

Meeting To Discuss Busch Blvd. Upgrades

By LAURA KINSLER lkinsler@tampatrib.com

Published: Jan 7, 2006

TAMPA - It wasn't that long ago that transportation planners were searching for a new vision for one of the county's ugliest roads.

Two years later, Busch Boulevard is set for a \$12 million makeover.

Tampa City Councilman Shawn Harrison will host a meeting Monday at Busch Gardens to discuss the latest plans to upgrade the 4-mile corridor from Florida Avenue to 56th Street in Temple Terrace.

Harrison chairs the county's Metropolitan Planning Organization, which has sent out more than 2,000 invitations to businesses and property owners in the corridor. Hundreds of residents and business owners participated in a series of meetings in 2004 to design a streetscape that would extend tropical themes beyond the borders of Busch Gardens.

"I wanted to make sure the business owners along Busch know that this is a real project," Harrison said. "Now is the time for the business owners to organize and help us with this project."

The Temple Terrace City Council canceled a scheduled town hall meeting so members can attend Monday's workshop, which begins at 7 p.m. at Busch Gardens' Moroccan Palace.

"That is a gateway to our city, and it's really important we be part of it," said Temple Terrace Councilwoman Linda Shattles. "We need to reach out to the city and the county."

The city should try to persuade Hillsborough County leaders and the Florida Department of Transportation to extend the improvements east to the bridge over the Hillsborough River, said Temple Terrace Councilman Frank Chillura. That area is in the city's redevelopment district east of 56th Street and south to the Hillsborough River.

Temple Terrace previously set aside funds to beautify Bullard Parkway (which is what Busch Boulevard becomes east of 56th) with trees and lighting. City Manager Kim Leinbach said the city's plans could complement county efforts to enhance the boulevard.

The bulk of the \$12 million will be spent on an FDOT repaving project. The roadway itself is in poor condition, project manager Jamal Nagamia said. The sidewalks also need to be brought up to standards in the Americans with Disabilities Act.

One option would be installing crossing signals with audio countdowns for visually impaired pedestrians. Temple Terrace already plans to install the audio signals at Busch Boulevard and 56th Street.

Another problem area on Busch Boulevard is the section between Interstate 275 and Florida Avenue where there is no sidewalk. Nagamia said the DOT is negotiating with CSX Transportation to secure a sidewalk easement on the south side of the road.

Hillsborough County secured \$2 million in last year's federal highway bill to beautify the boulevard, but that figure won't pay for half of the improvements in the plan. The design calls for decorative lighting, textured crosswalks and lushly landscaped medians and sidewalks with palms, oaks and animal-shaped topiaries. New bus shelters would feature animal-themed mosaic designs.

"We know there's not enough [money] to do all of it," MPO planner Alan Steinbeck said. "So Part 2 of the meeting is to engage them in how to get the rest of it done. We've had some discussions about forming a business alliance to continue to work on the completion of the project."

Harrison said he hopes the hotels and restaurants will join Busch Gardens in supporting the plan.

"They all will benefit directly," he said. "If we do it right, this will dramatically change the whole corridor."

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Busch Boulevard meeting

WHEN: 7 p.m. Monday

WHERE: Moroccan Palace, Busch Gardens, 3000 E. Busch Blvd. (enter through the Nairobi Gate)

INFO: Call Alan Steinbeck at (813) 273-3774, Ext. 336.