

Mack urges second look at Coconut

Don't decline money, he warns

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Controversy over the Coconut Road interchange has prompted U.S. Rep. Connie Mack IV to warn Lee County transportation leaders that declining money for the project could hurt the region in receiving future funding.

Mack, R-Fort Myers, wrote a letter to Commissioner John Albion about the Estero interchange, which would connect Coconut Road to Interstate 75. The interchange would relieve traffic on Bonita Beach and Corkscrew roads - the only connections to I-75 in Bonita Springs and Estero -but likely add more traffic to Coconut Road.

Mack's letter was the second that came from Congress in a week. The other was from Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, chairman of the House Transportation Committee. He wrote that the \$10 million in federal money earmarked for the interchange cannot be used for any other road projects, as Lee's transportation leaders would like.

Mack warned, as did Young, that leaving the interchange out of the county's 2030 transportation plan could lead Congress to believe that Lee's Metropolitan Planning Organization, a group of county politicians that decides future road needs, is rejecting the \$10 million earmarked for the project. The project is estimated to cost a total of \$106 million.

And that could hurt the county in the future.

"If the MPO chooses not to utilize this \$10 million for this project, there is a reasonable chance that my colleagues in Congress will work to rescind these funds in light of the overall emphasis of reducing federal spending obligations," Mack wrote.

"Moreover, the unintended message from the MPO to my colleagues in Congress is that our region is willing to reject scarce federal resources. I am concerned that the MPO's vote will make it difficult for Southwest Florida to have future success in securing federal resources for other important projects, many of which will not fall under the MPO's purview."

The letter, which The News-Press obtained Sunday, did not specify those projects Mack referred to in

his letter. He could not be reached for comment Sunday.

Jeff Cohen, a Mack spokesman, reiterated his boss's argument.

"The local officials there fight so hard for federal money, and then they decide not to use it?" he said. "There's a disconnect."

The conflict heated up a year ago, when Bonita Springs City Manager Gary Price paid \$15,000 for a study on the Coconut interchange to find out its impacts on the area. An updated version paid for by Price is under way.

The original study, by Tampa consultant Carter & Burgess, riled residents in The Brooks, the four gated communities bisected by Coconut Road. The study suggested that the Coconut interchange would take 9,000 cars off Bonita Beach and Corkscrew roads daily but add 6,000 per day to Coconut.

Residents blasted Price at a community forum a year ago, even though they were required to sign a waiver when they bought their homes that an interchange was possible.

Estero activists, led by Don Eslick and Phil Douglas, complained to the MPO last fall that the \$10 million could be better spent elsewhere. They had the backing of Commissioner Ray Judah.

The MPO subsequently voted 9-5 to keep the interchange out of the 2030 plan and remove a potential Coconut Road flyover to the County Road 951 extension from the plan.

The letters from Mack and Young have not changed Judah's mind. He believes the urgency for an interchange is a ploy from Edison Farms, also known as Agripartners, a development partnership that owns 4 square miles of land east of I-75. An interchange could provide access to the land.

"What we have here is an attempt by a property owner trying to steer public policy to enhance the value of his land," Judah said.

Judah said the focus should be to widen I-75 from four to six lanes through Lee and Collier counties, for which Congress has already promised \$81.1 million.

"It would benefit the entire community if Congress would redirect the money to widening the I-75 corridor," Judah said.

That's not going to happen, Young wrote.

Judah still stood his ground.

"I'm hopeful Congress will understand the importance" of redirecting the money, he said.

Bonita Springs Councilman Ben Nelson, the city's representative on the MPO, said the county should at least use the money to study the feasibility of an interchange.

"If we get information back that it's not viable, then I'm willing to disengage," Nelson said, "and I'm hoping the rest of the MPO would agree."