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State moves ahead on private road projects

By Lloyd Dunkelberger
Tallahassee Bureau

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TALLAHASSEE - Although the state failed to find a company willing to lease Alligator Alley, Florida is moving quickly into the expanding ranks of states using private companies to build or run roadways and bridges.

Just two years ago lawmakers endorsed a plan that would let the state Department of Transportation lease major highways like Alligator Alley or even the Sunshine Skyway bridge over Tampa Bay to private companies.

And while the state failed to secure a single bid on Alligator Alley last week, state transportation officials are moving forward on other major projects with the private sector, including a tunnel project in Miami, an interstate project in Fort Lauderdale and a major beltway road near Jacksonville.

Florida, like other states, is strapped for road cash. Privatized roads remain attractive, in part, because of their ability to bring in large sums of money. One preliminary estimate showed a long-term lease of Alligator Alley, a 78-mile highway that links Naples with Broward County, could generate \$500 million or more for the state.

Private contractors, whose involvement can range from financing and building the road to leasing and maintaining it, can also be used to speed up projects that could take years to achieve if they have to wait for the standard government financing.

But critics warn the private roads may be a short-term fix that could have long-term negative consequences for the state and its drivers.

Sen. Dave Aronberg, D-Greenacres, who has been a harsh critic of the Alligator Alley proposal, said the project was "ill-conceived from the very beginning."

"The Department of Transportation sped through the process and taxpayer dollars with minimal public input

and it deserves to be dead and buried forever," Aronberg said.

Among his concerns, Aronberg cited "security" issues with letting foreign companies lease state roads and the limited ability of the state to control toll increases or maintenance levels once the roadway had been turned over to a private company. But his bill that would have imposed a two-year moratorium on leasing state roads to private companies was never heard during the recently concluded session.

Despite the Alligator Alley setback, state DOT officials say the so-called "public-private partnerships" on road projects remain an important element in their transportation planning.

In early March, DOT officials announced the award of a \$1.2 billion expressway project in Broward County to a Spanish conglomerate that will build, maintain and operate an expanded 10.5-mile section of Interstate 595 that will include reversible toll lanes. The lease will extend for 35 years.

DOT officials said without the agreement, it could have taken 15 years or more for the improvements to come about.

Gov. Charlie Crist, who had supported the Alligator Alley lease, cited the I-595 project as one of the ways the DOT was able to accelerate construction and also help South Florida's drivers as well as the local economy "by getting shovels in the dirt and supporting more than 34,000 jobs in the region."

Another public-private project involved adding tolled express lanes to Interstate 95 in Miami Dade County. A private company financed and built the expansion, although the state still owns the roadways. The I-95 express-lane project is scheduled to expand into Broward County.

Doug Callaway of Floridians for Better Transportation, a lobbying group for businesses and road builders, said his organization views the public-private projects as "part of the solution" to the state's transportation challenges "but not the entire solution."

"I think they need to clear two hurdles," he said. "They ought to bring additional money to the table and they ought to bring additional capacity to the system. If they don't do that, we're really spinning our wheels."

The two South Florida interstate projects fit that model, Callaway said.

But more controversial are the DOT's proposals for leasing existing state roads to private companies, like the Alligator Alley project.

Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, who heads the Senate budget committee overseeing transportation and economic development, said he draws a distinction between public-private partnerships that yield new roads for the state and leasing existing roads to private companies.

"I am not a big fan of turning over an existing road that has already been paid for by the taxpayers or the toll payers," he said.

A recent report by the public interest group Florida PIRG raised new concerns about the state's efforts to privatize roads, saying nationally 15 roads in 10 states had been leased or built by private companies with some 79 other projects under consideration in 25 states.

"Though privatization may offer short-term relief to transportation budget woes, it often has grave implications for the public," the report said.

Brad Ashwell, a Florida PIRG lobbyist, said he sees little sign of Florida transportation officials backing away from the public-private partnerships.

"They see this as an easy way to get a lot of quick money, a short term infusion of cash," Ashwell said. Ashwell said pursuing the private contracts "would be detrimental to the long-term public interest," unless certain guidelines are followed, including making sure the public receives a "fair value" for the roadway, limiting the deals to no longer than 30 years and making sure the contractors have to meet "state of the art" maintenance and safety standards.

Callaway, a former state DOT official, said it will take some time for the state to adjust to the new world of public-private partnerships.

"With any sort of new transportation innovation, there is sort of a maturation process that needs to take place," he said.

But he also said state officials need to be careful not to oversell the benefits of the partnerships to the public until they have more experience with them. "We have to figure out what is the best way to go," he said.

Private road projects upcoming

Although the state failed to lease Alligator Alley to a private company, Florida transportation officials are moving ahead on more than a half-dozen "public-private" transportation projects. Among them:

Interstate 595, Broward: A \$1.2 billion expansion of Interstate 595 in Broward County, where a Spanish conglomerate will expand the roadway and add reversible toll lanes. The company will manage the system for 35 years.

Interstate 95, Broward: Adding tolled express lanes to Interstate 95 in Miami Dade and Broward counties. The express lanes are already running in Miami Dade.

I-10/I-95, Jacksonville: A \$2 billion, 46.5-mile "outer beltway" roadway around the western side of Jacksonville, linking Interstate 10 with Interstate 95.

Interstate 95, Miami: A \$1 billion Miami Tunnel project that will connect the Port of Miami with Interstate 95.

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meal. Stefanie Hamblen wanted to encourage people to "eat..."

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