

GUEST OPINION BY COMMISSIONER RAY JUDAH
JUDAH RESPONSE TO OPEN LETTER FROM MAYOR & CITY COUNCIL
OF BONITA SPRINGS

1-5-06

The recent opinion letter from the Mayor and City Council of Bonita Springs concerning the proposed Coconut Road/I-75 interchange helps to focus on an issue that requires full public discussion and scrutiny.

The Mayor and City Council of Bonita Springs are honorable men and we all share the same concern for improved traffic circulation in our rapidly growing community.

In fact, the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), comprised of local government elected officials working jointly with representatives of the Florida Department of Transportation, have developed a long term road transportation plan that incorporates patterns of growth and prioritization of road projects.

In their 5-year work program, the State is expected to widen I-75 to six and possibly ten lanes with the recently adopted Expressway Authority.

Lee County will be moving forward in early 2006 with the Three Oaks extension from Coconut Road to Bonita Beach Road, and coordinating with Bonita Springs to connect Sandy Lane to Old U.S. 41. The recently completed 6-laning of Bonita Beach Road from Imperial Street to the interstate was long overdue, and the proposed 951 corridor is into the planning and permitting stage to provide a north-south alternative to I-75.

The Bonita Springs City Council is also working to enhance the road transportation network in Bonita Springs with the widening of Old U.S. 41 from Rosemary Drive to U.S. 41 in 2006 and planning for the widening of East Terry Street to Bonita Grande Road.

At first glance, the \$10 million that mysteriously appeared as an earmark to the 2005 Federal Surface Transportation Bill for the feasibility study of the Coconut Road/I-75 interchange appeared too good to be true.

Further review and discussion at the MPO meeting on December 7, 2005 determined that there were significant ramifications in accepting the \$10 million Federal allocation.

As with all earmarks to budget appropriation bills, the \$10 million would “come off the top” before the balance of the appropriated funds could be spent in areas of demonstrated need, such as the widening of I-75. While the \$10 million would fund the initial feasibility study, the total cost to construct the Coconut Road/I-75 interchange and connecting road to 951 is estimated at \$106 million. Based on the recently adopted 2030 Financially Feasible Plan, the State is currently experiencing over a billion dollar shortfall in funding state highway projects and Lee County has been forced to prioritize local road projects due to a \$2.6 billion shortfall.

Interestingly, to prepare for Hurricane Rita in Houston, Texas, a number of interchanges along I-45 were closed to adjust the directional flow of traffic to facilitate evacuation. In fact, too many feeder roads providing ingress along a major hurricane evacuation route can cause an impediment to the main exodus of traffic flow.

Upon further review, it became apparent that Edison Farms, owners of several sections of undeveloped land east of I-75 between Bonita Beach Road and Corkscrew Road, would be a major beneficiary of the Coconut Road/I-75 interchange and connecting road to 951 on their property.

Recently Edison Farms made a proposal to the Lee County Board of Commissioners to provide financial incentives for the proposed 951 alignment that involved significant mitigation to offset impact to environmentally sensitive lands and potential for direct access to 951.

Lee County needs to provide responsible stewardship of environmentally sensitive lands east of I-75 and maintain the proposed 951 corridor as a limited access arterial to facilitate traffic flow.

Our community must stand firm and not allow special interest to influence public policy.