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Alternate Poinciana route still faces more delays



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Plans to build another road out of Poinciana through environmentally sensitive land face continued delays following requests for more information from state agencies.

Developer Avatar Properties is trying to obtain approval to build the Poinciana Parkway, a 9.66-mile, four-lane road, which would serve as an added way out of the residential community along the Osceola and Polk county line.

Current parkway plans put the road through what's known as the Reedy Creek Mitigation Bank – a 3,520-acre, largely wetland habitat set aside along county lines to offset environmental damage done by Central Florida construction projects.

However, what complicates this project is that its construction would damage wetlands already kept intact to make up for previously damaged ones.

“How do you mitigate for the mitigation?” South Florida Water Management District spokesman Bill Graf said recently.

The mitigation bank, which also serves as a documented panther habitat, is overseen in part by the water management district and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Due in part to the project's complexity, the water management district asked Avatar, the developer of Poinciana, to provide more information about the project before it would approve any permits to build.

The request also stems from a possible objection to Avatar's permit application by Audubon of Florida, a conservation organization that has raised concerns about the natural resources at risk.

“It's in everybody's best interest... that we deal with the concerns raised by Audubon now,” Graf said, adding that there is no set timeline for Avatar to file that information.

According to December agreements between Osceola County and Avatar, the parkway is divided into three sections: Polk County, Poinciana Toll Road and Osceola County. The first would run from the intersection of U.S. Highway 17-92 and County Road 54 to the Polk County Line.

From there, it would operate as a toll road for 4.15 miles inside Osceola County through the mitigation bank and then run from Marigold Avenue to Cypress Parkway in Poinciana.

Avatar would widen that section of Marigold Avenue from two lanes to four.

Many aspects of the road project remain unclear, including its final cost, how it would be paid for, its projected time of completion and its exact path through the mitigation bank.

Records from the Polk County Commission in 2005 estimated that the parkway would cost \$35 million to build and could be open by late fall 2007.

Charles Lee, the director of advocacy for Audubon's Central Florida office, said plans for the parkway also appear to be part of a much larger expressway system that threatens to damage the 12,000-acre Disney Wilderness Preserve, which sits southeast of Poinciana and is overseen by The Nature Conservancy.

Lee also expressed concern that residents in nearby Poinciana neighborhoods would be affected by road-widening and road-building efforts if the project were approved.

“Our view is that we think we really need to get all these issues out in the open,” he said.

Poinciana project manager Tony Iorio and Reedy Creek Mitigation Bank Attorney Prineet Sharma could not be reached for comment.

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