



LOCAL

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Traffic delays spur new push for possible U.S. 1 toll

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Increasing traffic congestion on U.S. 1 through the Florida Keys has revived the prospect of collecting tolls for the islands' main highway.

Monroe County Commissioner Heather Carruthers plans to ask fellow board members June 21 to "support the exploration of a toll into the Florida Keys for non-residents to offset tourist impact, protection and improvement of water quality, and to support infrastructure investment to mitigate against rising sea level."

Islamorada Village Council members unanimously passed a largely similar resolution April 20.

Tourism forms the basis of the Florida Keys economy, both resolutions acknowledge, but high visitation also affects local facilities and causes highway slowdowns.

"My concern is that if traffic gets too heavy, the tourism business will suffer," Islamorada Councilwoman Deb Gillis, a motel owner, said Friday. "If people have to wait too long to come down or to go home, they might not come back."

Monroe County commissioners in 2010 passed a similar resolution that did not have any tangible effect. Previous efforts also ran aground on the shoals of state and federal reluctance to impose a toll to fund any projects not directly related to transportation.

But visitors trying to reach Key West now have to contend with potential slowdowns in spots like Islamorada and Big Pine Key, even on some weekdays.

"Monroe County and the Florida Keys is an extremely popular tourist destination with approximately 80 percent of visitors entering" on U.S. 1, the proposed county resolution says. "The percent of those driving into the Florida Keys with a personal vehicle has increased by 12.8 percent from from 2015 to 2016."

The county "believes tourists can contribute to preserving the destination by alleviating the negative impacts of the vibrant tourist-based economy," Carruthers' resolution says. The issue is scheduled for the June 21 meeting at the Marathon Government Center.

If passed, the resolutions — Key West and Marathon are being asked to consider similar declarations — essentially would authorize staff to do a feasibility study.

Possible revenues could fund road and bridge improvements "and other pressing needs."

"Everything we do here is tourism-related," Gillis said. "If we can get this done — and that is a big if — we can corner some of the money for things like water improvements that do something to help Florida Bay and the Everglades."

The proposed county resolution makes historical references to the fee charged for vehicles using the No Name-to-Key West ferry before the Overseas Highway was completed, and the toll booth at Lower Matecumbe Key that collected a \$1 toll (local residents had passes for a brief time) from 1938 to 1954. However, a scandal over inappropriate revenue use, in part, caused the Matecumbe toll booth to be taken down.

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