

Preserving the Balance



BY BARBARA BILLITZER

Florida's Suncoast Parkway Integrates Environmental Concerns with the Transportation Needs of Tomorrow

Any transportation agency attempting to build a new alignment highway anywhere in the nation is likely to encounter environmental sensitivities along the way. Imagine the challenge presented when the land needed for the new highway is frequently referred to as “The Nature Coast” by local residents.

Numerous environmental challenges emerged when Florida's toll agency proposed building a limited-access roadway requiring a 122-meter (400-foot) right of way through three Florida counties: Hillsborough, Pasco, and Hernando, in order south to north. The new parkway was expected to carry 120,000 vehicles per day by 2010, the majority generated by the Tampa-St. Petersburg metropolitan area.

A Dynamic Growth Center

The Suncoast Parkway project had been high on the list of transportation needs in the Tampa-St. Petersburg region since at least the mid-1970s, when continued population growth and traffic congestion was first noted in planning studies. At

the time, Tampa-St. Petersburg was a dynamic growth center whose regional economy showed no signs of diminishing. It was home to three international deepwater ports and three international airports. The Port of Tampa was the seventh largest in the nation, conveying more tonnage than all other Florida ports combined. Tampa International Airport had been identified as the third fastest-growing airport in the country.

The Florida Department of Transportation (DOT) had conducted the first corridor and environmental studies in 1988 and presented a preferred alignment for the proposed Suncoast Parkway in 1992 at a series of public hearings. The route would run through a variety of landscapes that included urban and suburban areas, sparsely inhabited open land and conservation zones.

The timing of the project was a major factor. Construction that precedes major regional development by several years naturally reaps the benefit of relatively stable prices for land acquisition. At the same time, Florida law demanded that all highways built by the toll agency pass a revenue-projection

test to meet repayment expectations in the 15 years after construction. The State's toll agency, the Florida DOT Turnpike Enterprise, would play a vital role in ensuring funding availability. Operating as an entity within the Florida DOT, the Turnpike Enterprise was established to build highways by issuing public bonds and collecting tolls to contribute to their repayment.

Proposing a Partnership

Turnpike Enterprise officials and the in-house consultant's staff managed the design of the Suncoast Parkway project collaboratively, with help from consultants representing a variety of disciplines. Collaboration among all participants and stakeholders was critical to the project's environmental goals.

In the earliest stages, two significant decisions were made. The first was to divide the proposed highway into six contiguous segments so that six individual consultants could be assigned the design work for each segment, thereby working concurrently and more expeditiously. The second decision was to create an extended partnership to address the project's environmental aspects. To maintain a uniform approach, a single environmental consultant coordinated all permitting efforts with the partnership.

Borrowing from the world of construction contracting, project managers decided on a form of partnering that would involve all those with a stake in the environmental issues. The Florida DOT had never attempted this kind of partnering process before. To help ensure success, the Turnpike Enterprise hired a local consulting firm to oversee the environmental planning and permitting. The project coordinator was John Post, an environmental administrator with the Turnpike Enterprise, who was formerly employed by the Southwest Florida Water Management District, a State agency with jurisdiction over the Parkway project.



The Suncoast Trail is officially designated as part of Florida's Statewide Greenways and Trails System and stretches the entire length of the 42-mile parkway.

One reason that John asked to be assigned to the project was the unique approach it promised. "This was totally different from any of the projects I'd seen coming from the Florida DOT when I was with the Water Management District," he said. "In the end, it turned out to be a truly productive process, one that helped us come up with the best of all possible solutions instead of just good enough solutions."

Fourteen Agencies Sign On

With the first partnering meeting scheduled for November 1993, the project managers made another decision that proved crucial. They used a professional facilitator from the Florida DOT with no significant environmental background to lead the quarterly meetings and keep tabs on the process as it evolved. Following a three-day seminar to familiarize everyone involved with the basics of how the group process would work, the participants produced a partnering agreement affirming each member's commitment "to work

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers • U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service • Southwest Florida Water Management District • Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission • Florida Department of Transportation, Office of Florida's Turnpike • Post, Buckley, Schuh & Jernigan, Inc. • Henigar and Ray, Inc. • The Trust for Public Land • Metric Engineering • Reynolds, Smith and Hills Inc. • Parsons DeLeuw, Inc. • Kisinger Campo and Associates Corp. • Dyer, Riddle, Mills and Precourt, Inc. • E.C. Driver and Associates, Inc.

Partnering Agreement

We the partners of the Suncoast Parkway Environmental Coordination Team agree to work together in a spirit of trust and cooperation toward preserving the balance between Florida's environmental protection objectives and the state's transportation needs. Our objectives are:

- Avoid Impacts Where Possible
- Minimize Impacts
- Meet Permit Schedules
- Thorough and Timely Coordination
- Serve Public
- Timely Decision Making
- Early I.D. of Environmental Issues
- Successful Mitigation
- Maintain Coordination Throughout Project
- Build an Environmentally Engineered Facility
- Good, Honest Public Image

The Partnering Agreement solidified the spirit of trust and cooperation in preserving the balance between environmental protection and

together in a spirit of trust and cooperation toward preserving the balance between Florida's environmental protection objectives and the State's transportation needs."

The partnering agreement was signed by 14 entities comprised of:

- Florida DOT Turnpike Enterprise
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Southwest Florida Water Management District
- Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission
- Trust for Public Land (nonprofit that purchases private land for public ownership)
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- Six Consulting Agencies

The group quickly established priorities, identifying the Suncoast Parkway as a highway project that would be "environmentally engineered" to the greatest extent possible, meaning that environmental considerations would lead all others in the design process. First consideration would be given to avoiding adverse environmental effects where possible, with second consideration given to minimizing impact. As a last resort, mitigation strategies would offset adverse impacts that were either unavoidable or resistant to minimization.

A Dialogue from the Beginning

The process began smoothly, as even the most skeptical participants not only approved of the content of the proceedings, but also appreciated the opportunity to have their concerns fully aired and considered. "Large, new roads are just not something we generally recommend," explained Jim Beaver, a biological scientist with the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, an agency that had aired strong objections during the project's early phases. "But you could really appreciate that both the DOT and the consultants were willing to listen to problems with the project design as we saw them, and that they were willing to enter into a real dialogue on how to address them."



The 42-mile roadway required right of way through three Florida counties: Hillsborough, Pasco and Hernando.

As dialogue progressed, a strategic outline emerged. Acknowledging that the project ultimately would result in significant impacts requiring mitigation, land available for use in mitigating adverse impacts was identified and two large parcels singled out. Both parcels were located in wetlands at the southern reach of the project, crossed by two meandering rivers. The Pithlachascotee and the Anclote ran east to west only 2-3 miles apart through floodplains and dense swamps.

One parcel, roughly 3,600 acres in size, was used mainly as a cattle ranch. Because the land was relatively undisturbed from its natural state, minimal environmental restoration or enhancement was necessary. The parcel had been purchased by the Trust for Public Land in anticipation of the Suncoast Parkway project. The other parcel, roughly 6,700 acres, would prove to be slightly more problematic, but ultimately represented a key piece in the puzzle. It had been approved for development, and since very little environmental restoration or enhancement was necessary, it ultimately became the subject of extended financial negotiations.

A Virtual Island of Conservation

The two mitigation properties adjoined the already existing Starkey Wilderness Area, a 10,000 acre natural preserve managed by the Southwest Florida Water Management District. In addition to agreeing on the mitigation plan as a centerpiece of the environmental strategy, there was agreement that the two pieces of land, once acquired, would be turned over to the Southwest Florida Water Management District for long-term habitat management to form an area measuring roughly ten miles deep and seven miles wide. With the Suncoast Parkway as the eastern boundary, the mitigation properties and the existing preserve would constitute a valuable buffer on the rim of the Tampa-St. Petersburg metropolitan area.

The final environmental impact statement submitted to the Federal Highway Administration stated, "As Pasco County and west central Florida are developed to urban uses, this park may represent a virtual island of natural areas set aside for the preservation of fish, wildlife, and native Florida vegetation. The environmental value of such a large tract of conservation land cannot be overemphasized."

In total, the environmental strategy also included the enhancement of wetland habitat for wading bird species like the sandhill crane and wood stork, both protected species, and upland preservation for the indigo snake, a federally protected species, and the gopher tortoise, protected by the State of Florida. Wildlife crossings also constituted a significant aspect of minimizing environmental impact. Significant known populations of the Florida black bear, for instance, inhabited the area near the right of way.

Partnership Reaps Benefits

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the partnering process was the changed attitude expressed by participants on both sides of the permitting table. Mike Nowicki, a Senior Project Manager who had been with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers since 1980, noted, "I'm not sure a 20,000 acre wildlife preserve would ever have come out of the Suncoast Parkway project without the partnering process. What really changed everything was getting a chance to meet on a regular basis with the project managers and their consultants. The positive attitude they showed in addressing our concerns made the whole permitting process much less contentious and far shorter than it might have been."

Another advantage of the proactive partnerships was the cost savings achieved by including permit considerations in the earliest stages of the design process.

The same eagerness to address environmental considerations permeated every detail of the design, thanks to a set of guidelines developed by the contractor's landscape architects and distributed to all of the consultants.



Suncoast Parkway is commonly referred to as the "most environmentally friendly highway in Florida."



The project's basic premise was to be compatible with the natural environment and surrounding communities.

Recreation a Part of Design

Looking at a variety of older and newer highways around the United States, the designers of the Suncoast Parkway were inspired by the tri-State Blue Ridge Parkway, Westchester Parkway and Northway Parkway in New York, the George Washington Parkway and I-66 in Virginia, I-75/I-85 in Georgia, I-70 and E-470 in Colorado, and I-285 in California, among others.

Kevin Hoeflich, P.E., PBS&J's Senior Vice President, National Tolls Business Sector Manager, was originally on the design team for the project. "This was one of those projects that you might be lucky enough to come across once in your career. The chance to tap into your creative side while constructing a project of this magnitude was a rare opportunity. It challenged us to design something unique while having a lasting, positive impact on the environment. By locating the Suncoast Trail within the right of way, we felt like we were giving something back to the community. It's rewarding when you realize what you can accomplish if you are willing to approach things a little differently."

A central component of the Parkway's design was a 12-foot wide recreational trail on the western side of the highway's right of way. The trail was buffered from the roadway as much as possible and included numerous rest areas, a series of trailheads connecting with local recreational resources, and a variety of river, wildlife, and wetland interpretative and viewing areas.

The tollway reflects careful environmental planning in every aspect, from project management to roadway design. A state-of-the-art commitment to minimize environmental impact is reflected by the mitigation efforts: preservation of 20,000 acres of the conservation land and the long bicycle trail that parallels the parkway demonstrates how the Suncoast Parkway was truly a revolutionary project.

Extension of the Environment

Special attention was paid to the subtleties of landscape design and the specific treatment of natural amenities, including selective clearing and the retention of existing features in the highway medians. The design treatment included the use of light-brown concrete, dark brown guardrails and light posts, brown monotube roadway signs and black vinyl-covered fencing. The effect of driving on the Suncoast Parkway, especially in areas with views to the open landscape, provided an unusual sense of transparency instead of the more-expected experience of a highway barrier between the motorist and the surrounding landscape. The guardrails, light posts, and road signs seem to disappear, allowing the natural environment to remain the focal point.



James Ely, Executive Director of Florida Turnpike Enterprise (pictured right) and Kevin Hoeflich of PBS&J, accept the 2003 IBTTA President's Award for Toll Excellence.

At wildlife crossings, a specially designed high wildlife fence topped with outriggers was extended in a funnel shape along the highway perimeter to help direct animals toward openings created for them beneath the roadway. All land acquired to establish the Suncoast Parkway's right of way that resulted in small, unused lots after construction was sold later with prohibitions against erecting billboards and other signs in close proximity to the highway. That restriction helped ensure that a sense of harmony with the natural environment would be maintained on the Suncoast Parkway for years to come.

Raymond Ashe, currently the Turnpike's Director of Governmental Affairs, was Manager of the Turnpike's Environmental Office during the design and construction of the Suncoast Parkway. During questioning and testimony at one of the project's administrative hearings, Raymond noted, "In my 30 years with the Department of Transportation, I have worked on or had my hand in most of the major transportation infrastructure projects in the state of Florida, including the Interstate system, Sunshine Skyway Bridge, Florida Keys bridges replacement and the Alligator Alley to I-75 conversion. While each of these projects had its own signature environmental feature or challenge, the Suncoast Parkway's design and construction incorporated the best of the best from these previous projects and in my opinion culminated in the best environmentally and engineeringly-balanced transportation facility in the state."

Lessons Learned

According to John Post, "There were so many roadblocks along the way, and any one of them could have stopped the project entirely. The ability to solve each issue as it arose was a testament to the group's teamwork." In terms of lessons learned," John noted, "this project taught us to always be prepared for the worst. If something could go wrong, it would. By documenting each step, anticipating issues that could arise and most importantly, keeping open communication with everyone involved, was what made this a success story."

When asked about some of the project hurdles, Rick Hurst, SR/WA, PBS&J's Manager of Toll Systems and Operations, noted, "This project challenged our staff in a number of ways. First, there were some landowners who

were facing health and family issues. Some of these displaced really needed our help. This required some ingenuity, however we were able to implement some unique advance acquisitions. We felt fortunate to be able to help these folks."

"We also faced some rather aggressive opposition from attorneys working for landowners, who attempted to use our project schedule to pressure us into settling at unreasonable value," Rick stated. "This forced us to strengthen our communication between design, environment, appraisal and our negotiators. By organizing our information, we were better prepared both in negotiations and court. As a result, our attorneys, management and staff successfully negotiated settlements and reduced project costs."

Opening to Accolades

The project opened to traffic in two phases. In February 2001, the first section opened, extending from Veterans Expressway to SR 50 in Hernando County opened. Leading the procession during the opening day ceremonies for was a lemon-yellow Model A truck built in 1929. On each of the antique cab doors was a neatly stenciled "DOT 1," representing the Florida Department of Transportation. The restored truck, its chrome headlights and front bumper gleaming brightly in the Florida sun, was a shining symbol of the past tiding proudly on a roadway planned with maximum environmental sensitivity for the transportation needs of the future.



The restored 1929 Model A truck led the opening day procession.



Presenters at the IRWA Fall Forum in St. Pete Beach, Florida, were Raymond Ashe, Director of Government Affairs for the Florida Turnpike Enterprise and Kevin Hoeflich, Senior Vice President at PBS&J.

Since that opening day, the project has received numerous awards, beginning with the White House Millennium Council, which honored the Suncoast Trail with the Millennium Trail Award. In 2002, the American Society of Landscape Architects presented the Suncoast Parkway with its prestigious Award of Merit. In 2003, the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association (IBTTA) presented the President’s Award for Excellence in recognition of Aesthetic Design Guidelines.

On winning the IBTTA Award, Kevin Hoeflich of PBS&J noted, “A truly remarkable achievement considering that this is the highest honor in the toll industry and the very first time a Florida agency had won the IBTTA President’s Award. It was a thrill and an honor and certainly a tribute to all of the team members who worked so hard to plan, design and build the Suncoast Parkway.”

Recognized as Top 10 Project

In October 2008, IRWA announced plans for a year-long promotion in honor of the Association’s milestone 75th anniversary. A major component of the promotion included an unprecedented North American publicity campaign. The primary goal was to garner public awareness of the role that right of way professionals play in bringing quality of life to communities everywhere.

IRWA invited members to nominate projects that they felt contributed to the quality of life in our communities. More than 130 different infrastructure projects were submitted for consideration. Following a membership-wide vote, IRWA announced the Top 10 Infrastructure

Projects of the past 75 years. The Suncoast Parkway project had been voted into the Top 10, receiving the second highest number of votes (the Interstate Highway System ranked number one).

In October, IRWA held its 2009 Florida Educational Conference and Region 6 Fall Forum in St. Pete Beach. During the three-day seminar, representatives from the Florida Turnpike Enterprise made presentations on the project’s unique challenges. Speakers included Raymond Ashe, Director of Government Affairs, Nicola Liquori, CPA, Deputy Chief Financial Officer, and Kevin Hoeflich, Senior Vice President at PBS&J.

In accepting the IRWA Top Ten Project award, Nicola stated, “Florida’s Turnpike Enterprise integrates public sector motives with private sector methods. This means that we are constantly striving for the balance of serving the public while ensuring value for our bondholders. The Suncoast Parkway is a project that exemplifies this goal.”

The Ultimate Success Story

Florida’s \$517-million Suncoast Parkway resulted from a highly successful partnering process. The partnership facilitated the applications for construction permits, developed an impact-mitigation strategy that meets or exceeds even the most stringent expectations, and created an integrated design protocol that incorporates the first public biking trail built along a major limited-access highway corridor in the State.



IRWA Executive Vice President Mark Rieck presented Top 10 Infrastructure Project award to Nicola Liquori, CPA, Deputy Chief Financial Officer for the Florida Turnpike Enterprise.