



## Funding secured for FC Expressway's final phase

By Stuart Korfhage  
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The long-planned replacement for the Shands Bridge between St. Johns and Clay counties now has the funding needed for it to become a reality.

Gov. Rick Scott made the announcement Thursday during a trip to Green Cove Springs.

The bridge is part of Phase 3 of the First Coast Expressway project under control of the Florida Department of Transportation. The cost of the phase was announced as \$763 million.

The replacement of the Shands Bridge and extension of the First Coast Expressway to Interstate 95 in St. Johns County is the final phase of the \$1.9 billion road project.

According to FDOT, construction on the northwestern, first segment of the First Coast Expressway (Blanding Boulevard/State Road 21 in Clay County north to Interstate 10/U.S. 90 in Duval County) began in 2013 and should be completed in its entirety in the fall.

The central, second segment of the First Coast Expressway involves new roadway from Blanding Boulevard/S.R. 21 in Middleburg running south and then east through Green Cove Springs and includes a new bridge over Black Creek. Construction on this part of the project is expected to begin in January 2019.

The southeastern, third segment of the expressway, including the new bridge over the St. Johns River into this county, is expected to begin construction in 2023.

When complete, the First Coast Expressway will cover 46 miles of limited-access roadway, extending from I-10 to I-95, offering an alternative that bypasses downtown Jacksonville.

Even though the First Coast Expressway will be a toll road, it was announced that drivers will be able to cross the St. Johns River without paying a fee.

“While the First Coast Expressway is a limited access, all-electronic toll facility, the plan at this time is for the new bridge to have local access points to allow drivers who only wish to cross the St. Johns River (but not continue on the FCE) to do so without being charged a toll,” said FDOT spokeswoman Sara Pleasants in an email to The Record.

Rep. Cyndi Stevenson, who attended the announcement ceremony Thursday, said that was a key final detail of the project.

“It was a huge deal,” she said. “The kind of concept they’re working on is no tolls on existing capacity. We’re not going to go and put tolls on things that have already been built even though this project includes some improvements to existing roads.

“All people will still have a free way to cross the river. That’s very important.”

Both Stevenson and the governor stressed the importance of improved infrastructure in relation to economic opportunity in the area.

“When a big infrastructure piece like this goes into place, it tells businesses where there’s going to be capacity,” Stevenson said. “That (major road project) is something you can’t expect the private sector to do.”

Added FDOT Secretary Mike Dew in a release: “FDOT is committed to enhancing safety, easing congestion and improving mobility for all of our citizens. Once complete, this bridge replacement and new roadway will connect communities and provide new and existing businesses with the infrastructure they need to thrive.”

A further advantage to the new bridge is that it will increase vertical clearance to 65 feet from the current 45 feet to accommodate additional shipping traffic.