

FIVE QUESTIONS

State Sen. Burt Saunders

Interview by Marla J. Ottenstein

IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA, TRAFFIC IS A TOPIC DISCUSSED with the same regularity as the weather. The difference is, we like our weather. The worsening gridlock is an ugly monster that promotes road rage, slows even the shortest of trips and is bad for business. Above all, it's dangerous—and the most frustrating part is that traffic will only worsen in the near term because there are no ready solutions.

Is it a result of poor planning? Are we too far behind to catch up? How did we get into this hopeless predicament? State Sen. Burt Saunders (District 37) is looking for answers—and solutions. Here are some of his thoughts on the roads issue.

1 Why weren't planners and legislators proactive when it was obvious that the population was rapidly growing and over-populated roads would follow?

Even the most reasonable modeling and traffic projections could not have predicted the explosive growth experienced in Southwest Florida. While population growth trends and actual road density demands are significant factors, state-wide needs and rapid growth patterns in other urban areas are an integral part of developing the long-range plans for all interstate projects, including state highways and local and county roadways. Funding is another major consideration. The state cannot spend money and create bond opportunities without the authority.

2 The widening of Interstate 75 from Daniels Parkway in Fort Myers to Golden Gate Parkway in Naples won't start until the 2007-2008 fiscal year. Why not skip six-laning I-75 and go directly to 10-laning?

Actually, jumping to 10-laning would delay the project, as the work and funding schedules cannot easily be changed. Due to the design and preconstruction modifications that would be needed, as well as the lack of federal and state funding that would be necessary to accelerate the project to 10-laning, it would be practically impossible to stay on course and maintain the project's timeframe if the present plans were accelerated to 10-laning.



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3 How will the widening I-75 affect traffic, and how long will the project take?

The project is estimated to take two years. The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) plans on keeping all four lanes open during the day unless conditions necessitate a temporary lane closure. The majority of lane closures will occur at night when there is less traffic demand. Interchange and ramp improvements will be made in advance of the widening project to enhance traffic flow at key locations.

4 What improvements or plans are in the works to increase public transportation?

Although FDOT assists in the procurement of funding for public transportation, it's a local issue. There are no current plans for any significant public transportation improvements.

5 Does FDOT have a long-term plan for funding and building additional roads in Southwest Florida?

Long-range state, regional and county road improvement plans are in place. The five- and 10-year work programs are reviewed annually and the 25-year plan is formally reviewed every five years—or more often, if needed. Funding is dependent upon appropriations at the state and federal levels. GB