

Commission leaning toward Poinciana Parkway as county road



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Editor

The Osceola County Commission at a workshop Monday leaned toward making the proposed Poinciana Parkway – which would connect the greater Poinciana area with Interstate 4 via Polk County Road 54 – a county owned road, with tolls used to fund a portion of it.

Avatar Properties has not been able to arrange funding for the road and is quickly approaching a Feb. 14 deadline to have the financing in place and to begin construction, with a May 2014 opening required. The company, the main developer of Poinciana, initially had asked the county for a one-year extension on the agreement, which had been extended twice already – in 2008 and 2010.

A commission vote on the issue is expected Feb. 6. At the same time, the commission also will vote to select a consultant to perform a revenue/traffic study for the tolled portion of the roadway, with Avatar Properties covering that cost.

Avatar Properties has transitioned through several proposals, going from financing the project itself to the two counties – Polk and Osceola – funding their respective portions. In between were hopes that the company with the county's help would be able to receive federal funding for the project, which did not occur.

Latest proposal

The latest proposal is for Osceola County to finance 4.17 miles of upgrades to Marigold Avenue as the non-tolled portion of the roadway, beginning at Cypress Parkway and ending at Eastborne Avenue, at a cost of \$6 million.

The next 4.15 miles – between Eastborne Avenue and the Polk County line – would be financed with toll collections by the county through the Osceola County Expressway Authority. Bonds would be issued to raise the needed funding, if the study determines it to be feasible. Whether this portion would be four lanes or two lanes depends on how much revenue would be generated.

The northern 1.34 mile segment, which county officials hope Polk County would finance, would begin at the Polk County line and end at the intersection of U.S. Highway 17-92 and County Road 54, which connects to Interstate 4.

Avatar Properties has completed the engineering and design work for the project and has purchased the needed right of way and obtained the necessary state permits, spending about \$47 million on the project so far, according to company officials. In the latest agreement, a mechanism would be put in place to repay the company for that investment.

When there is sufficient toll revenue generated to finance it, a new south-north parkway access road west of Marigold Avenue would be constructed, with Avatar donating any needed right of way it would own at the time for the project.

In the revised proposal, Avatar Properties also would provide to the county 160 acres of the Judge property that the company owns across East U.S. Highway 192 from Osceola Heritage Park, for development into county-owned amateur ball fields. The county would pay the company \$150,000 for the site and would pay for document stamps and recording fees. The county also would have to negotiate further for the site if the tolled section of the Poinciana Parkway is not financed and constructed by the county.

The timeline for the latest proposal is to have the revenue study, the proposed agreement and transfer of the Judge property to the county all completed in nine months, with the roadway to be opened in May 2015.

One of the county's transportation goals is to have a beltway around major population areas. The parkway would link into the Southport Connector, which would connect to Florida's Turnpike around the south end of Lake Tohopekaliga. That roadway would eventually connect with the southward extension of State Road 417 in the St. Cloud area.

The dilemma

Avatar Holdings (parent company of Avatar Properties) general counsel PK Fletcher said the company is not selling many homes in Poinciana now due to the economy and that without the county's participation, Avatar Properties could not build the parkway.

"We've tried every opportunity and every private investor and we can't find a way to get it accomplished without a public-private partnership," Fletcher said.

County Chairman John Quiñones said the residents of Poinciana have been "royally wronged" by Avatar Properties and prior county commissions with those actions leading to the current traffic congestion.

"This community could never be built now," Quiñones said. "This community was allowed to develop without the right infrastructure. So here we are, injecting the county into the responsibility of Avatar. We need to resolve the problem that has been brewing for 40 years."

Quiñones also said the county taking the responsibility to build the parkway would not be letting Avatar off the hook.

"The situation is that local government allowed that development to occur," he said. "The residents deserve a way to get in and out of Poinciana."

Commissioner Michael Harford said Avatar took the profits it derived from selling homes in Poinciana to develop properties in other places rather than reinvesting it in infrastructure locally and is now asking the county to bail it out of its responsibility.

To that, Avatar Properties' vice president Tony Iorio said the transportation impact fees from Poinciana have gone to fund county road projects.

"If Avatar could take just the toll portion of the roadway, we could finance it, but not the whole thing," he said, adding that in this latest plan the parkway would become county property and that revenues generated by it could help fund other roads through the county expressway authority.

Commissioner Brandon Arrington, whose district includes Poinciana, said he would also like to see an extension of Reeves Road to help the community.

Quiñones at the workshop also put Bill Beasley, deputy county manager for Polk County, on the spot, asking about that county's plan for its portion of the proposed parkway.

Beasley said the roadway is not in his county's capital improvement plan.

"The commission has not discussed it at any length ... they understand its significance and are willing to talk about it," he said. "There are other projects in the queue."

Poinciana residents comment

After the parkway discussion at the workshop, Nick Murdock, chairman of the Poinciana Economic Development Alliance, said not all options have been discussed regarding private sources of financing.

"There are other alternatives to the county funding the whole thing," he said. "More conversation is needed."

Murdock in an alliance press release earlier said that a consortium from Chicago was interested in investing \$100 million in Poinciana through public-private partnerships and that talks to make that happen are ongoing. That investment, he said, could include financing for the parkway.

Poinciana community activist Keith Laytham said with Monday's board consensus the Poinciana Parkway project took a major step toward becoming a reality.

Basically, the agreement states that Poinciana Parkway will now become an Osceola County road as opposed to what had previously been an Avatar-owned road, Laytham said, adding that all toll revenues would flow to Osceola County with Avatar only getting a percentage based on its original investment.

"My hope is that in the process we can tie Polk County expressway planning into this project as well, hopefully linking the long-term plans for Central Polk Parkway into the Osceola Expressway and Orlando plans as well as providing a way for Osceola County Poinciana residents to have access to the Posner Park area (in Davenport)."