

DOT Plans Projects To Improve Polk Roads

By Tom Palmer
The Ledger

BARTOW -- New sidewalks and streetlights along a section of Combee Road near Lakeland and the long-awaited extension of State Road 559 in Auburndale are included in the latest update of the five-year state transportation plan.

The plan produced by the Florida Department of Transportation was unveiled Wednesday during a hearing before the Central Florida Regional Planning Council.

The projects are part of a \$278.8 million plan that include previously announced major road-improvement projects, such as the widening of U.S. 27 near Haines City and the extension of Lakeland's North-South Route. They also include routine maintenance projects such as highway resurfacing and installation of traffic signals.

The Combee Road project will involve the installation of sidewalks and street lights from U.S. 92 to Morgan Combee Road. The \$315,537 project is scheduled to be completed within the next year.

Combee Road area residents who are working to upgrade the neighborhood pushed for the project and worked with state Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, and Rep. John Stargel, R-Lakeland, to secure state transportation funds.

"That's good news," said Tom Parrotte, president of the Combee Area Revitalization Effort Inc., the group that lobbied for the work.

"That will help to get people out of the street."

Parrotte said residents are also working on other issues ranging from drainage to code enforcement, but this is a start.

The State Road 559 extension would provide a direction connection between U.S. 92 and Recker Highway, improving the transportation network and opening up additional land for economic development.

The \$6.8 million project is scheduled for construction in 2010.

Ben Walker, district planning manager for DOT's District 1 in Bartow, said the big challenge in the current five-year work plan is to maintain the existing project list in the face of rising costs.

"Asphalt and concrete prices have risen by 30 percent," he said.

He said that accounted, for instance, for the \$3.1 million increase in the estimated cost of the construction of the NorthSouth Route in Lakeland from Pipkin Road to Drane Field Road. It is projected to cost \$25.3 million when it is built in 2009.

Other projects in the five-year plan include the installation of guardrails on Interstate 4 near interchanges between Memorial Boulevard and U.S. 27. Transportation officials want to prevent accidents involving vehicles crossing the medians.

The \$4.5 million project is scheduled to be completed next year.

In addition to road projects, the five-year plan includes \$192,535 for a bike path in Eagle Lake from Eagle Lake to Lake McLeod, \$280,000 for the construction of facilities to accommodate users of the Fort Fraser Trail near Bartow and \$394,000 remains in the budget for the Lake Wales Trail from Fourth Street to Buck Moore Road.

Lake Wales commissioners rejected the project earlier this year, but residents are mounting a drive to reverse the decision.