

Transportation Meeting Takes A Wrong Turn

Residents want to hear gridlock solutions, not long-range plans.

By MIKE GROGAN
REPORTER CORRESPONDENT

POINCIANA | Residents who attended Tuesday evening's transportation meeting led by state Sen. Paula Dockery came to hear about solutions to Poinciana's gridlocked road system.

Instead, state Department of Transportation officials talked about long-range plans for future highway projects that would have little effect on Poinciana's problems.

The problem, said Brandon Arrington, chairman of the Osceola County Commission, who was in the audience, is that the state was never involved in the Poinciana Parkway project. And the recession has put a roadblock in front of that road.



DOCKERY

Dockery, a Lakeland Republican whose district includes Poinciana, brought several officials from the Florida Department of Transportation and a Lynx executive to the meeting that was organized by a residents' group, Poinciana Residents

For Smart Change, and held at Palmetto Elementary School on the Polk County side of the community that has more than 80,000 residents.

Because Poinciana is spread over two counties and is in two different transportation districts, representatives from District 1, which includes Polk County, and District 5, which Osceola County is a part of, were on the dais with Dockery.

But it soon became clear that Christopher Piazza, a project development engineer from District 1 who gave a long update on plans for Central Polk Parkway, was not addressing the issues the more than 50 residents at the meeting wanted to hear.

The same held true when Mary Schoelzel and Steve Olson of District 5 talked about highway projects on the drawing board for future design and construction within Osceola County but which would have little or no impact on Poinciana.

What those in the audience wanted to hear about, Poinciana resident Christopher John told the panel when it came time for questions, was what is going to be done to provide more roadways in and out of the community.

Dockery

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"There are 80,000 residents here who need another way out," he said, getting a round of applause from his fellow residents.

John said the community that was started in the 1970s has outgrown its infrastructure. And while some of the projects cited by the DOT officials are impressive, he said, many of them are 20 and 30 years in the future.

Poinciana needs immediate help, he said.

Resident, Annette Brown, who was one of the organizers of a citizens' group that fought to get a hospital constructed in Poinciana, reminded the speakers that it was poor highway access in and out of the community that persuaded state officials to approve licensing the medical center over strong objections from rival hospitals in Haines City and St. Cloud.

She said a solution also has to be found for the high number of serious traffic accidents on Poinciana's crowded roads.

"People are dying," she said.

Schoelzel said DOT has no plans to finish the Poinciana Parkway. The road long planned by Avatar, Poinciana's primary developer, would extend Mari-gold Avenue nine miles to connect with U.S. 17-92 at Ronald Reagan Boulevard. That would provide an extra road in and out of the community.

The Poinciana Parkway project never involved the state, Arrington said.

He said the parkway plan was a public/private project between Avatar and the two counties. But with the collapse of the economy money to complete the road dried up.

Avatar Vice President Tony Iorio said after the meeting that his company has spent \$47 million on the parkway — much of it buying right of way — but that \$140 million more is needed to complete it.

There were hopes of getting federal grant money under President Obama's stimulus package, he said.

high speed rail?" Iorio asked. "Gov. (Rick) Scott tossed it aside."

Dockery told the crowd that to get the state involved in the Poinciana Parkway project is going to mean community officials have to work with the two DOT districts to get it recognized as a priority.

But, she said, it might be an uphill battle because Poinciana is primarily a residential community.

"Usually, new roads come when they are pushed by commercial development, not residential development," she said. "Personally, I think that's backwards."

She then promised her office would do whatever it could to help in getting DOT to see the need for completing the additional highway outlet for the gridlocked community.