

PASCO COUNTY, FLORIDA  
INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

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TO:	Honorable Chairman and Members of the Board of County Commissioners	DATE:	12/24/08	FILE:	CA09M-5019
Thru:	John J. Gallagher County Administrator	SUBJECT:	Ridge Road Extension Status Report		
FROM:	Michele L. Baker, Chief Assistant County Administrator	REFERENCES:	CA05-0056, DS05-081, ENA06-12R Commission Districts 2 and 4		

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It is recommended that the data herein presented be given formal consideration by the Board of County Commissioners (BCC).

DESCRIPTION AND CONDITIONS:

Ridge Road Extension (RRE) has been on the Pasco County Highway Vision Map since the mid 1980's. In 1989, the Preliminary Design and Evaluation (PD&E) Study of the Suncoast Parkway was initiated. Pasco County participated in the partnering committee that looked at route alternatives and mitigation possibilities for the Parkway. The proposed alignment and construction of the Ridge Road Extension (RRE) was discussed in those meetings. In 1993, the Development Order (DO) for the Serenova DRI was approved. The DO clearly showed the proposed RRE alignment. As part of the Parkway partnering meetings the decision was made to relocate the Parkway alignment and preserve Serenova as mitigation. The Partnering Agreements executed in 1997 provide for the conveyance of right-of-way through Serenova for RRE and construction of the interchange, in exchange for the acquisition of Serenova as mitigation for the Parkway. In January of 1997 the Route Study for RRE was begun. Design was initiated in 1998. The joint application for an Environmental Resource Permit (ERP) was submitted in November of 1998, to the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE). After a series of requests for additional information, the COE issued a Public Notice for the project February 2, 2000. In October of 2001, the County responded to the comments received from the public notice. Between 2001 and April 2005, there was a series of responses to requests for additional information from the federal agencies and a focused effort to obtain the SWFWMD permit which was issued on July 29, 2003. There was little activity on the RRE project in 2004 due to a vacancy in the Assistant Engineering Services Director (project manager) position. In April of 2005 we re-initiated permit negotiations. The County has continued coordination with the SWFWMD and the COE and the following is an update on the major components of the project and the permitting status.

SWFWMD Permit Status

Pasco County was initially issued a SWFWMD environmental resource permit (ERP) for the RRE project on July 29, 2003. A permit modification was necessary to replace the Mablebridge property with an alternative mitigation plan. The updated and revised "Wetland Mitigation Plan for Ridge Road Extension – Phase I & II" dated April 2007 (Mitigation Plan) has been accepted by the SWFWMD and Environmental Resource Permit #43018792.004 was issued on February 26, 2008.

COE Permit Status

The County has been actively engaged with the COE in resolving the federal agencies concerns over the permit. Major submittal packages were provided to the COE: April 2005, July 2006, December 2006, January 2007, April 2007, and May 2008. There have been numerous telephone conversations, emails, and letters between the COE and staff answering questions and providing clarification. Chairman Schrader and staff met with Mike Fulford, Deputy District Engineer, on January 18, 2008, to request his assistance in expediting approval of this long outstanding permit.

On May 14, 2008, staff and our project consultants traveled to Jacksonville to meet with Charles Schnepel, Tampa Section Chief, and Michael Nowicki from the COE, Jay Hernington and Todd Mecklenburg from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Rhonda Evans from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Joe Walsh from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). At that meeting we discussed the 10 outstanding issues and the plan for resolution. Following the meeting a site visit was conducted on May 30, 2008, to determine the best location for an additional upland wildlife crossing. This meeting was attended by representatives from USFWS, FWC, SWFWMD and staff. The USFWS indicated that the addition of the wildlife crossing bridge would resolve their concerns regarding

permeability of the road and resolve their issues regarding the potential designation of the Serenova tract as an Aquatic Reserve of National Importance (ARNI). Minutes of the meeting in the office, and field, were provided to all attendees to ensure that everyone was on the same page as we proceed to the finish line. At the meeting May 14 meeting, Mr. Nowicki indicated he might have a few additional items after completing his review of our May 2008 submittal package.

On August 14, 2008, we received a letter from Mr. Schnepel responding to our May 9, 2008 submittal. On August 15<sup>th</sup> I spoke with Mr. Nowicki regarding the letter. On September 12, Mr. Nowicki advised me to hold our response to the letter since he was still awaiting input from EPA and USFWS. The intent was for Pasco County to have a comprehensive final list of outstanding issues so that we could negotiate change orders with our consultants for the total sum of work to be completed in order to obtain the permit. On September 14, we provided Mr. Nowicki a draft email response to the August 14<sup>th</sup> letter. On November 12, 2008, we received a letter from Mr. Schnepel confirming the final 10 issues and the expected resolution of those issues. Staff and the consultants are finalizing the response letter and it will be in the mail before the New Year.

Item	Description	Response
1	Alternative Analysis/Avoidance	Our final response should be sufficient.
2	Minimization of Wetland Impacts	Our analysis should be sufficient.
3	Mitigation Analysis	We are providing clarification on our Mitigation Plan, which we believe to be appropriate, significant, and sufficient. The COE has also requested Management Plans for the mitigation areas. Drafts are being provided for their review. See additional information below.
4	Revised Wetland Assessments and WRAP Scores for Phase II	We will accept a permit condition to update the analysis prior to wetland impacts.
5	Revised Wetland Assessments and WRAP Scores for Phase I Based On Water Withdrawals	The COE is still reviewing our May response, which we believe to be sufficient.
6	Revised Wildlife Surveys for the Scrub Jay	We will accept a permit condition to update the surveys prior to wetland impacts.
7	Analysis of the Eight Wildlife Crossings	We will provide the USFWS requested modifications. We will be issuing a Change Order to PH&A to make the plan modifications and design the new wildlife bridge. See additional information below.
8	Clarification on the Project Purpose for the RRE	Our final response should be sufficient.
9	A Detailed Analysis of the Access to be Provided at the Proposed Interchange to the Multi-Use Area South of the RRE	Our final response should be sufficient.
10	The Agreement for the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) to Build the Interchange	See additional information below.

### Mitigation Analysis

The proposed Mitigation Plan for Ridge Road Extension is summarized in the table below.

Mitigation Area	Comments
River Ridge Floodplain (222ac MOL)	Deeded to the County by NG Development.
4G Ranch Conservation Area (389ac MOL)	Ranch owner has committed to execution of a conservation easement over the northern portion of the Critical Linkage on this property, as required for RRE Mitigation. The easement will be executed upon receipt of COE notice of intent to issue permit.
Starkey 8 Restoration (1130ac MOL)	Restoration of land owned by SWFWMD.
Floodplain Compensation Area Planting	11 wetland creation areas are provided as part of the package for 7.1 mitigation lift units.

The SWFWMD has accepted the Mitigation Plan. The COE has questions regarding 4G Ranch and the critical linkage overlay. We believe our response to their questions will be sufficient. The COE has also requested copied of Management Plans for River Ridge and 4G. The SWFWMD has agreed to include management of the River Ridge area in their Starkey Wilderness Preserve Management Plan. The owner of 4G Ranch is working with his team to develop a management plan consistent with our requirements for

property in conservation within a critical linkage. An outline is being provided to the COE for their comment and review.

If the COE determines that the proposed Mitigation Plan, already accepted by SWFWMD, is insufficient for their permit, staff has identified a small parcel that could be added to the package. An analysis of the mitigation lift and modification of the Mitigation Plan will need to be conducted, if the additional mitigation is deemed necessary.

#### Revised Construction Plans/Wildlife Crossings

The County's consultant, Pitman-Hartenstein and Associates, Inc. (PH&A), completed revision of the construction plans to reflect wetland impact minimization efforts, the bridge structure spanning the 120-foot private easement within Mr. Bo Bexley's property, and the wildlife crossing at Five Mile Creek. Revised plans were submitted to SWFWMD on May 16, 2006, and approved as part of the permit issued on February 26, 2008. The COE/USFWS have requested changes to the plans to add a new upland wildlife crossing bridge and modifications to three ponds for additional buffering from the wildlife crossings. Change Order #10 is being drafted for PH&A to prepare the necessary plan modifications and will be brought to the BCC at the January 27 meeting.

#### Florida's Turnpike Enterprise (FTE) Interchange

Florida's Turnpike Enterprise (FTE) has 100% interchange plans for the Suncoast Parkway and Ridge Road Extension. They will be scheduling pre-application meetings with the SWFWMD and COE in early 2009. On December 19, 2008, the COE forwarded to us additional materials received from the Citizens for Sanity raising questions regarding the interchange impacts, the public notice and the viability of the project. As you are aware due to current fiscal constraints, the FTE has had to move the project from FY12 to FY18. We have been in contact with Turnpike Enterprise staff and they assure us they remain committed to the project, they are proceeding with permitting, and they will be mitigating for the impacts identified in the Public Notice. If the financial situation improves or alternative funding sources are identified (such as the Federal Infrastructure Funds) the project can be moved forward in time. We will be providing documentation to the COE on the commitment of the FTE to the interchange project. If the COE determines that a revised public notice is required, the RRE permit will be delayed for the duration of the notice period.

#### Right-of-Way Status

The majority of the right-of-way for Phase I has been deeded to the County by NG Development. The balance of the necessary right-of-way for Phase I has already been provided to the County by SWFWMD through the partnering agreement for the Serenova property. Approximately four miles of right-of-way for Phase II (from Suncoast Parkway to CSX Railroad) will have to be obtained from Mr. Bexley. We are ordering appraisals and we will be conducting negotiations this year. The majority of the right-of-way from CSX Railroad to U.S. 41 has been deeded to the County by Tierra Del Sol. A small portion of the right-of-way through two other parcels is currently being negotiated.

#### RECOMMENDATION AND FUNDING:

The purpose of this agenda item is to provide the Board an update on the project; no Board action is required at this time. In summary, we have the SWFWMD permit and we are close to resolution with the COE. Of the 10 issues on the COE list, five should be resolved with the response in process. Two of the issues will likely result in permit conditions requiring updated surveys prior to impact. The three remaining items: Mitigation Plan, new wildlife crossing, and Turnpike Interchange, should be resolved this year.

As a result of the decrease in County Transportation Impact Fee (TIF) revenue, staff has had to re-balance the Capital Improvement Program (CIP). Phase 1 of RRE is currently scheduled for construction in FY 11/12, and Phase 2 has been pushed out of the five year program. Once the permit is received we will re-evaluate construction priorities. Ridge Road Extension has been included on the Federal Infrastructure Funding list, and it is possible a future developer may wish to construct all or part of the road as a pipeline project. Funds remain available to complete the design modifications, permitting process, and right-of-way acquisition.

JJG/MLB/