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County on road to gridlock

As Brevard's thoroughfares near maximum capacity, officials must rethink moratoriums

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Martha Oakey remembers when Wickham Road was a little-traveled two-lane road and Brevard Community College was in the middle of nowhere.

These days, Wickham is a four-lane snarl of commuters and delivery trucks that crawl past the Mailbox Etc. store she owns in a shopping center across from the college, which itself is in the most congested 4-mile stretch of roadway in Brevard County.

For Oakey, Wickham Road is the only option she has for getting to work from her home in Fountainhead three miles away.

"If I could avoid driving on Wickham, I would," Oakey said.

What's happening on Wickham is happening all over Brevard as a crumbling, inadequately designed road system strains under the burden of thousands of extra cars traveling on them each day. Wherever you go, motorists complain about the potholes, the congestion and the fumes.

But Wickham is the first road to be placed under a development moratorium because it's on the verge of reaching gridlock -- that point where the number of car trips each day exceeds the road's design capacity.

Close to two dozen new projects -- including a Home Depot and 298 condos at the Preserve at Longleaf --are under construction along the roadway. They'll add 6,600 car trips per day to the roadway. That will push Wickham, designed to handle 43,200 trips a day, to within 700 car trips a day away from capacity.

To give engineers and policymakers some breathing room, the County Commission effectively banned any new development six months ago by issuing a moratorium on driveway permits. They're poised to extend that ban another 60 days while their engineers figure out how to improve traffic conditions.

They'll discuss extending the moratorium Tuesday, along with what the county can do in the short term to avoid gridlock.

Other cities are grappling with the same issues. The Rockledge City Council is weighing a development ban on Barnes Boulevard, another county-maintained road near gridlock. Including pending development, it soon will be within 300 trips of its design capacity of 27,100 daily trips.

North Courtenay Parkway on Merritt Island has long been a congestion nightmare for locals and

commuters to Kennedy Space Center. And similar traffic bottlenecks are common in Palm Bay and Titusville.

"If we wait until the problem is critical and on top of us, it takes years to solve," said Bob Kamm, the county's transportation planning director. "And if we wait, it's only going to get worse."

Frustration mounts

Motorists jam the stretch between Parkway Drive and the Pineda Causeway as they drop kids at school, go to work and shop for groceries. They're commuters who live in the new homes and condos going up along Wickham, who work and shop at the shopping centers and office complexes being built there, and who eat up almost all the capacity the road was designed to handle.

Frustrated motorists look for ways to avoid congested Wickham -- which puts more traffic onto the aging network.

"Wickham is the main road when I get out of my house," said Marielly Torres-Santiago of Melbourne. "But it is getting so hard to get out by Wickham I have to take an alternate route."

Traffic engineers have warned county and city officials for more than 10 years about the pending crisis, toting up the cost of improving those roads to where it is now at around \$417 million. Meanwhile, elected officials have failed to address those needs.

The County Commission adopted a 6-cent-per-gallon gas tax 18 years ago -- about half the amount they could impose under state law. Six years ago, the board raised the transportation impact fee on new development to one-fourth the amount consultants recommended to pay for growth's burden on the road system.

Financial burden

"They've known about this for years," said Bob Wille, a former Melbourne Beach mayor and member of the Metropolitan Planning Organization -- a local group of elected officials that sets road spending priorities.

"Everybody knew it was coming, but nobody's been willing to address the funding issue -- taxes," Wille said. "It's got to come from someplace."

What's happening in Brevard is not unusual, said Rob Gregg, program director of Transit Management and Innovation at the Center for Urban Transportation Research at the University of South Florida in Tampa. It's a problem many growing communities in Florida have had to face, he said, particularly those large rural counties that have become more urbanized.

The issue is investing in public services like roads, and figuring out the fairest mix of taxes and fees to spread the financial burden around, Gregg said.

"It sounds to me as if it's been put off far too long," Gregg said. "It sounds like it's finally caught up with them. Not unlike other counties."

The state gives local governments the authority to raise money for roads and other public services like water, sewer and drainage, he said. Options include sales and gas tax, impact fees, even tolls on roadways.

It's up to local governments to come up with a fair mix that spreads the burden evenly between existing residents and newcomers, he said.

"The really tough political decision is to raise taxes in some form," Gregg said.

Within the last two years, County Commissioner Sue Carlson has pushed for raising the transportation impact fee to its recommended level and for putting another 1-cent sales tax increase to voters similar to one that failed in 2003. But she hasn't been able to get enough votes from her colleagues.

"Obviously, they can't put it off," Carlson said. "They are well aware of the problem. We need a meeting of minds for what's best for community, and not what's politically correct at the time. Right now you have gridlock on the commission."

Funding options

Carlson gave her colleagues credit for breaking through the tax gridlock when they voted to borrow \$47 million against future gas tax revenue to pay for the Pineda Causeway extension and other smaller projects throughout the county. Some of that money will pay for improving the timing of traffic signals along Wickham and for widening Barnes.

Cities also are pushing for another 1-cent increase in the sales tax to pay for roads, three years after voters overwhelmingly rejected a similar proposal. If it gets on the ballot, and is approved, the sales tax could raise \$60 million to \$70 million a year -- about what it cost to widen the 5.5-mile stretch of U.S. 1 from Aurora Road to Pineda Causeway.

By comparison, a 1-cent-per-gallon increase in the gas tax would generate about \$2.5 million a year, Kamm said. "The sales tax is the only thing that gives us enough money to put a significant dent in the problem."

Many residents don't support the sales tax. An overwhelming number of people responding to a FLORIDA TODAY online poll said they'd vote against such a measure. Many residents e-mailing their county commissioners have said the same thing.

Some just don't trust the county to spend the money on roads. Others feel that it's not their burden to bear -- that developers and newcomers should pick up the tab for growth.

"The 1 percent tax would unfairly affect those least able to pay, the poor and the elderly," Gary Tighe of Melbourne said. "It would let the builders off the hook for creating the mess."

People won't support a sales tax unless they perceive developers are paying their share, Gregg said. Carlson is well aware of that.

"We'll be hard-pressed to pass a sales tax if we haven't maximized impact fees to full extent," she said. "Whether anybody likes it or not, it's the only tool we have for growth."

By imposing a moratorium on Wickham Road, the county set the clock ticking on fixing the road or facing lawsuits from landowners who want to develop their property.

"If the county does continue these moratoriums, they are subject to litigation if they don't let people build on their land," said Bob Wille of Joyal Construction. "Coming up with a plan is one thing. But the rubber only hits the road when they get the funding, and they have no funding."

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