

OCTOBER 17, 2008 – SPECIAL MEETING

The Board of County Commissioners, Walton County, Florida, held a special meeting on Friday, October 17, 2008, at 9:50 a.m., at the South Walton Annex to discuss the four-laning of Highway 331.

The following Board members were present: Commissioner Sara Comander, Vice-Chair; Commissioner Scott Brannon; Commissioner Kenneth Pridgen; and Commissioner Cindy Meadows. Mr. Ronnie Bell, County Administrator, was also present.

Commissioner Comander led the invocation followed by the Pledge of Allegiance to the American Flag. Commissioner Comander assumed the Chair position. Chairperson Comander called the meeting to order and recognized that Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos, Mayor Carpenter, Councilman Huffman, and Mayor Marsh were also present.

Chairperson Comander stated that Walton County is requesting \$7 million from the surface transportation program or the transportation community system preservation program, within the fiscal year 2009 transportation HUD appropriations bill, to support the design and construction of the expansion of US Hwy 331 to four lanes in order to provide additional capacity for the evacuation purposes and regional economic development. Highway 331 is the only north/south corridor that connects the north end of the county to the south end. The road is currently 274% over the capacity level in the evenings and the maximum service volume is 690 vehicles per hour. In 2005, the Department of Transportation (DOT) measured the TRIP count on Hwy 331 which totaled 770 vehicles per hour. The over abundance of vehicles on Hwy 331 is a daily

threat to those traveling the road and has caused multiple accidents. Highway 331 is the sole evacuation route out of South Walton County during a hurricane and the widening of Hwy 331 would allow a safer transportation corridor for those to travel the road to work and support the tourist industry which is vital to the county. Chairperson Comander stated that Walton County would like to expand four segments of Hwy 331 to four-lanes, totaling a cost of \$164,000,882.00.

Secretary Kopelousos, Director of Transportation for Florida, stated that Secretary Kelly mentions Hwy 331 on a daily basis and they are looking at some ways to get right-of-way donations so the funds we have can be used for construction. There is a shortage of approximately \$4 million and they have been working to get these infrastructure projects moving forward towards completion.

Chairperson Comander expressed her appreciation of Secretary Kelly's help and all his efforts. She stated that four-laning Hwy 331 is vital to the economic development of Walton County and people's livelihood, health, and welfare.

Mr. Bell stated that they have been working on a plan for the segment from Owl's Head to Edgewood Circle. He stated that about 5 months ago they suggested to Secretary Kelly and the Chipley staff to look at a way to get that segment four-laned and now we are \$4.12 million short of pulling this together. Included in the packet are highway patrol reports and pictures of the bypass and the traffic issues out of tourist season.

Secretary Kopelousos stated that the partnerships will be what make this happen. She stated that public-private partnerships are what is going to allow us to accomplish what is needed in this area.

Commissioner Meadows questioned the timing of these projects since the airport is due to open on Memorial Day 2010. Secretary Kopelousos stated that they are looking to see how much can be saved by right-of-way donations and now the project prices are coming in below the estimates. This is the right time to continue forward with the transportation projects but the money is the issue. She stated that the goal is to move forward with these projects as soon as possible and there are many challenges ahead of us and we have to continue to take them on one at a time.

Commissioner Brannon stated that there is still a lot that has to be done and we have come a long way within the last 4-5 years. Commissioner Brannon questioned if Secretary Kelly could explain the current segments and the monies appropriated for the right-of-ways and construction.

Secretary Kelly stated that DOT does recognize the need on the Hwy 331 corridor. The estimated amount for the segment from Hwy 98 to the Choctawhatchee Bridge was about a \$12 million investment, but we got it for about \$10.5 million. The estimated price is \$280 million for the Choctawhatchee Bridge, the design build is ready and a contract could be made if the money was available. The Choctawhatchee Bridge to SR20 section is designed, there is about \$47.6 million in the budget for the right-of-way acquisition and no mitigation or construction money is programmed. The construction of that section, which is a little over 4 miles, is estimated at \$87.5 million. The realignment project from SR20 to Owl's Head has been completed for a total of \$39 million. There is resurfacing, design, and right-of-way money available for the segment from Owl's Head to Edgewood, but no construction money. There were however, some TRIP grant programs available that were taken advantage of. There is nothing programmed for the

segment from Edgewood to I-10 and that estimated construction cost is \$91 million. The Department has either completed, in progress, or have in the 5-year work program, \$130.6 million, which has been invested or identified in the work plan for the Hwy 331 corridor from Hwy 98 to I-10.

Discussion continued regarding the acquisition right-of-way from Eglin, the possibility of state involvement in the bridge construction due to safety factors, and the partnering of the state with the federal government for the bridge construction funds.

Secretary Kopelousos stated that the federal government has been focusing on a new bridge program which is great because safety is priority, but safety, preservation, and maintenance is prioritized before adding capacity. She stated that if the federal government would give flexibility of the funds it would be more helpful. The federal government currently gives an average of \$80-100 million in the bridge rehabilitation and repair program, but over \$400 million was spent.

Mr. Bell questioned Secretary Kopelousos what ideas she had for new ways of generating money. Secretary Kopelousos stated that out of the state budget, the federal funds consist of about 25%, so breaking the budget up differently for preservation and maintenance is 56% of the budget. She stated that we need to get away from the gas tax revenue. When looking at the new construction within the past 15-16 years, 91% of all the new roadways and expressways have been toll facilities.

Mayor Carpenter, City of DeFuniak Springs, encouraged the Board to four-lane the segment from Edgewood Circle to I-10 because the economy has hurt the city and this segment would really help.

Councilman Huffman stated that Highway 331 does need to be four-laned but if tolls were added that would put another burden on the people who work in South Walton.

Chairperson Comander expressed her appreciation to Secretary Kopelousos and Secretary Kelly for attending the meeting and their willingness to help Walton County so much.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 10:35 a.m.

APPROVED _____
Larry Jones, Chair

ATTEST _____
Martha Ingle, Clerk of Court