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Article published Apr 16, 2004

Faculty Senate: SW 24th off limits

A future road that could punch through a wooded area of the University of Florida hit a possible detour Thursday when faculty leaders voted to urge the administration to halt efforts to hand over right of way for the project.

But it's still unclear if UF President Bernie Machen plans to heed the recommendations of the Faculty Senate. About 75 faculty leaders were unanimous in their support of ending an administration-driven push to amend the campus master plan to make way for a property transfer that would allow for the eastward extension of SW 24th Avenue across campus to Archer Road.

While the issue has been floating around for months, a decision hasn't been made thus far because Machen has said he didn't want to skirt faculty input on the matter.

The whole issue blew up last year after former UF President Charles Young indicated the university could donate the right of way if the plans were included in UF's master plan. Developer Clark Butler, who is also a substantial UF donor and has plans to develop a major shopping center along part of SW 24th Avenue, and others favoring the creation of an east-west corridor urged Young to help with the project.

Faculty opposed Young's seemingly unilateral decision to hand over university land without first broaching the subject with them.

Additionally, vehement opposition arose from UF professors directly impacted by the proposed road extension. The proposed road would eliminate part of the university's Natural Area Teaching Laboratory, an essentially undeveloped area of campus used by students for their ecological studies and experiments.

Following Thursday's senate meeting, Machen said he may make a decision in the next few days. Machen said Butler is eager for a decision, too.

"He's asked for my decision in a timely manner," Machen said.

The campus debate mirrors those that have occurred during the past year or so related to the reconstruction of SW 24th Avenue.

The Alachua County Commission went back and forth on whether to build the road as a two-lane or four-lane road. After a couple of flip-flops, the board decided to reconstruct the road - now a limerock road north of Butler Plaza - as a two-lane segment between SW 34th Street and SW 43rd Street.

The county is moving forward with building the first segment of the road at a cost of about \$10.7 million - about \$4 million more than previously thought.

Costs are up in part because Butler, who favored a four-lane road, withdrew his offer to give rights of way to the county for the project after the board decided to go with a two-lane design.

And the county now has a \$2.4 million shortfall on the project, although it could tap existing gas

taxes to fill its financial gap, county officials said.

Long-term plans also call for the road to extend westward and then north to hook into SW 62nd Boulevard, the street that runs north-south along the east side of The Oaks Mall. So far no money has been secured to begin work on this piece.

However, traffic planners also suggested extending SW 24th Avenue east through the UF campus to connect into Archer Road. The idea was developed to curtail traffic gridlock. Without the road continuing east, all eastbound traffic on SW 24th Avenue would empty onto SW 34th Street, which is already overcrowded with traffic.

Meanwhile, a new wrinkle has developed.

The project has received a \$3 million earmark in the House version of a federal transportation bill. U.S. Rep. Corrine Brown, D-Jacksonville, announced that she had helped secure the earmark, which was originally requested last fall.

Alachua County and Gainesville city commissioners sent letters to Washington in an effort to obtain \$12.5 million to help build out all segments of a new east-west connector - and to build them as four-lane roads.

It's unclear just what strings are attached to the \$3 million in federal money should it be approved by the U.S. Senate in the summer.

Alachua County Public Works officials said they have not received any information on the potential road money.

"The road is approved to be two lanes, and the right of way we are acquiring is for a two-lane road and we are proceeding accordingly," said Rick Hedrick, Alachua County Public Works director.

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