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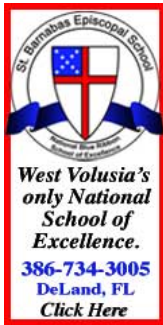
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Recession takes toll on Volusia County roads



By Al Everson
BEACON STAFF WRITER

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The downturn in the economy is limiting Volusia County's ability to build new roads, fix existing ones, and replace aging bridges.

"We're in difficult times," Deputy County Manager Mary Anne Connors said.



BEACON PHOTO/AL EVERSON

Road to recovery? — The recession is putting the brakes on Volusia County's plans to build and improve its roads, as revenues from gas taxes and impact fees have plummeted.

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County government can no longer realistically plan to cut new thoroughfares through undeveloped land, or add additional lanes to roads already loaded with traffic. Many projects are on hold, as county officials now speak about a 10-year or even a 20-year road program, instead of the five-year program once considered traditional.

Cash for the road program comes mainly from two sources, gasoline taxes and impact fees. Both revenue streams are especially sensitive to the flows and ebbs of the economy. As the economy contracts, the county's coffers are receiving markedly less money.

"This is the 12th road program I've been involved with, and over the past three or four years, things are starting to deteriorate," Public Works Director George Recktenwald said.

Gasoline-tax revenues reflect the health of the economy. In the county's 2007-08 fiscal year, gasoline taxes generated \$22.2 million in revenues. Total collections for the current year may reach \$21.6 million. The official projection for 2009-10, which begins Oct. 1, is \$21.4 million.

Volusia County is one of several Florida counties levying the maximum local gas tax of 12 cents per gallon. Other counties charging this highest level of tax are Broward, Collier, Columbia, DeSoto, Palm Beach, Polk and Sarasota counties.

The impact fees for roads have likewise gone down as construction has slowed.

In the 2007-08 fiscal year, the county took in \$6.4 million in road-impact fees. As the 2008-09 fiscal year draws to a close, collections may reach \$4.57 million. The next fiscal year may yield about \$4.35 million, according to the county's revenue estimate. These annual totals are a far cry from the \$13 million or so the county received in 2004.

Because of shortfalls in gas taxes and impact fees, county leaders have proposed new sources of financing future capital improvements and maintenance.

One such new source may be a local-option sales tax. A 1-cent sales tax would generate approximately \$75 million annually, but would require the approval of Volusia's voters.

Without additional cash, County Manager James Dinneen warned, the outlook is "very pessimistic."

The county finds itself having to repay debt on roads already built, before it may consider building new roads. In 2004, Volusia County sold \$65.5 million in bonds for roads. The

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county pledged gasoline-tax revenues to repay the bonds, but actually used the proceeds of road-impact fees for the debt service. The debt service is about \$4.8 million per year, more than all the road-impact fees the county expects to collect this year or next.

The shortfall of impact-fee revenue this year forced the county to tap gas-tax monies to pay the debt. The County Council Aug. 6 appropriated \$900,000 of gas-tax revenues for the bond repayment.

"All of the impact fees you collect will be going to debt service,"

County Engineer Gerald Brinton said.

While the cash diminishes, Recktenwald said, the motoring public may see the quality of roads drop because of flooding and "water over the roads."

The road bases may give way, and the county will have to effectively rebuild the roads.

"It will shorten their life span. It will not happen immediately, but in a few years, you're in trouble," Recktenwald said.

Rebuilding a deteriorating road will, of course, divert dollars from the construction of new roads.

Unless the economy takes a dramatic upturn, or unless new revenues are found, officials say, the county will fall further behind in maintaining its transportation assets.

Not least, Volusia County must begin thinking about how it will pay for new bridges over the Halifax River.

"Those bridges are coming to the end of their life, and that's an issue nationwide," Recktenwald said, noting the bridges in Daytona Beach are almost 50 years old. "Those three bridges eat up 90 percent of our bridge budget."

Recktenwald said the county may have to close one bridge, perhaps Main Street Bridge, and divert traffic to other bridges.

"If you replace those bridges, that's not capacity expansion; that's keeping what you have," Recktenwald said.

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