

## APRIL 3, 2012 – SPECIAL MEETING

The Board of County Commissioners, Walton County, Florida held a Special Meeting on April 3, 2012 at 5:00 p.m. at the Walton County Courthouse in DeFuniak Springs, Florida, to discuss the U. S. Highway 331 four-laning and the Choctawhatchee Bay Bridge Project.

The following Board members were present: Commissioner Kenneth Pridgen, Vice-Chairman; Commissioner Larry Jones, Commissioner Cecilia Jones, and Commissioner Sara Comander. Mr. Gregory Kisela, County Administrator; Attorney Toni Craig, County Attorney; and Ms. Martha Ingle, Clerk of Courts; were also present.

Mr. Gregory Kisela, County Administrator, gave a brief overview of the items to be discussed regarding the Highway 331 Expansion Project. He announced that a second public meeting would be held on April 17, 2012 at 5:00 p.m. at the South Walton Courthouse Annex in Santa Rosa Beach. Mr. Kisela stated that handouts detailing the toll and tax information have been made available by the Walton County Area Chamber of Commerce.

Commissioner Scott Brannon, Chairman, joined the meeting at 5:10 p.m.

Secretary Tommy Barfield, FDOT District 3, briefly discussed the project and made himself available for questioning. Commissioner Comander stated that two different reports had been given as to the placement of the new bridge and asked Secretary Barfield to clarify its exact location. Secretary Barfield stated that the new bridge would be constructed to the East of the existing bridge and the toll would be placed on north bound traffic. Ms. Martha Ingle, Clerk of Courts, questioned if the new bridge would extend from shore to shore. Secretary Barfield stated that it would. He also reported that improvements would be made to the existing causeway. Commissioner Comander questioned if the improvements would help with flooding problems. Secretary Barfield said that he was unsure how the improvements would affect flooding issues.

He stated that the new bridge would be shore to shore and not affect the causeway. Chairman Brannon questioned if the existing recreational areas on the causeway would be reduced. Secretary Barfield stated that it would not, and that the goal is to protect the environment and use of the causeway.

Commissioner C. Jones asked if the toll was passed would discounts be available to local residents, what amount would be considered, and if the toll would sunset. Secretary Barfield stated that the toll would sunset once the debt is paid. Ms. Dianne Scaccetti, Florida Turnpike Authority Executive Director, stated that until the preliminary planning study is done, the discount amount could not be provided. She also said that once the county has decided to go with a toll, a full investment grade study would be necessary for the bond market to endorse the loan. Commissioner C. Jones questioned if businesses would receive discounts. Ms. Nicola Liquori, Florida Turnpike Authority Chief Financial Officer, discussed the different types of discount programs used by the Turnpike Authority. Ms. Scaccetti stated that knowledge of the different types of discounts would be needed to determine how the traffic and revenue study would be fashioned.

Commissioner L. Jones asked how the Pineallas County local resident toll discounts were determined. Ms. Scaccetti stated that it is a flat fee for the year. Discussion continued regarding the determination of toll discount amounts.

Chairman Brannon asked how the toll system would affect county/government vehicles and voiced concern that it would be a significant cost to the county. Secretary Barfield stated that he has a transponder in his State vehicle and does not pay a toll. Ms. Scaccetti stated that State Statute only allows State level vehicles toll-free access; all others must pay a toll.

Mr. Kisela questioned how the amounts are calibrated for studies. Ms. Scaccetti said that as much toll discount information as possible is needed during the preliminary/planning study to determine a direction to pursue for the final study. Mr. Kisela felt that not knowing the ramifications of the discounts on the toll fee would make a final decision more difficult. Discussion continued on the impact of the toll discounts on the amount of years needed to pay off the bond, and on administration costs.

Mr. Kisela asked about the different toll pay options. Ms. Scaccetti stated that there would be two types of pay options: SunPass or Toll-by-Plate. She stated that a hand out was available explaining the SunPass use, and a list of the state wide establishments where transponders could be bought and reloaded. Secretary Barfield stated that a pay station could be located at the South Walton Annex if there were no other establishments available in Walton County.

Commissioner Comander asked if there were additional charges for the toll-by-plate other than the toll itself. Ms. Scaccetti stated that there is a \$2.50 per document fee.

Commissioner L. Jones questioned what would happen if a person doesn't pay the toll-by-plate charge. Ms. Liquori stated that it would be considered a moving violation for in state tags, out of state tags would be turned over to a collection agency. Ms. Ingle questioned how the toll-by-plate be charges be applied to a rental car. Ms. Liquori stated that rental companies have a toll program available for their vehicles. Mr. Kisela said that he was informed that 40% of out-of-state toll-by-plate fees were uncollectable and asked for clarification. Ms. Liquori stated that the 40% was correct, and that the SunPass Program was the lowest revenue risk and had the lowest operating costs. Discussion continued on the collections of toll-by-plate fees.

Mr. Kevin Chilcutt, WZEP, questioned if there was a guarantee that the toll would sunset and not be re-established for some other use. Secretary Barfield stated that the bridge would not be a turnpike facility, and that an agreement would be signed by both the FDOT and the County removing the toll once the debt had been retired.

Commissioner Comander noted that the same would apply to the ½ cent sales tax option. Commissioner L. Jones reminded everyone that although the discussion had been centered on the toll option, the ½ cent sales tax referendum will still be held on May 8, 2012.

Mr. J. B. Hillard spoke in favor of the toll.

Mr. Art Dees, WZEP, asked if it would be possible to sell a one-time sticker for those visiting the beach. Ms. Scaccetti said that a \$4.99 SunPass decal is available throughout the state and would be made available in Walton County.

Mr. Hilliard stated that in 1996 the FDOT had maps indicating where roadways would be positioned for the expansion of Highway 331; he questioned when a current plan would be made available for the citizens to review. Secretary Barfield discussed the 1996 maps and the initial study for the proposed project, and stated that information would be presented at the meeting on April 17<sup>th</sup>.

Commissioner Comander asked Mr. Kisela to state how much money the expansion project would bring into the local economy. Mr. Kisela stated that with the expansion from the bridge to I-10, approximately \$1.5 to \$2 million per week could be spent in our community.

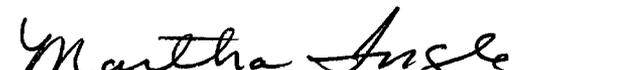
Mr. Bob Dixon asked what toll would be applied to multiple axel trailers. Ms. Scaccetti stated that there are multiple vehicle classifications on the turnpike, however, the planning study for this project will look at a per axel charge. Commissioner Comander questioned if one toll could be set for all types of vehicles. Ms. Scaccetti stated that larger vehicles cause more damage

to the roadways than passenger vehicles thereby making one set toll unfair. Commissioner Comander voiced concern that other counties have alternate routes that are not tolled; and stated that Walton County only has one roadway in and out of South Walton. Ms. Scaccetti stated that the issue could be reviewed, but will make financing for the bridge more difficult.

Mr. Lee Perry addressed the sales tax option and asked if any other toll information would be available before the referendum on May 8<sup>th</sup>. He voiced concern that the voters will not have enough information on the toll. Mr. Kisela stated that there will not be any further information available before the referendum. Mr. Perry questioned if the recommended time for the project pay-out is still around 30 years for the toll, and 18 years for the tax. Mr. Kisela stated that the preliminary study would determine the toll option, and 15 to 20 years with the ½ cent sales tax.

There being no further items to present the meeting adjourned at 5:52 p.m.

  
Scott Brannon, Chair

  
Martha Ingle, Clerk of Courts