

Road raising at least 6 years away

By Kevin Wadlow Free Press Staff

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KEVIN WADLOW/Free Press Lower Matecumbe Key resident Caren Brinson asks Florida Department of Transportation engineers and representatives questions about the U.S. 1 embankment and bike paths at a Feb. 5 meeting.

ISLAMORADA — Lower Matecumbe Key residents and state transportation officials share

deep concern about the precarious stretch of low-lying U.S. 1 at Sea Oats Beach.

But major upgrades to raise the roadway between mile markers 74.5 and 75.5 may be nearly six years in the future, a Florida Department of Transportation delegation told a community association Feb. 5.

Noting the mostly retirement-age members of the Lower Matecumbe Key Association, a resident offered, "We're not going to be here to see that."

Major storms like the most recent, Hurricane Irma, cause damage to the highway that lies just yards away from the Atlantic Ocean, said association president Mark Riley.

"That cuts off the rest of the Keys," Riley said. "It happens all the time."

"We recognize that this is the most vulnerable section of the Overseas Highway," FDOT engineer Daniel Iglesias said. "Right now, this is the one we want to address because of our concerns."

However, major construction projects require detailed designs, extensive permitting by multiple state and federal agencies, and multimillion-dollar funding, he said.

"We understand you want to see something done quickly," but it has to be done the right way, Iglesias said. "Based on what we see, this is the time frame."

He later added, "There is no way to raise the road to address a 15-foot-high storm surge."

Engineer Hong Benitez, working in FDOT's Environmental Management arm, said the agency is undertaking a long-term review of all state-owned roads in Monroe and Miami-Dade counties where the roads "are basically getting too close to the water" because of sea-level rise.

"Right now, we do not have that detailed analysis" on how high roads must be raised, she said.

In September 2020, FDOT expects to begin reconstruction of the brick-like “articulating blocks” placed to provide some erosion protection from the ocean waters. The block system was starting to break down before Irma, and the Category 4 storm caused additional damage.

“We’ve speeded up efforts to improve and install the new system,” Iglesias said.

That work will take place as part of a \$4.8 million, 300-day project that also includes shoring up eroded embankments along the Indian Key Fill area from mile markers 77.5 to 80. Traffic should not be significantly affected, agency officials said.

In other discussions at the meeting:

- FDOT will not participate in beach restoration at Sea Oats Beach.
- Residents asked for more center-turn lanes near blind spots at bridges to reduce rear-end collisions.

Iglesias said that could lead to more illegal passing, a common complaint on Upper Matecumbe Key.

“Drivers will abuse it,” he said.

Glenn Taylor suggested putting speed bumps in the turn lanes.

- Natacha Angelo of Lower Matecumbe said the highway over the Indian Key Fill stretch is “extremely dangerous” because of vehicles passing recklessly.

“I drive over the fills twice a day because I have to make a living, but I’m taking my life in my hands,” she said.

- Unapproved business signs and dirt driveways appear far too often in the state’s right-of-way with little enforcement, residents said.

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