



For Florida Transportation Commission, future is now

By A.G. Gancarski November 30, 2015

The future of transportation in the Sunshine State includes automated cars, space transportation, and other factors that will revolutionize transportation as we currently see it. And central to that future: the Florida Transportation Plan.

On Monday afternoon, in a meeting at Jacksonville's Hyatt Regency, the Florida Transportation Commission adopted a resolution regarding conditional approval of the Florida Transportation Plan.

New goals in the latest update:

- Reducing the number of crashes in the transportation system
- Facilitating emergency response and recovery with transportation infrastructure and services
- Meeting/exceeding industry and governmental standards for infrastructural quality, condition, and performance for all modes of transportation
- Optimizing the functionality and efficiency of existing infrastructure and right of way.
- Adapting transportation infrastructure and technologies to meet changing customer needs.
- Increasing reliability and customer satisfaction with all modes of Florida's transportation system.
- Increasing the efficiency and reasonableness of transportation-related regulatory processes.
- Increasing the use of shared vehicles and public transportation as alternatives to single-occupancy motor vehicles.

This meeting is a prelude to one more meeting in December, then implementation in 2016.

There were three statewide events leading up to this plan, and thirteen workshops, with special attention paid to technology, according to Commissioner Ken Wright, related even to unmanned vehicles, and "meta data" and "big data."

The process changes this time around included an enhanced steering committee, expanded stakeholder and public outreach, and use of scenario planning to guide discussions, forging the policy piece this year ahead of implementation in 2016, said Jim Wood, FDOT's State Transportation Development Administrator.

Carmen Monroy, FDOT Office of Policy Planning Director, said the current plan was a "little more thoughtful, a little more strategic, and a little more innovative" than previous iterations,

with recurrent dialogue with stakeholders. Monroy noted 15,000 “engagements” with the public, with specific feedback both electronically and at regional workshops throughout the state.

FDOT’s Dana Reiding, Administrator of Intergovernmental Programs for FDOT, noted that the “vision document” being discussed was intended to address needs fifty years out.

Security, Reiding said, is paramount, including guarding against drug and human trafficking, preventing cargo theft, and remedying security vulnerabilities.

As well, Reiding said, the “customer-focused” goal is that the transportation system should be “quality,” which would include more choices and options for the expected 26 million Floridians by 2040.

Reiding talked about the I-4 Ultimate initiative, improving the thoroughfare from Volusia to Orange Counties, as an example of responsiveness to the needs of consumers. In a similar vein, she talked about the long-range planning for “future corridors” over the next few decades, taking into account trends and land use patterns. As well, she talked about SunRail as an example of a way that policy makers seek to remove undue reliance on single occupancy vehicles.

As one would expect, the buzzwords of the modern era abounded: innovation, collaboration, customer service, performance measures, and strategic investments. Implementation of these plans includes the FDOT, obviously, as well as regional and local governments and organizations.

The final review of the Policy Element by the Steering Committee is Dece. 11, here in Jacksonville, before an adoption by the FDOT executive board in December. Public comment will be considered in the ultimate refinement of the current draft.

“You might see a couple of changes,” Reiding said, related to specific local asks, “but nothing really significant.”

The resolution was approved.

After a break, a bit of a deeper dive into some genuinely visionary components of the plan.

FDOT’s Rich Biter discussed automated vehicle technology, and the strategic plan developed around it, which stemmed from the First Annual Florida Automated Vehicle Summit in 2013, when Biter says “it wasn’t on anyone’s mind what was going on.”

Today, in contrast, automated vehicles are on the popular radar.

The third of these summits begins here in Jacksonville tomorrow, as FDOT continues to ready public policy to meet the demands of developing technology, coordinating with experts to “find out what it is that we need to do.”

“Florida is indeed a leader in looking at automated vehicle technology,” Biter claimed.

The big takeaway? Safety is of paramount importance.

“We can reach a point where we can eliminate crashes and eliminate congestion,” said Biter, though Florida is a long way from that in practice.

Automated vehicles allow for design opportunities, such as narrower lanes, that could theoretically allow for more capacity created through re-striping.

Among the pilot projects: the advanced driver assistance system, a 100 vehicle pilot project in FDOT District 7, which Biter hopes to have real data on in the first quarter of 2016.

Automated vehicles are going to be a game changer, says Biter, affecting car transactions and how they are used, and he speculates that today’s technology pioneers’ products “sooner than we think will be on our roads.”

Jim Barbaresso followed up, talking about “infrastructure deployment considerations for connected automation,” with a specific eye toward getting ready for this.

“We’ve got a big problem,” said Barbaresso.

That problem? Traffic fatalities, in Florida and worldwide.

Though traffic fatalities have declined by almost half since the requirement of seatbelts in 1968 in the US, there are still 30,000 a year. And an argument for automated vehicles: they would cut fatalities by reducing operator error.

“This is happening, and it’s happening now,” Barbaresso said, regarding their use as fleet vehicles.

Connectivity and automation, he added, likely will be available on a mass market scale in the next few years.

Connected vehicles offer a feedback loop with regard to system performance data for public agencies also, even as concerns have been expressed, such as “are these technologies ready for prime time?”

Worries about technological obsolescence are also real concerns.

“Is it possible that ten years from now we’ll be talking about flying cars? Or hyperloop technology, like Elon Musk is proposing. We don’t know how that’s going to evolve quite yet,” Barbaresso said.

Technical challenges, alas, abound, such as the potential for a car to be hacked. And institutional challenges, such as funding shortfalls and lack of staff with necessary technical skills, are real also.

Then there are the unforeseen issues, such as “automated vehicles being too polite.”

A Google vehicle was driving so slowly and “politely” that the occupant was ticketed recently, Barbaresso said.

Once those issues are resolved, the game could completely change, with traffic signals eventually, perhaps, no longer being needed.

After that, a discussion of space transportation with Mark Bontrager, the VP of Spaceport Operations for Space Florida.

A distinctly energetic Bontrager said that Florida was on the cutting-edge of this initiative, an “emergence of a real commercial marketplace” that is “selling this technology” to companies and governments alike.

Space technology extends, he said, to everything from GPS technology to satellite tracking of produce ripeness before harvest.

And the bulk of the activity – 76 percent – is commercial, a function of increased demand from companies and “constrained” federal budgets for aerospace.

Florida has two space ports – Cecil Field and Cape Canaveral – and both will be central to these plans going forward.

Partners in this effort: FDOT, Enterprise Florida, and the Department of Economic Opportunity.

The final presentation, from Jim Wood, revolved around “future corridors.”

Two discussed: Tampa to Central Florida and Tampa to Northeast Florida, both of which address connectivity challenges.

The first one: the increasing megalopolis quality of the Tampa/Central Florida region. The second: a lack of linear connection between the Jacksonville area and Tampa, with an eye toward relieving usage of Interstate 75, via an I-75 Relief Task Force, which will focus on the counties west of the interstate.

The Task Force will meet seven times, starting next week at the Ocala Hilton and extending through August, with a report to the FDOT Secretary on October 1, 2016.

The FTC, meanwhile, convenes again on January 11 in Tallahassee.

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