according to the highest preset standards, it could earn a maximum 12 percent on its investment.

Some experts believe this deal is the prototype for road projects around the country. It is at least preferable to another plan by FDOT to privatize Alligator Alley. In that deal, a private firm would set toll rates. The deal would amount to a giveaway of an asset already bought and paid for by taxpayers. The plan is now on hold -- and should expire.

The I-595 plan is intended to ease major congestion. The 13-mile roadway was completed in 1989 at a cost of more than \$1.2 billion -- then the most expensive FDOT project on record. The road rapidly reached capacity: 120,000 vehicles a day because of development in West Broward and the influx of new residents after Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Today, the road carries more than 180,000 vehicles a day.

The project will boost South Florida's economy, bringing an estimated 7,800 new construction jobs, 3,700 new suppliers and 11,000 more jobs by extension.

Traffic is worse now

The worrisome part of this plan is the state's penchant for slapping tolls on interstates financed by taxpayers. The I-595 express tolls will be similar to those imposed on the I-95 northbound toll lanes in Miami-Dade: variable rates pegged to congestion. The I-95 toll lanes have lived up to critics' concerns. They're "Lexus lanes" that put more vehicles into the four, narrow free lanes. They haven't solved traffic gridlock, just made it worse for motorists in the free lanes. Let's hope the I-595 express lanes prove more effective.