



Road map to the future: From autonomous cars to parking space finders, technology will improve traffic in St. Johns County

By Colleen Jones
January 23, 2019

You can hear the passion in his voice when North Florida Transportation Planning Organization Executive Director Jeff Sheffield talks about futuristic transportation concepts such as self-driving cars or technology that would direct a driver to an open parking spot.

But Sheffield is equally enthusiastic when discussing more pragmatic projects that St. Johns County motorists will see in coming years, such as the opening of the First Coast Expressway and the State Road 313 extension which will form a beltway around West Augustine.

Sheffield took time recently to chat with *The Record* about both short- and long-term projects before his scheduled presentation on transportation trends at the St. Johns County Chamber of Commerce Economic Development Council's quarterly breakfast at 8 a.m. Friday at the World Golf Hall of Fame.

The North Florida TPO is an independent agency that oversees transportation planning for St. Johns, Duval, Clay and Nassau counties.

When asked about whether he saw St. Johns County as playing catch-up with its roads and infrastructure in the face of such rapid population growth over the last 10 years, Sheffield said he didn't think that was the case, and that transit on the whole has kept pace with growth.

"The amount of funding that's found its way into Northeast Florida is well above what you would consider our share," Sheffield said.

Sheffield pointed to several road improvements on the horizon that should make life a little easier for those traveling into, out of or through the county. One is S.R. 313, an extension of State Road 312 that will connect to State Road 16 and then to U.S. 1 North. Part of the goal of that project is to ease congestion farther south on U.S. 1.

The first stretch of the First Coast Expressway connecting Interstate 10 with Blanding Boulevard in Clay County has opened. The segment that will allow drivers to access the corridor by I-95, south of County Road 210, should break ground in 2023. The expressway will eventually be partially tolled.

Sheffield also spoke about the widening of I-95 to create speed lanes beginning at International Golf Parkway through to Duval and into downtown Jacksonville. The first section, at the intersection of I-295, is already open but the lanes in St. Johns County won't be completed until 2023.

"You'll be able to opt into the lanes for a fee if you want to move faster," Sheffield said. "The fee will be based on the congestion level."

Higher-level digital technology and data analytics will allow planners to deliver and integrate real-time information to transportation management centers. This could be alerts to pedestrians crossing or traffic signal prioritizing; smart lighting that comes on only when activity is detected on a street or the controlled flow of autonomous cars.

Though years away from implementation of some of these "smart city" innovations, St. Augustine has a couple of projects already underway, Sheffield said. The first is a parking management system that would collect real-time data from garages and parking lots showing capacity levels and available spaces, which could prompt city officials to open up satellite parking. It could also alert drivers to open parking spots and lead them there. Motorists will also be able to pay for time through an app.

Another game-changer for St. Johns County residents could be sensors built into roads that would detect elevated levels of stormwater so officials could divert drivers before they got to flood level.

To Sheffield, safe, reliable and efficient roadways enhance a region's economic vitality as well as its quality of life.

"I think transportation is the lifeblood of a community," Sheffield said.

To register for the EDC Quarterly Breakfast, visit sjcchamber.com. Admission is \$40 for chamber members; nonmembers may call 904-829-5681 to register.