

THE SR 408 (EAST-WEST EXPRESSWAY) *A Regional Partnership Opportunity*

Meeting the Need: Mobility in West Orange and South Lake Counties

Western Orange County and South Lake County (WOSL) comprise a region of rapid urbanization. South Lake County, from Clermont, south to the Four Corners area, is one of the more rapidly growing and densely populated areas in Central Florida. West Orange County, including the cities of Oakland, Winter Garden and Ocoee, and the planned community of Horizons West, is growing at a similar pace.

The spine of the transportation network currently in place to serve this bustling area is the SR 50 corridor, a four- to six-lane, regionally-significant, east-west arterial connecting the burgeoning western communities cited above with the metropolitan city of Orlando to the east. Because of the urban development pattern emanating from downtown Orlando westward along the SR 50 corridor into Clermont, SR 50 continues to be overloaded with trips generated by the residential developments of the WOSL suburbs seeking destinations in the Orlando. For this reason, alternatives are needed.

In addition to land use decisions that locate magnets such as jobs, goods, and services closer to the residential developments of South Lake, the transportation system is in need of alternatives. SR 408 (East-West Expressway) is an east-west arterial highway parallel to SR 50 connecting Orlando to the metro's east and west. The SR 408 corridor extends only as far west as Ocoee in western Orange County. From downtown Orlando to Ocoee, the East-West Expressway alleviates much of the potential congestion along SR 50. However, west of Ocoee, from Winter Garden into Clermont, SR 50 is quickly becoming overburdened due to east-west travel demands.

Meanwhile, three significant north-south facilities serve the area: SR 91 (Florida Turnpike); SR 429 (Western Beltway); and SR 25 (US 27). These three facilities provide a frame to the WOSL transportation area. US 27 is the western portion of the frame, while the expanding SR 429 is the eastern perimeter. Florida's Turnpike bisects the area in a northwest to east fashion. The three arterial highways provide effective north-south movement of traffic.

Where this transportation network lacks is in east-west connectivity between southern Lake County and western Orange County and the metro of Orlando. The current growth burst in South Lake, combined with the sizeable existing and proposed employment and retail centers located in Orange County, will soon generate volumes to exceed capacities of the SR 50 corridor. Perpetual widening of SR 50 is not a sustainable option. Therefore an alternative corridor should be examined.

SR 408 Western Extension: A Parallel Solution

With the rapid growth anticipated in South Lake County, it is clear that additional east-west facilities are going to be required to handle the increasing demand. Alternative east-west facilities will provide relief to the SIS facilities in the WOSL area. The SR 408 Western Extension concept has been discussed locally for a number of years. With SR 408 currently terminating at Florida's Turnpike, just east of Winter Garden in Orange County, an extension of SR 408 to US 27 would have the potential to provide significant relief to the SR 50 corridor, as well as portions of the Turnpike, SR 429 and US 27.

Because the need is significant and because financial resources are limited for an undertaking as significant as an expressway, local governments through the Lake-Sumter Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) have considered the feasibility of the expressway extension as a tolled facility. The concept has gained support from the West Orange-South Lake Transportation Task Force, comprised of public and private entities in the WOSL region. With the concept supported locally, an entity is needed with the resources to advance such a project.

The Opportunity for Regional Partnerships

Lake County and the Lake-Sumter MPO in June approach the board of the Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority to request the potential project be included in the OOCEA 2030 Long Range Transportation Plan. The OOCEA is considering the inclusion of the potential project and will reach a final decision by January 2006. If the project is included in the OOCEA's vision, a request will be made for the OOCEA to initiate a feasibility study of the project. If the potential project is included in the 2030 plan and the feasibility study is approved, the viability of the potential project maybe known by the end of 2006.

If the project is a viable undertaking for the OOCEA, several planning steps must be taken to advance the project. The process could take several years even after a feasibility determination is made. Before the project can begin, the need for the expressway extension must be agreed to by affected local governments and must be reflected as such in their comprehensive plans. The two MPOs of the WOSL region, METROPLAN Orlando and Lake-Sumter MPO, must also reflect the need for the project in their Long Range Transportation Plans. Finally, the OOCEA must be invited through an interlocal agreement with Lake County to construct a tolled facility in Lake County. If all parties agree and the project moves forward, completion requires the following stages: the Planning, Development and Environmental (PD&E) stage, the design stage, the right-of-way acquisition stage, and the construction stage

Potential Alignment

Because studies have not been conducted to determine feasible alignments, an actual alignment from the Western Beltway to US 27 has not been determined. Conceptually, the extension could commence from SR 408's current western terminus at Florida's Turnpike by dually designating the one-mile portion of the Turnpike from SR 408 to SR 429 as both SR 91 and as SR 408. A similar dual designation could occur along the Western Beltway from Florida's Turnpike south to the point at which the new East-West Expressway would separate west as its own expressway, resulting in a dual designation of the beltway as SR 429 and SR 408 to that point.

According to the Lake-Sumter MPO, it is important that the potential alignment be as close to SR 50 as feasible in order to capture the trip demand that is overloading SR 50. However, development patterns south of SR 50 have created a newly-built environment south to Hartwood-Marsh Road that may prove problematic for an expressway alignment. A future study may reveal that the expressway concept would have to be south of Hartwood-Marsh Road. The concern with a dramatically southern alignment, south of Hartwood-Marsh Road, is that the new facility is intended to alleviate SR 50 congestion. An alignment too far south may reduce the corridor's effectiveness.

The Strategic Intermodal System (SIS): the Added Benefit

In 2003, the Florida Legislature enacted Florida Statutes 339.61-64, which formally established the Strategic Intermodal System (SIS) and provides for its development and implementation. Comprised of highways, railroads and terminals, airports, seaports and Florida's spaceport, the objective of the SIS is to strengthen the competitiveness of Florida's economy by focusing resources on the transportation facilities and services that support critical interregional, interstate, and international trips. The State of Florida has designated three highway facilities in the WOSL area as SIS facilities: Florida's Turnpike (SR 91), the Western Beltway (SR 429) and US 27 (south of the Turnpike to I-4). Efforts are required to protect and preserve these SIS facilities as they serve as the backbone for the economic vitality of the State of Florida.

The concept of an expressway connecting two SIS facilities, US 27 and SR 429, contains the added benefit of connecting two of the state's priority highway facilities. Through this potential connection, congestion could be alleviated on the SIS corridors, as well as Florida's Turnpike, another SIS facility, and SR 50. Furthermore, the WOSL region and the Central Florida region receive the benefit of an enhanced region highway system that provides effective connectivity to the SIS.

Conclusion

With the facts presented above, the idea of an expressway connecting South Lake to West Orange is an alternative worth examining. The Lake County Board of County Commissioners this year instructed public works staff to work with the OOCEA in determining the viability of such a project. In May, the board of the Lake-Sumter MPO endorsed the concept of a SR 408 extension to US 27 and instructed staff to work with OOCEA. The West Orange-South Lake Transportation Task Force has supported the concept. Local governments and chambers of commerce stand ready to voice their support once a decision is made by the OOCEA Board on whether to include the project in their 2030 plan.

Meanwhile, state transportation policy continues to evolve with a focus on the SIS and with an emphasis on regional partnerships. With so much building support, it appears that the SR 408 concept may provide an opportunity for a major regional partnership. If the potential partners can agree and the concept becomes a project, the SR 408 could prove to be one of Central Florida's best examples of partnering at a regional level.