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Fill I-595 jobs with local hires, Broward officials urge

State signed contract with Spanish firm

By Michael Turnbull

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The \$1.2 billion Interstate 595 reconstruction -- and the 35,000 jobs it's expected to generate through 2014 -- will be a boon to somebody.

Broward County officials want the state to ensure the economic impact stays local.

The Metropolitan Planning Organization on Thursday passed a resolution directing the state to make a "reasonable effort" to hire Broward County firms, suppliers and workers, and track how many I-595 jobs are filled locally. The resolution is non-binding.

State law bars giving local firms preferential treatment when awarding contracts. To do so would decrease competition and drive up the cost of projects, said Hesham Ali, transportation operations director for the Florida Department of Transportation.

The state signed a contract last week with I-595 Express, a consortium lead by Spanish construction giant ACS Infrastructure Development. ACS will finance, design and rebuild I-595 over the next five years, then maintain the highway until 2044.

State officials have said most of the jobs created will be local. But Broward planners want proof to back up those claims.

"The data is the only way to know for sure," said Broward County Commissioner Kristin Jacobs.

Elected officials and residents have voiced a common complaint: Why didn't the state award the I-595 job to an American company?

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an American company?

The other bidder was a consortium made up of American companies, Ali said. But its bid was more than \$700 million higher than ACS' winning bid.

As part of a public-private partnership, the ACS consortium is financing the cost of the project up front to speed up completion.

The financing method is commonly used in Europe but has yet to take root here. U.S.-based companies don't have as much experience taking the lead on such projects.

The consortium won't receive any money from the state until the project is finished in five years. Then it will receive \$685 million spread out over seven years, and up to \$63.98 million a year for 30 years as long as the road meets the state's expectations.

If I-595 isn't maintained to state standards, the consortium will receive less money. That's a risk the consortium is willing to take.

The state will set rates and retain revenue from tolls collected in the new reversible express lanes that will be built in I-595's median. Officials believe that in 20 years, the express lanes could generate enough revenue to cover the annual payment to the consortium and turn a profit for the state.

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