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Alachua County may shake up traffic plans

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A network of buses whizzing through traffic in their own lanes paid for by new development is now the focus of Alachua County's future traffic plans rather than building or widening roads.

A new proposed traffic concurrency management plan scraps extensive roadwork and instead creates a rapid transit system that would be subsidized in part by fees on new growth.

It will also offer incentives — namely cheaper fees — for developers to build at greater densities and with mix of homes and shops.

The plan would be the first of its kind in Florida if eventually approved.

"I think it's very unique," said Assistant County Manager Rick Drummond. "It's pretty exciting because we use the buzzword 'sustainability' and this really could be the model for that in terms of coordinating land-use and transportation."

Drummond said the new focus is based on the belief that it would be impossible for the county to afford enough roads to meet state standards. But not everyone has fully embraced the proposal.

The state Department of Transportation fears traffic will continue to grow on Newberry Road despite bus rapid transit.

And some developers contend a part of the plan that encourages high-density mixed-use development will drive those who want a suburban-style home to buy outside of Alachua County.

"There will always be people who don't want to live in a high-rise," said Brian Leslie, president of the Builders Association of North Central Florida, at a recent County Commission meeting. "This will push them out of the county and increase

traffic coming in from outside of the county.”

Concurrency is the state requirement that space be available on roads for traffic created by new development.

Many roads, particularly in western Alachua County, are already at or near capacity. Growth has stopped in some areas because of that.

The county’s Growth Management Department earlier proposed a concurrency plan that focused primarily on widening and building roads.

Now, however, it has shifted to an extensive rapid transit network with bus-only lanes.

For instance, envisioned is an Interstate 75 overpass south of Newberry Road that would be only for buses, bikes and pedestrians.

And instead of adding lanes on NW 83rd Avenue in front of Santa Fe College for cars, the lanes would be for buses only.

Eventually a network of bus rapid transit lanes and stations along major corridors would link outlying areas to urban Gainesville. “It’s an approach that has a lot of merit, and I applaud staff for thinking outside of the box,” County Commissioner Mike Byerly said.

Currently the county charges impact fees on new development for roads. Another option is proportionate share — charging developers a portion of the cost of road improvement based on the amount of traffic they will create. But the county is now proposing to instead charge a “mobility fee,” based on a number of factors including the location and type of development.

A standard subdivision of single-family homes that is more remote from urban areas or activity centers such as Jonesville would be charged more because residents would be more dependent on cars. A mixed-use development of homes and shops that is close to the urban center would be charged less because it is more suited to alternative transportation.

Florida currently does not allow for mobility fees.

That would be one hurdle the plan could face when presented to the state Department of Community Affairs for approval.

Another would come from the state Department of Transportation, which owns and maintains several key roads including Newberry and Archer.

“The department is very interested in what has been proposed here. It’s an interesting concept and ... we will be watching it very closely,” said James Bennett,

DOT urban engineer. "I can say that the department is not willing to allow all impacts to (Newberry Road) to be mitigated by transit. That's not realistic."

Earlier this year the county outlined a proposed concurrency plan that estimated it would cost \$75 million for upgrades to meet concurrency.

That does not include roads that would need upgrading to accommodate major individual developments.

For instance, the county sought \$120 million for roadwork to meet concurrency for the proposed expansion of the Springhills development at 39th Avenue and I-75. An agreement could not be reached and the commission rejected the Springhills plan.

Another controversial development, Newberry Village, steered the county toward bus rapid transit.

The new urbanist blend of homes and shops to be built on Newberry Road at Fort Clarke Boulevard could not meet concurrency.

Developers and the county came up with a plan for Newberry Village to pay for the birth of a bus rapid transit system that will run from NW 39th Avenue south on 83rd Street, west to Fort Clarke Boulevard and through Newberry Village.

It will eventually link to The Oaks Mall and continue south to Butler Plaza.

County planners have believed for some time that an expanded bus rapid transit system coupled with denser development made better sense for future growth. Capacity will still be added to some roads, but the focus and much of the money will go to bus transit.

"It's always been there but we always felt hamstrung by the rules that have come out of DCA. When we heard that DCA was promoting a new way to look at things, we thought 'We'll be their guinea pig to look at something new,' " Drummond said. "There are a lot of opportunities if we can be forward thinking enough. If we get the buses running regularly with a 10-minute headway, we believe the ridership will come as long as the buses are not sitting in traffic with the rest of the cars."

Drummond said county officials met with DCA Secretary Tom Pelham and added that Pelham was interested in the plan.

Several county commissioners said they have a lot of questions about it but favor the direction.

Commissioner Lee Pinkoson said the county should begin setting aside tax money that comes from new growth for the system instead of relying solely on the mobility fee.

"If we are going to do this, we need to have a discussion about additional funding. Historically we have taken the additional money (from new growth) and put it in the general fund. It doesn't go to offset development," Pinkoson said. "We have to couple money from fees with another funding source. I will have a discussion on mobility fees if we have a discussion about this."

Adam Bolton, Builders Association government affairs chairman, praised the county for looking at its needs from a different angle. But Bolton said he isn't certain the plan will solve the traffic problem in the long run.

Bolton added that the incentives for high-density mixed-use development would limit choices for home buyers. And he agreed with Pinkoson that tax money from new growth must be applied to solving the traffic dilemma.

"In some area mixed-use development is very appropriate and, well-done, it can be very attractive," he said. "The issue comes when you are ultimately trying to serve the marketplace and deliver the products and type of homes people in Alachua County want to live in."

The county will continue to develop the plan and present more specific details to the commission in the coming months.

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