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Paying for Lee roads is billion-dollar question

By Charlie Whitehead

Tuesday, March 6, 2007

Lee County faces a \$40 million road-building problem in the next 12 months.

That's the good news.

The bad news is that by the year 2030, the deficit is projected to be \$2 billion.

That's billion with a "B."

To plug the gap, the Lee County transportation planners will tell commissioners on Thursday, there are various options, none of them likely to be popular. The solutions include a sales tax, property taxes, bonding or the car-rental tax Gov. Jeb Bush vetoed last year.

County transportation planner Dave Loveland says he can plug in road impact fee proceeds to stem the short-term bleeding, but the long-term deficit is a different issue. Eliminating toll discounts on the two Cape Coral bridges and the Sanibel Causeway, which would produce \$8.3 million a year, is one of the possibilities commissioners will be asked to consider. The county could also raise tolls or place tolls on existing roads or bridges.

"The sales tax has been tried, and failed miserably," said county Transportation Director Scott Gilbertson. "The rental car tax was vetoed. Commissioners have already loaned \$50 million in property taxes and given a grant of \$10 million more."

The county's financial advisors are looking into issuing debt — floating bonds — to fund projects, Gilbertson said.

"What we want is (to know) which of these they want us to pursue in more detail," he said. "Tolls really haven't been explored at a county level to any great degree."

Loveland is working to finalize the new five-year construction plan — the Capital Improvement Plan — due in county budget offices next week.

"I'm still crunching numbers on the CIP," Loveland said. "But the \$40 million is cost increases."

That's \$40 million in increases on six projects expected to be construction-ready within 12 months. One is the Estero Parkway overpass, which will extend the road across Interstate 75 to Ben Hill Griffin Parkway. Cost projections have risen there by \$6.4 million, making the new construction cost estimate \$41 million and the total project cost \$57 million.

The \$2 billion shortfall estimate is several months old, based on the plan the Metropolitan Planning Organization adopted in December of 2005. Costs have since risen. The recent I-75 bids the state received were about 27 percent above their continually updated estimates.

Once Loveland's done looking at the next five years the \$40 million may seem small.

"The \$40 million highlights the issue we're dealing with," he said. "That's just the first year. We have a five-year CIP to do."

Commissioners, who are currently attending Florida Association of Counties meetings, will get part of the news during a workshop Thursday. The workshop starts at 9 a.m. at the Old Lee County Courthouse in downtown Fort Myers.

The rest of the bad news will wait until budget hearings this summer.

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