



Governor speeds up bridge construction plan

By Stuart Korfhage
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The Florida Department of Transportation announced Thursday that it will begin construction in fiscal year 2022 on a new bridge over the St. Johns River as part of the First Coast Expressway project.

That's a year earlier than previously scheduled.

According to a release from FDOT, the accelerated schedule was made possible by support from Gov. Ron DeSantis for a public-private partnership to fund the design-build project.

"The Department appreciates the Governor's support for the First Coast Expressway and the opportunity to advance construction through a Public-Private Partnership," FDOT District Two Secretary Greg Evans said in the release.

"This important investment in our state's infrastructure will add capacity to the crossing connecting St. Johns and Clay counties, provide additional clearance for boat traffic and improve emergency evacuations in North Florida while also enhancing safety for bicyclists and pedestrians."

The bridge will be constructed just south of the existing two-lane Shands Bridge and will include four travel lanes as well as emergency shoulders and a multi-use pathway for bicyclists and pedestrians. The vertical clearance of the new bridge will be 65 feet from the water line, compared to the current 45-foot clearance.

The additional 20 feet will match the height of the Buckman Bridge and is expected to improve marine commerce in the region.

Construction of the new bridge is expected to cost approximately \$324 million and take about five years to complete, weather and unforeseen circumstances permitting.

The First Coast Expressway project is the result of a partnership between the Florida Department of Transportation District 2 and Florida's Turnpike Enterprise. This multi-lane, limited access, all-electronic toll facility project will ultimately span 46 miles across parts of Duval, Clay and St. Johns counties.

Phase I of the project is already open, and work has begun on Phase II in Clay County. The new bridge is part of Phase III, which is the only part involving St. Johns County. It goes from the Clay County line to Interstate 95 between International Golf Parkway and County Road 210.

Although the First Coast Expressway is a tolled road, it was announced last year 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 in 2018.