



LOCAL

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A toll on U.S. 1 into Keys? Florida DOT not a fan

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A toll on vehicles entering the Florida Keys could generate revenue for road and bridge repairs and possibly other environmental projects. But would the law allow it?

A draft resolution going before the Monroe County Commission seeks an inquiry into whether a Florida Keys toll “for non-residents to offset tourist impact, protection and improvement of water quality, and to support infrastructure investment to mitigate against rising sea level” could be feasible.

A toll also could lower traffic demands on the increasingly crowded U.S. 1. More than three-fourths of visitors coming to the Keys — perhaps 2.5 million people annually - arrive in personal or rental cars, says the “2016 Visitor Profile Survey” compiled by the Monroe County Tourist Development Council.

The County Commission is scheduled to consider the resolution as part of its regular meeting June 21 at the Murray E. Nelson Government and Cultural Center in Key Largo. The Islamorada Village Council already has endorsed a similar resolution.

The Florida Department of Transportation strongly opposed efforts in 2010 to 2012 to consider a Florida Keys toll. Former District Secretary Gus Pego vowed to fight any attempts to create one, he wrote in a stern January 2012 letter to commissioners.

Pego has retired but FDOT District 6 covering South Florida maintains that position.

“Under current federal and state law, the existing lanes of U.S. 1 in the Keys cannot be tolled,” FDOT spokeswoman Ivette Ruiz-Paz wrote in an email after researching the issue.

“How many times has this come up? Five? Six?” wondered County Commissioner Sylvia Murphy, who did not advocate for previous efforts on a road toll that sought to generate revenues for projects like the Florida Keys wastewater system.

U.S. 1, which starts at mile marker 0 in Key West and runs to Maine, is part of the United States Numbered Highways systems, a network of linked state-owned highways. It is a “federal-aid” highway, which could place it under federal rules requiring that any tolls collected be spent on new road construction or needed maintenance.

Keys backers of a U.S. 1 toll often reference the \$6 toll to cross the Sanibel Bridge leading to the popular Lee County island; there is no toll for leaving. The current Sanibel Bridge was finished in 2007 at a total price of \$145 million, a debt being paid down until 2035.

“Bond covenants that are in effect through 2035 require that any surplus funds generated from [the Sanibel Bridge and two other Lee County toll bridges] must be used for transportation-related purposes,” Betsy Clayton, Lee County communications director, said in an email. Sanibel and other nearby communities can share surplus funds but solely for transportation projects.

One notable exception to transportation-only expenditures from toll revenue is Alligator Alley, the section of Interstate 75 that charges a \$3 toll to cross Florida both coming and going. Maintaining the Alligator Alley highway and a rescue station servicing the remote 80-mile stretch account for most of the revenues.

But a Florida law says excess Alligator Alley funds can be transferred to the Everglades Fund managed by the South Florida Water Management District. Those could include specified lands for water conservations, improving water sheet flow, and creating “more water resources to reach Florida Bay to replenish marine estuary functions.”

Clarification

A previous story incorrectly said the June 20 regular meeting of the Monroe County Commission will be held in Marathon. A Monday special meeting on county-employee health insurance costs will be held at the Marathon Government Center but next Wednesday’s regular meeting is in Key Largo.

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