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Florida's Shame Day 5: Rocky Roads

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Isn't it great to live in an area where you can trust your elected officials to learn from their mistakes? Don't know. We can't remember when it's happened here.

And, sadly, the magnificent Wekiva River basin may be the next victim of our elected officials' short-term memories. Read on:

June 29, 2004: Handshakes and high-fives all around. Gov. Jeb Bush has just signed a bill that gives the go-ahead to the Wekiva Parkway. For once Central Florida will build a road that doesn't degrade the area around it with traffic jams, strip malls and runoff that will pollute the waterways. This road has the guarantees in place to protect the Wekiva River basin, an oasis just outside Orlando that's teeming with pristine springs, rare wildlife and dark swamps. What vision! A place for Central Floridians to enjoy for generations to come. The Wekiva Parkway would actually be a vehicle for, well, vehicles, rather than a vehicle for the next fast-buck scheme to set up shop.



This was no small victory. State road builders had been steamrolling ahead with plans to widen State Road 46, a two-lane country road that winds through the basin. Even four lanes weren't enough. In places, the road would go to six lanes. It didn't take long for the For Sale signs to line the road. The speculators have arrived, ladies and gentlemen! And we all know what that means. Think S.R. 436 -- Semoran Boulevard -- which runs through Seminole and Orange counties. Hard to believe, but it once was considered the area's outer beltway. Now it's an ad for Growth Gone Wild.

But none of that for the 26-mile Wekiva Parkway. No, sir. This time we'll do it right. Not only would the road be elevated over the basin's most fragile parts, 10,000 acres next to it would be preserved. Interchanges -- magnets for new subdivisions -- would be sparse. No more would local governments be rezoning land willy-nilly for pals who just happen to own land nearby.

Or so we thought.

Turns out, no one knows where \$1 billion of the \$1.8 billion project is going to come from. Oh, well. And this is a road that's supposed to be ready for construction in a few years. So we could end up with a six-laned S.R. 46 after all.

Is this just another game of "Trust us" from our elected officials? Looks that way. The law never specified where the money would come from. Environmentalists involved believed a toll increase by the Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority would pay for a lot of it. Not so, say expressway folks. They say the Florida Department of Transportation is supposed to come up with the money. But it's not in its

five-year plan.

State Sen. Lee Constantine, who spearheaded the project in the Legislature, says not to worry. He and other Central Florida politicians will somehow squeeze the money out of the Legislature. Wish we could be so confident. This comes at a time when the Legislature is more than a billion dollars in the hole as it is, a problem that is sure to be around for the next few years.

Surely, the expressway authority will now give the Wekiva Parkway its full attention, right?

Well, not quite. The expressway authority has moved on -- to other roads. Not just one other possible expressway extension, but five -- five -- of them. After all, it's a whole lot easier to plot out highways across undeveloped land than trying to work out all those pesky protections that the state law demands of the Wekiva Parkway. So it's spending \$2.8 million to "study" these new highways that go north, south, east and west, stretching all the way from Poinciana to Melbourne in the south, where it will cut through wildlife corridors and other sensitive land. This is Florida, after all. Instead of steering growth to the areas that already have houses and businesses so that all those new roads, schools and sewer lines don't bankrupt the rest of us, the new roads speed through the rural areas.

This wouldn't be so bad if these roads had the protections of the Wekiva Parkway, which would be a spur for motorists rather than spurs for development. One Wekiva Parkway stretch goes 7 miles without an interchange. Even where there are interchanges on that parkway, local governments can't just do whatever their campaign contributors want.

But no one has made any promise to give these roads that sort of protection. Incredibly, there could be an interchange every 3 miles. Heaven help undeveloped Central Florida.

Unless you're a landowner who wants to develop, that is. Roads to developers are like campaign contributions to politicians. They can't live without each other.

Take Deseret Ranch. The authority is studying at least one expressway through its 300,000 acres. It has hired Wayne Rich, not only a former expressway-authority chairman but a member of Broad and Cassel, the law firm that handled land acquisitions for the authority until July.

So is the authority giving Deseret favorable treatment because of Wayne Rich? After all, Deseret can just forget about development if it can't get a road.

Not at all, says Lennon Moore, the expressway honcho hired to head these studies. She's talking with lots of developers, including Avatar, which wants to develop thousands of acres in Osceola and Polk counties near Poinciana. Well, that makes us feel much better: developers standing in line to make their pitch to Lennon Moore for an expressway through their rural land. Has nothing changed?

So now what? Well, fortunately, it's not too late for the Wekiva Parkway:

Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty and his expressway authority can take the leadership. The authority can find the dollars for this road rather than spending its time plotting more roads for any and every developer who shows up at its doorstep. After all, the parkway would complete the loop for the Orlando beltway.

They also can push Florida's Turnpike Authority to take over this road. A new law just gave the authority an extra \$5 billion in bonding capacity. There's no better candidate for that money than the Wekiva Parkway.

It's simply a matter of trust.

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