



A Palm sees a future

Florida project helps revitalize forgotten corridor

By Mike Bernos
Contributing Author

The junction of blue sky and blue water may be a perk of living in Florida, but hurricanes, many of which percolate just south of there in the Caribbean Sea, are never far from the minds of its residents.

The farther down the peninsula, particularly on its heavily populated east coast, the greater the need for planning to evacuate the coastal areas through its two main north-south arteries, I-95 and the Florida Turnpike.

In 1986, officials for Martin County, located about 100 miles north of Miami, determined that an alternate evacuation route was needed to the one that already existed. The county's Long Range Transportation Plan proposed a 12-mile east-west route that would use existing roadways as a footprint for the new alignment, except for a 2-mile stretch that would require building a bridge over the south fork of the St. Lucie River and the Okeechobee Waterway. In 2001, the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) began the environmental impact statement (EIS) process along with community assessment and public involvement for a new bridge. The final impetus for construction of the bridge came in 2009 with a \$128 million infusion from the America Reinvestment & Recovery Act—the largest of Florida's ARRA projects. Transportation officials then began the process to award construction of the Indian Street Bridge project that would connect Old Palm City and the city of Stuart, the first of four segments in the new evacuation corridor.

Older is now better

According to George Denti, CEI project administrator for Cardno TBE,

the design-build project also provided an opportunity to revitalize a nearly forgotten area along the roadway through Old Palm City leading to the bridge and to create an aesthetic streetscape and park area.

"Palm City is an older neighborhood that grew up in the 50s prior to Martin County turning into an affluent area of Florida," said Denti. "Much of the county's focus has been on the high-end developments, and this working-class neighborhood has been neglected, particularly from the standpoint of its infrastructure, water, sewer and parks.

Denti said from the project's beginning the Martin County Redevelopment Agency provided input into the request for proposal (RFP) calling for the park. He added that FDOT held a series of public meetings to determine what the public expected aesthetically.

"We wanted to provide a livable, walkable community by connecting the neighborhood through the linear park," he said. "It also creates an incentive for private investment and revitalization."

The 1-mile linear or passive park will be landscaped with trees, meandering sidewalks, aesthetic lighting and brick pavers providing a green buffer between the four-lane roadway (originally two-lane) and the Old Palm neighborhood. Paralleling the project is a series of dry and wet ponds to serve as an additional buffer to reduce the noise and visual impact of the roadway.

Kim Holland, project director for the engineering firm RS&H, which partnered with Archer Western on the design-build team, said that the park entrance on the west end at the intersection of Mapp Road will feature lighted gateway signs, a monument archway with the inscription Old Palm City, textured red brick crosswalks and 8-ft-wide continuous, winding sidewalks with enhanced

lighting that will connect with those of the neighborhood. She added that the park median will have two treatments—native plantings interwoven with decorative brick red stamped concrete.

Like Denti, she knows the park owes its *raison d'être* to the Indian Street Bridge.

"This is the first new waterway project crossing in south Florida in 20 years, and this one has been in planning for over 35 years," said Holland.

The six-lane Indian Street Bridge will be approximately 3,096 ft long and requires a 55-ft vertical clearance and 200-ft horizontal clearance at the Okeechobee Waterway channel. The bridge is scheduled for completion in July 2013. In September 2011, The Martin County Commission voted to rename it the Veterans Memorial Bridge upon its opening.

According to Ben Lehr, RS&H's project manager, the bridge's aesthetic features are built into the structure and are not add-ons, thereby presenting a classic appearance at low maintenance. It will provide six overlooks of the scenic south Florida waterways with bench seating to provide a resting place for pedestrians.

"The bridge aesthetics, with its palm motif impression and Verde Green decorative railing, were inspired by the Old Palm community in an effort to match the community and surrounding areas," said Lehr. "At night, the bridge will be silhouetted by pier lighting using floodlight luminaires."

Holland worked with a strong alliance of agencies and groups to finally gain a consensus and move forward with construction. Among them were FDOT, Martin County's Metropolitan Planning Office, Technical Advisory Committee, Bike Pedestrian Advisory Committee and Community Redevelopment as well as the city of Stuart.

According to Holland, Indian Street Bridge also is noteworthy because of the successful precedent it has set for design-build projects in Florida, which have come into vogue during the past five years. Because, she said, it was a highly visible ARRA project, there was urgency to push the work out the door and create job growth.

"Normally the process of obtaining permits, acquiring right-of-ways, performing surveys, geotechnical analysis, subsurface exploration and complete design plans takes three or four years, but we finished in nine months," said Holland.

Holland said she is seeing more design-build projects on the street.

"I believe design-build affords the best value for the best price," she said. "We are able to advance schedules and reduce risks by having the designer and contractor on the same team working together."

Growth contained

Despite the addition of the park and additional safety route Indian Street Bridge provides as well as all the entities that Holland said coalesced to move the project forward, many in the community were not in favor of the project.

"Martin County is definitely a slow-growth county," said Denti. "Folks don't want to see the urban sprawl that took over Dade, (Miami) Broward (Fort Lauderdale) and Palm Beach counties."

Denti said lawsuits were filed from groups that claimed the project would have negatively impacted the environment, particularly the fragile mangrove swamps that line the river and the Okeechobee Waterway and create a fecund habitat for birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals.

"FDOT demonstrated that the project is accommodating growth that is already here and not encouraging new growth," said Denti. "They demonstrated that with engineering stats."

Denti said the lawsuits took two years to run before the courts ruled in favor of FDOT, adding that there also were several months of administrative hearings on the challenges to the environmental permits. Because it was a design-build, he said no time was lost

while the project was in limbo because the designers kept working.

"All in all, new bridge construction in lieu of bridge replacement is always tough in Florida because of the environmental and social impacts," Denti said.

An overview of environmental compliance addressing the indigenous biology reads like an episode of Nature. The West Indian Manatee, Eastern Indigo Snake and Smalltooth Sawfish are all federally protected species requiring impact studies from the design-build team.

One of the ongoing monitoring processes to safeguard the manatees that migrate to this area in the winter is having a full-time certified "manatee spotter" on-site during construction. There also was a turbidity-monitoring program in place to assure water quality was maintained during construction.

According to Brian Sparks, Florida design-build manager for Archer Western, floating turbidity barriers were placed and all workers were trained in manatee awareness.

"Protecting the indigenous habitat and wildlife is something we take very seriously and are diligent about," said Sparks. He said other environmental responses included the relocation of gopher tortoise burrows.

"After all the controversy, what is clear is that the project provided new jobs," said Martin County Commissioner Doug Smith. He said at the project's groundbreaking in April 2011, an article appeared in the local newspaper with the headline, "To Have This Job is a Great Thing for My Family."

"It couldn't have happened at a better time considering the dismal state of the economy," said Smith. "It employed thousands of people in all facets of construction. It's these types of national projects that we needed at the time to help jolt us out of the recession locally. Infrastructure of this type does not come along every day. It makes a difference." **R&B**

Bernos is director of public relations for RS&H, Jacksonville, Fla. He can be reached at 904.256.2131.

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