

More than 50 people pack heated hearing on State Road 7 extension

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WEST PALM BEACH —

Lawyers and elected officials on both sides of the State Road 7 debate exchanged sharp jabs at a public meeting Thursday, but they all seemed to agree on one thing: It will be a long time before the road is built.

Several supporters of the 4-mile link to Northlake Boulevard, which would help relieve traffic in the central-western communities, took issue with threats by West Palm Beach to block the project in the courts.



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LANNIS WATERS

The location where the proposed extension of State Road 7 would run next to Grassy Waters Preserve Wednesday, January 21, 2015. ... [Read More](#)

“It is not a threat,” West Palm Beach Mayor Jeri Muoio told the Palm Beach Metropolitan Planning Organization’s 18-member board. “We are going to do everything we can to protect our water supply.”

But one MPO member challenged the city’s main concern, that the road will harm the source of the city’s water supply — Grassy Waters Preserve, a 24-square-mile marsh that was part of the original Everglades.

The preserve is just east of the upscale Ibis Golf and Country Club, which was annexed into the city in 1989 just before it was built.



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About 55 people showed up to participate in discussion about the controversial State Road 7 extension during a Palm Beach County ... [Read More](#)

“It didn’t seem that West Palm Beach had much of an objection to building the entire Ibis development,” said Royal Palm Beach Vice Mayor Richard Valuntas. “I’m assuming (a legal fight against the construction of Ibis) was not something West Palm pursued.”

Among the 50 people at the meeting were three outside lawyers representing West Palm Beach: Rafe Petersen from Holland & Knight’s Washington office, Roger Sims from the firm’s Orlando office and former City Attorney Claudia McKenna.

They sat in the first rows of Palm Beach County’s Vista Center auditorium with Muoio, City Attorney Kim Rothenburg and City Administrator Jeff Greene.



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West Palm Beach Mayor Jeri Muoio told members of the Palm Beach County Metropolitan Planning Organization board that if their water ... [Read More](#)

“It is interesting to have all those attorneys for the city of West Palm Beach come and speak, too. That is part of the intimidation process,” said road supporter Michelle Damone, an Indian Trail Improvement District supervisor.

“It is truly a strategy of the city of West Palm Beach not to win but to stall this project and purposely stall the funding of this project,” Damone said.

After two hours of debate, the MPO board voted 15-3 to accept the Florida Department of Transportation's five-year work program, which includes moving \$50 million for State Road 7 up to next year instead of 2019.



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Lisa Interlandi, senior attorney with the Everglades Law Center, said extending State Road 7 “has the likelihood of increasing more development” ... [Read More](#)

But MPO member Keith James, one of two West Palm Beach commissioners on the MPO board who voted against the program — along with Boynton Beach Commissioner Mike Fitzpatrick — said it doesn't make sense to approve money for a road that might never be built.

“This project is not shovel-ready and I predict with an extreme amount of confidence it won't be shovel-ready by 2017,” said James, who launched the discussion with a 13-minute speech.

Part of Thursday's debate focused on a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency letter sent Sept. 28 to the Army Corps of Engineers recommending denial of a permit for the link.



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During a Palm Beach County Metropolitan Planning Organization meeting, Thursday, October 15, 2015, Michelle Damone, who is an elected member of ... [Read More](#)

Petersen and Sims told the MPO that the EPA has veto power over any decision the corps makes because Grassy Waters is an Aquatic Resource of National Importance. But other lawyers, including Bob Diffenderfer of the Western Communities Council, disputed that notion.

“Our decision should not be based on the threat of litigation,” Palm Beach County Commissioner Hal Valeche said. “The EPA is not infallible. They have been reversed by the Supreme Court many, many times in the past. This is just their opinion.”

Valeche then took a jab at the city when he asked DOT officials if they were preparing a response to the EPA letter “because we’ll have plenty of time, according to Commissioner James. This will be going on for years.”



DAMON HIGGINS

Drawing on statements made by groups like U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Environmental Protection ... [Read More](#)

Road opponent Sal Faso, who lives in Ibis and heads a neighborhood coalition, said he agreed with some of the arguments made by the State Road 7 supporters. But he said that shouldn’t justify the road.

“If I looked at this area, Ibis should have never been built. Northlake Boulevard probably never should have been built the way it was built. But it was. We’re here. We’ve got it,” he said. “So let’s not exacerbate the problem by adding 44,000 cars a day coming up and down State Road 7.”

State Road 7 is inevitable because of traffic and population trends, said Jay Foy, an engineer with the Indian Trail Improvement District, which governs The Acreage.

“It’s just a matter of time when this road is built, and that time is going to be dominated by how much money the opposition is willing to give to the appeals,” he said.

West Palm has paid outside lawyers at least \$900,000 since 2008 to fight State Road 7 and two other proposed roads near Grassy Waters.

A two-lane link along the State Road 7 route already goes from Northlake Boulevard south to the southeast gate of Ibis. It is mainly used by Ibis residents and it is next to the northwest corner of Grassy Waters.

“It was OK put a development in Ibis with an access road of one mile adjacent to (Grassy Waters) but it’s not OK to have an evacuation route for people who live in The Acreage?” asked Acreage resident Megan Jacques.

“Humans live along Royal Palm Beach Boulevard. They are the endangered species. Stop talking this nonsense about water supply. We know it’s nothing about water supply. It’s all about power and money.”

Acreage resident Rick Fignar said he was surprised they city had spent so much money fighting the road instead of replacing broken security cameras in high-crime neighborhoods.

“If I was a member of a (West Palm Beach) neighborhood without street lights or cameras, I would be upset,” he said.

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