

Split Oak controversy over expressway route re-emerges with tough choices - Orlando Sentinel

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Split Oak forest is an 1,800-acre conservation tract purchased in the 1990s for conservation by Orange and Osceola counties. (Kevin Spear / Orlando Sentinel)

One of Central Florida's most defining environmental controversies – whether to build an expressway through or near Split Oak preserve – is re-emerging into the public spotlight with more sharply defined and potentially agonizing choices.

The Central Florida Expressway Authority will hold meetings next month to unveil details and prime the public's awareness of alternatives for where to route an extension of the Osceola Parkway expressway toll road from the heart of Osceola County to south and east of Orlando International Airport.

Blocking the way is Split Oak Forest Wildlife and Environmental Area, a 1,800-acre preservation tract assembled with local and state initiatives more than 20 years ago, intensively rehabilitated as natural landscape since then, and now robustly defended by a coalition of environmentalists and area residents.

"We really listened to the environmental advisory group and tried to deliver what they asked for," said Laura Kelley, expressway authority executive director.

East Orange and north Osceola counties have witnessed a tidal wave of development pressure, planning and projects.

That momentum has been backed primarily by Tavistock Development Co. and Suburban Land Reserve, or SLR, which is part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints corporate family that includes the massive Deseret Ranches in Central Florida.

The extension of Osceola Parkway would extend to an expressway network within and connecting to a rising urban landscape of Tavistock and SLR.

The options about to face public scrutiny have been debated previously in broad terms.

What's new, according to the expressway authority, is that Tavistock and SLR -- powerhouses in Central Florida real-estate development -- are more formally committing to setting aside more than 1,500 acres as a conservation buffer south and east of Split Oak.

That would create an island of 5,375 acres of protected lands, spanning Split Oak, other park lands, wetlands, critical uplands and former agricultural tracts.

That offer is contingent on routing the parkway through the southwest corner of Split Oak, paving 60 acres and severing a 100-acre wedge that will be significantly degraded as forest habitat.

The other choice, what the authority is calling the "Split Oak Avoidance Alternative," wraps closely around the southwest corner of Split Oak.

That path already has met with vociferous backlash from residents, and there is little to suggest that the opposition has lessened during the past year when the Osceola Parkway extension proposal was back on drawing boards.

Because of impacts to private property, the avoidance alternative would be more expensive for a project estimated at an early stage to cost between \$750 million and \$1 billion.

While many regulatory and political decisions lie ahead for the Osceola Parkway extension proposal, a public hearing set for Nov. 19 has the makings of an epic confrontation between road builders, residents, developers, forest visitors and factions of environmentalists.

"We believe that this plan offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to designate significant land for preservation and provides a reasonable option for the parkway extension," said Clint Beaty, vice president for Tavistock Development Co. in a statement.

The alignment through Split Oak "allows more than 1,550 acres to be placed

into perpetual conservation – significantly increasing the expanding conservation lands in the region,” Beaty said. “Transferring this land to conservation eliminates nearly one million square feet of commercial entitlements from development.”

The prospect of sacrificing a wedge of Split Oak for the larger gain of protecting more than 5,000 acres of contiguous landscape has gained traction from some quarters of the environmental community.

“The most important issue is the long-term ecological integrity of Split Oak, Moss Park and Isle of Pines Preserve,” said Charles Lee, advocacy director for Audubon Florida.

“Right now about 4 miles of the boundary of these conservation tracts is already approved for 1 million square feet of industrial, 1.7 million square feet of office park, 80,000 square feet of commercial development, and much more,” Lee said. “In the long run, the CFX proposal to impact 160 acres and add 1,500 acres of new preservation areas is the best result for these conservation lands.”

But many other opponents of crossing Split Oak have rallied to fears that if the preserve cannot be protected from an expressway, then little in Central Florida’s environment is safe from encroaching development.

Valerie Anderson, a founder and the public face of Friends of Split Oak, has remained an uncompromising opponent to dissecting the preserve with an expressway, including on Wednesday when told of the proposal’s resurfacing for public review.

“We need to stand up for what we have, not bow down to a deal engineered by the developer that has the most to gain from the construction of the Osceola Parkway extension,” Anderson said.

“If the State of Florida, Osceola County, Orange County and CFX are willing to undermine the existing legal framework for protecting conservation land from development, how can these entities be trusted in the future to protect our parks, public land and green spaces from development pressure?” Anderson said.

Also up for consideration is the west end of the parkway extension, where two alternatives are being considered: intersecting the parkway with State Road 417 near Boggy Creek Road or extending the parkway to S.R. 417 along Tavistock land nearer to the Lake Nona community and Medical City.

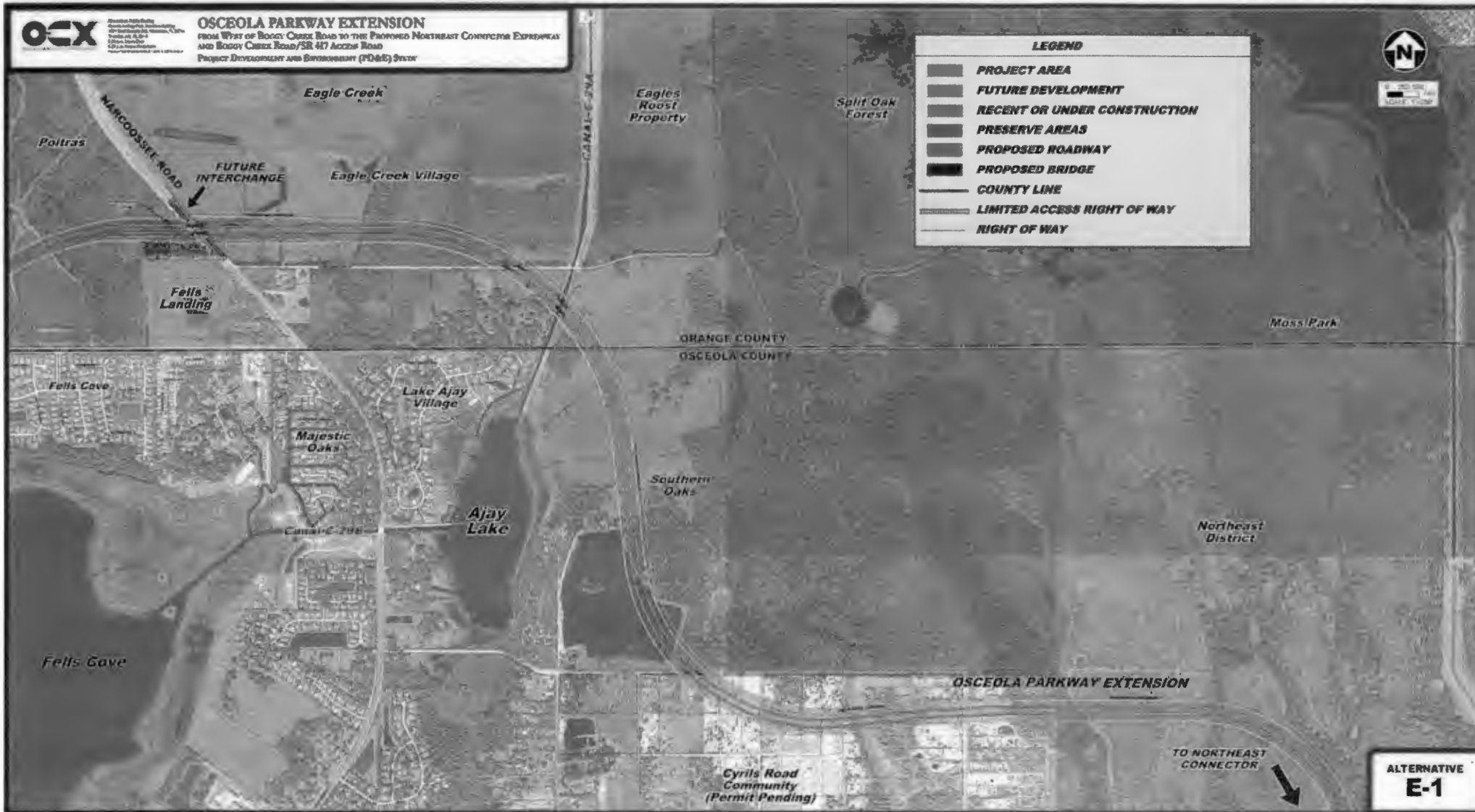
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OSCEOLA PARKWAY EXTENSION

FROM WHAT OF BOGGY CREEK ROAD TO THE PROPOSED NORTHEAST CONNECTOR
AND BOGGY CREEK ROAD/SR 417 ACCESS ROAD
PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT (PD&E) STUDY



LEGEND

- PROJECT AREA
- FUTURE DEVELOPMENT
- RECENT OR UNDER CONSTRUCTION
- PRESERVE AREAS
- PROPOSED ROADWAY
- PROPOSED BRIDGE
- COUNTY LINE
- LIMITED ACCESS RIGHT OF WAY
- RIGHT OF WAY



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