

# **Gandy Connector (SR 600, US 92)**

From the Gandy Bridge to the western  
Terminus of the Selmon Expressway

Project Development & Environment (PD&E) Study

## **Final Comments and Coordination Report**

**With Supporting Documents**

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Hillsborough County

Prepared for the  
**Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority (THEA)**



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# Comments & Coordination Report Gandy Connector (SR 600/US 92) PD&E Study

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In compliance with state and federal rules, regulations and policies, a public involvement program was developed and followed throughout the Gandy Connector project development and environment (PD&E) study. The purpose of the public involvement program was to involve and maintain communication with property owners, business owners, local governments, agencies and citizens.

The study limits extend approximately 1.6 miles from east of the Gandy Bridge to the western terminus of the Selmon Expressway at Dale Mabry Highway in Hillsborough County, Florida. The proposed alternative includes constructing elevated express lanes within the median of the existing Gandy Boulevard corridor. Tolls would be collected on this facility and would be owned, operated and maintained by the Tampa-Hillsborough Expressway Authority (THEA).

Between the Gandy Bridge and Dale Mabry Highway, Gandy Boulevard serves a dual role. It functions first as US 92 (part of FDOT's Florida Strategic Intermodal system), a major regional highway and evacuation route leading across the bay to Pinellas County and secondly as a local street serving many south Tampa neighborhoods and businesses. Based on the high level of community interest from residents, business owners and public officials related to this issue, THEA conducted a vigorous, pro-active public involvement program as part of the study process. *The main focus of this effort was to first listen to the community and then to incorporate those views into the THEA solution to the greatest extent possible.*

## 2. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM

A public involvement plan was developed for the Gandy Connector PD&E study and approved in October 2008. The approved public involvement plan is included in **Appendix A**. This program was developed in compliance with the Project Development and Environmental Guidelines; Florida Statute 339.155; Executive Orders 11990 and 11988; CEQ Regulations for Implementing the Procedural provisions of the Natural Environmental Policy Act; and FHWA Order 5610.1C. The program was implemented to keep interested citizens, business owners, local agencies and local government officials informed about the progress of the study, to encourage all interested parties to participate in the study process and to allow the project to be developed in compliance with local and regional transportation plans.

## 3. NEWSLETTERS

Two newsletters were prepared for this project and mailed to the public. A copy of the mailing list is provided in **Appendix B**.

The first issue was published and distributed in March 2009. In addition to informing the public of the alternatives being considered to relieve traffic congestion on Gandy Boulevard, it also served as an invitation to the public information meeting displaying these project alternatives for public review. This issue also stressed the need for public input and provided information on points of contact for citizens to express comments and concerns.

The second issue, published and distributed in August 2009, presented an overview of the preferred alternative under consideration and served as notification of the Formal Public Hearing.

Copies of each issue are included in **Appendix E**.

#### **4. BUSINESS SURVEY**

In December 2008 the project team conducted a survey of the Gandy businesses within the project corridor. A post card was mailed to each business within the project limits approximately one week before the door-to-door survey was conducted to notify them of the schedule and purpose of the study.

A total of forty businesses participated in the survey. The purpose of the survey was to gather general information from the Gandy businesses about hours and days of operation, peak business months, days and hours, as well as the method of delivery for the business, particularly the size of the delivery truck.

A copy of the post card, survey and the results are located in **Appendix C**.

#### **5. BUSINESS IMPACT STUDY**

The Authority contracted with the University of South Florida's Center for Transportation Research (CUTR) for an independent assessment of the impact to 97 businesses along Gandy Boulevard and surrounding the Gandy/Dale Mabry intersection if the proposed express lanes were constructed.

The study indicated a small amount of potential business loss (less than 1.5% of gross annual sales) for gas stations and some restaurants, but also a gain for those businesses servicing local residents for other types of activities. In summary, the study predicts a net gross reduction of \$1.1 million or 0.8 percent of sales out of the study area total of \$139 million. It also estimates a transfer of 13 jobs to other areas of Hillsborough County for the affected businesses while adding five new jobs within the Gandy area for those that would gain. The reduction of gross sales and jobs experienced by traffic-dependent businesses along Gandy Boulevard would be a transfer of resources to other areas of Hillsborough County while the increase in gross sales and jobs would be a net positive impact in business activity and employment for the whole of the County. The entire study can be found in **Appendix K**.

#### **6. MEDIA COVERAGE**

THEA undertook a pro-active approach to media coverage that included editorial board visits, electronic and print media interviews, periodic news releases and project meeting advertisements. Throughout the Gandy Connector PD&E study, there were numerous newspaper articles written about the project. Copies of the project-related newspaper articles are included in **Appendix J**.

#### **7. MEETINGS**

##### **a. Coordination & Community Meetings**

Informational meetings were held with local government representatives and other agencies to address specific concerns of each agency.

Through an active speakers bureau activity, THEA also invited neighborhood and civic associations, as well as individuals, to view presentations on the Gandy Connector study given by Authority staff and to discuss the project issues and potential solutions. (A copy of this letter is located in **Appendix D**.) The project team held over 85 individual, and small and large group meetings throughout the study process. Those meetings were in addition to the Project Advisory Group meetings. These meeting were extremely helpful in helping THEA to develop and refine the project alternatives. A complete list of these meetings can be found in **Appendix D**.

## **b. Project Advisory Group Meetings**

Given the more than 20-year history of efforts to find workable and financially feasible transportation solutions in the Gandy Boulevard corridor, it was particularly important that a process be employed to elicit meaningful public participation from all stakeholders.

Community support and buy-in was a critical element for defining a project that would serve the overall mobility, aesthetic, residential and business needs of the corridor. Obtaining that support takes broad-based community engagement, involving the active participation of neighborhoods, businesses, institutions and public agencies representing various interests along the corridor.

The Project Advisory Group (PAG) process helped to identify the key community issues and concerns, provided the direction for the initial solution development and facilitated the ultimate recommendation for a preferred alternative. All PAG meetings were publicly noticed and open to the public to ensure a transparent process and adhere to Florida's Government in the Sunshine laws.

The PAG included representatives from the following stakeholder groups:

- Hillsborough County
- Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization
- City of Tampa
- Tampa City Council
- Hillsborough County Commission
- Civic Associations
- Neighborhood/Homeowners Associations
- Hillsborough County Metropolitan Planning Organization
- MacDill Air Force Base
- Chambers of Commerce
- Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority
- Florida Department of Transportation
- Various Business Owners

Attendees at all the PAG meetings – members and nonmembers – were able to listen to the presentations and discussions, record their issues and ideas for consideration by the project team, and pose questions to the project team. A comment form was provided to the public for their use, and the project team summarized those separately for review.

An experienced and impartial facilitator led the information-gathering meetings. The facilitator defined a process that elicited key issues from the stakeholders and community participants, fostered equitable opportunities for public comments, and ensured that all issues and ideas raised during the PAG meetings were addressed during the study process.

In effect, the independent facilitator ensured the PAG meetings remained focused, that all participants had an equal opportunity to share their views, and that those views were addressed in the study.

### **i. PAG Meeting One (September 30, 2008)**

The first meeting of the PAG was held at Monroe Middle School (4717 West Montgomery Avenue, Tampa, Florida) and served as an initial organizational

meeting. The primary objective for this first meeting was to identify issues that should be addressed in the evaluation of transportation strategies within the Gandy Boulevard corridor.

The meeting included three main components:

- 1) An opening general session reviewed the history of the problems and needs identified in past studies; summarized the solutions investigated in those studies; defined the study process, schedule, and major milestones; and described the objectives and role of the PAG in that process;
- 2) Break-out sessions of several sub-groups (6-10 participants each) were used to identify and rank the important issues in the corridor; and
- 3) A consolidation session re-assembled the PAG to report and review the results of the break-out sessions. This meeting concluded with a brief presentation of the study's future activities and schedule.

The technique employed for this meeting gave every PAG participant an equal opportunity to generate as many issues as necessary for consideration in the study process. The outcome of this meeting was a list of prioritized issues reflecting the input of each PAG member.

No “solutions” or “opportunities” were discussed at the first meeting. It was imperative that the PAG and community understand there were no preconceived notions about the issues or how to address the corridor mobility needs. By focusing on key issues, the first meeting laid the foundation for a more transparent process, enabling the project team to concentrate on developing alternatives to respond to different issues, thus helping build consensus for a locally preferred alternative.

The comments and the list of issues are listed in **Appendix F**.

## **ii. PAG Meeting Two (January 20, 2009)**

The second PAG meeting was held at Monroe Middle School and began by reviewing the major issues defined at the first meeting. From this list of priority issues, the project team had developed evaluation measures; thereby linking the early input of community stakeholders to specific evaluation criteria,

The study team then presented some ideas for potential solutions that addressed the issues identified during the first PAG meeting. Following this initial review, the PAG was divided into several (3-5) sub-groups to discuss the potential solutions. One of sub-groups was made up of non-PAG members from the general public – individuals who attended the meeting and wanted to participate.

A facilitator was used with each sub-group to ensure that each participant had an opportunity to share their ideas on each potential solution. Comments were noted for all members' consideration, and a record was kept for review by the project team.

When the PAG reconvened, each sub-group presented a summary of their discussions and suggestions. These comments are listed in **Appendix F**.

**iii. PAG Meeting Three (April 14, 2009)**

The third meeting of the PAG included a Formal PAG meeting followed by an Informal Public Workshop. It was held at Monroe Middle School.

The meeting included an overview of the purpose of the PD&E study, a more detailed overview of the alternatives under consideration and a discussion of the project schedule. An evaluation sheet was distributed to allow each PAG member to record their level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the alternatives as they related to the major issues identified at the earlier PAG meetings.

After the presentation, all attendees had the opportunity to view conceptual engineering drawings of the proposed alternatives and to discuss the materials with Authority staff and technical representatives. The room was set up with separate exhibit areas for each design alternative. The important issues and evaluation measures were displayed for public review. Members of the project team staffed each exhibit area to answer questions and explain the concepts.

The evaluation sheets and feedback from this meeting were used by the project team to modify the alternatives and develop a recommendation to the PAG on a preferred alternative. (Additional information on this combined meeting is detailed in **Appendix G.**)

**iv. PAG Meeting Four (September 29, 2009)**

The fourth and final PAG meeting was held after the Formal Public Hearing at Monroe Middle School. (See below for more information on the Public Hearing)

The meeting opened with a presentation by the THEA study team. The presentation included a review of the history of the study, the recommended design concept and how the concept evolved based on PAG and community input and a review of the comments from the public hearing. A brief presentation on the economic impact study conducted by the Center for Transportation Research (CUTR) from the University of South Florida was also included. Public discussion followed.

Additional information on the final PAG meeting is located in **Appendix F.**

**c. Public Hearing (August 25, 2009)**

The Formal Public Hearing was held at the New Beginnings Christian Church (4100 South Manhattan Avenue, Tampa, Florida.)

The Formal Public Hearing was attended by 99 citizens as well as Authority and consultant staff.

Attendees signed in and were given a handout, which included a description of the project and the PD&E study process, a description of the recommended improvement alternative being presented, the overall work program schedule for the project, a cost matrix for the recommended improvements and a comment form.

The hearing included an informal open-house period with members of the study team available to answer questions and discuss the project “one-on-one” with attendees. The following project related information was on display:

- Project Limits/Location
- Welcome Sign
- Title VI and VIII board
- Traffic Forecast
- West End Alternative
- West Shore Boulevard & Manhattan
- Avenue Intersections
- Bridge Street Alternative
- Bridge Support Height Options
- East End Alternative
- Preferred Typical Section
- Bridge Pier/Columns Examples
- Evaluation Matrix

In addition the project documents, including the traffic study and economic survey were on display.

After the informal open-house, the Formal Public Hearing portion of the meeting began with presentation that included an explanation of the recommended improvements and the corresponding social, environmental and economic effects of these improvements. In addition, a description the findings of the independent economic impact study completed by the University of South Florida’s Center for Transportation Research was presented along with the findings of the study.

Following the presentation, the public testimony period began.

Twelve citizens gave oral statements during the public testimony period.

Additional information from the public hearing can be found in **Appendix H**.

## **8. COMMENTS**

A total of eighty-five (85) comments were received either prior to, during, or after the hearing. Of these comments, twenty-four (24) percent supported the Build Alternative, while the remaining seventy-six (76) percent were opposed to construction of the project. Of those opposed, most comments were in regards to the perceived negative impacts the build alternative would have on the community, local businesses, and property values.

## **9. ADVANCE NOTIFICATION**

The Advance Notification (AN) was forwarded to the Florida State Clearinghouse – Florida Department of Environmental Protection on July 17, 2009 in accordance with Executive Order 95-359. The package specified that the project had been screened through the Efficient Transportation Decision Making (ETDM) process and the Class of Action was determined to be a State Environmental Report (SEIR) by DOT based upon in-house environmental evaluations and comments received through coordination with other agencies through the ETDM Environmental Screening Tool. The AN package consisted of:



- AN Transmittal Letter
- Mailing List
- ETDM Final Programming Summary Report
- Project Location Map

A full copy of the AN package can be found in **Appendix L**.

## **10. CONCLUSION**

The public involvement program developed at the outset of the Gandy Connector PD&E study was followed throughout the study process and included coordination with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), local governments, businesses, neighborhoods and the public.

Every effort was made to listen to community desires and concerns. The Project Advisory Group was extremely effective in providing broad-based on-going representation from elected officials and the residential, commercial and public agency components of the community. While the vast majority of the PAG representatives worked to find a solution to the current and future traffic congestion, there was small number of PAG representatives who expressed their opposition to any additional improvements on Gandy Boulevard.

The results of the process was the development of a solution that will provide much needed improvements for this element of Florida's Strategic Intermodal System and with a public involvement process that considered the best interests of the local and regional communities that it will serve. This process resulted in great care being taken to create a very reasonable solution to a difficult problem with minimal impacts to residents and businesses. It will improve traffic flow and time savings on Gandy Boulevard, access to local properties, public transit accommodations, pedestrian safety, fuel savings, air quality and hurricane evacuation for those on both sides of Tampa Bay. This project would require the acquisition of no homes and one business property. The environmental impacts were rated in the *Final State Environmental Impact Report (SEIR)*, American Consulting Engineers of Florida, March 2010, as Not Significant, None or No Involvement.