

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Thu, Mar. 19, 2009

Massive I-595 project to begin in May

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Interstate 595, the 13-mile, east-west expressway that connects central Broward County to Interstate 75, is set to undergo major changes as part of the costliest road and bridge project in state history.

The \$1.8 billion project, to be financed, built and maintained by a private Spanish conglomerate, will begin in May. Once completed, it is expected to help ease painfully long rush-hour delays.

But if you think your I-595 commute is bad now -- brace for the worst. County officials warn the five-year construction project will take its toll on the more than 180,000 drivers who travel the highway every day.

"Someday, this ought to enhance the system, but in the meantime, we are gearing up for the road project from hell," said Nicki Grossman, president of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Construction will tie up the road that goes to the beach, to the hotels, to the airport, the Sawgrass Mills mall."

The Florida Department of Transportation says more than 300,000 vehicles per day will use the highway by 2034.

Plans call for converting 10.5 miles of the highway's grassy central median into three reversible toll lanes. I-595 Express, from just west of Interstate 95 to just east of the Sawgrass Expressway, will operate eastbound in the daytime and westbound in the afternoon and evening -- finally bringing tolls to a 20-year-old highway originally conceived as a toll road.

Its current six lanes will expand into nine, with concrete barriers separating the three express lanes, which will connect to Florida's Turnpike.

Tolls will vary: The heavier the traffic, the higher the toll. Pre-registered carpools of three or more people will be able to use the reversible lanes for free.

Under an unusual deal signed March 3, the reversible toll lanes and other new features, including ramps, bypass and auxiliary lanes, an upgraded bike path alongside the highway and noise walls will be built by a private Spanish conglomerate that will finance the project and then run and maintain the road for 30 more years.

It is a departure for FDOT. Normally, the agency allocates state and federal money to build, expand or reconstruct a highway or bridge, prepares designs and finds a private contractor to carry out the work.

For this deal, Actividades de Construcción y Servicios S.A. (ACS) Infrastructure Development of Madrid and partners will front the money, design the project and carry out all construction from beginning to end.

Joseph Borello, FDOT's I-595 project manager in Broward, said public-private partnerships allow for quicker completion of expensive and elaborate projects.

"We didn't have enough money to construct the whole corridor in one project," Borello said. "We were going to implement the improvements over a 20-year period as the money became available, and even with that, in our current work program, we didn't have enough money to complete the improvements."

Under the I-595 deal, ACS can complete the project in five years because it doesn't have to wait for funding from either the state legislature or the U.S. Congress. Florida will repay ACS only after completion of the project in 2014, Borello said.

ACS, one of the world's largest builders of transportation projects, is involved in construction of highways and tunnels in Spain, Argentina, Canada, Chile, Portugal and others parts of the United States.

Juan José Díaz, an ACS spokesman in Madrid, declined comment on the I-595 project but emailed a statement that noted the firm has experience because of its role in other U.S. transportation projects, including the boring of a \$428 million tunnel in Manhattan for the Long Island Rail Road.

Borello estimated the project could "support" more than 34,000 jobs.

While project managers will come from Spain, workers will be hired in South Florida, Borello said.

ACS work crews are scheduled to begin preliminary work in May to remove or move utility lines along State Road 84, which runs parallel to I-595 and serves as feeder road. Utility work will occur largely along the eastbound lanes of SR 84, Borello said.

The heavy work, construction of the reversible lanes, is scheduled to begin in August at multiple sites along the expressway, Borello said.

If ACS completes the project on time and to state satisfaction, Florida will begin paying back money ACS invested in annual installments and lump sum payments.

Borello said that sometime in the future, I-595 Express lanes may be linked to I-95 Express Lanes now being built between Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

The state transportation agency will retain control of toll rates and revenue from I-595 Express lanes.

When reversible lanes open, they will be used by express buses or Bus Rapid Transit to downtown Fort Lauderdale and Fort-Lauderdale Hollywood International Airport.