



Walton County Democratic Party
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Ray Padgett, Chairman

Locally, many have complained that the FDOT is unresponsive to complaints and/or requests from local officials and often disregard the safety of the public in order to preserve its bureaucracy. Do you agree with this? Why or why not and if why, what solution would you propose?

On May 21, The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) sponsored the grand opening ceremony converting the 21.5 miles of U.S. 98 across south Walton County into a four-lane highway. According to Edward Prescott, FDOT Secretary – District Three, this project was completed under budget (total cost of \$80.4 million) and six years ahead of its planned construction schedule. Local politicians from Bay, Walton and Okaloosa Counties were on-hand to celebrate this major improvement in a section of highway that was known for years as “Bloody 98”.

While everyone agrees that the new “98” is a major and excellent improvement, not everyone agrees that the construction was planned and managed as well as it should have been or that the new road is as safe as it should be. Local motorists and tourists remember the unmarked lane merges and traffic backups that existed for months around the Mack Bayou and U.S. 98 intersection and businesses along U.S. 98 understand the negative impact of poorly constructed and inadequately marked temporary entrances to their business. According to newspaper reports, the Mack Bayou intersection traffic tie-up was only addressed after the St. Joe Company became involved. A lack of traffic lights and the increased speed limit remain major safety concerns for residents, workers and visitors that use our new four-lane highway.

Mr. Tommie Speights, FDOT Public Information Director – District Three, assures us that safety is the overriding concern of all FDOT plans and construction projects and FDOT management understands that adequate plan review and contractor management are essential to assuring motorists safety during construction. To help with this concern, public input from local citizens and officials is always solicited. However, many citizens believe that their input is not taken seriously or is ignored, that contractors drag out their schedules and are slow to respond to discrepancies in their contractual requirements. In fact, the number one citizen complaint is that “the contractor is not working continuously and consistently to get the project finished”. Also, many citizens still believe that FDOT only responds to safety issues after serious accidents occur.

FDOT oversees planning and construction of Florida's state and federal highways. While it interfaces with a myriad of citizens, community and environmental groups and local government officials, it's primary partner in the development of new roads is the Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) across the state. An MPO is established jointly for Walton and Okaloosa Counties. MPO members are appointed by the governor to represent local community interest; to plan and obtain funding for long-term highway construction needs. They are our key lobbyists for new construction funds with our federal and state governments.

Once construction is complete, FDOT and local county officials share many of the costs and responsibilities for our state roads. According to Mr. Speights the state installs all traffic lights and signs and the county maintains those signs. This causes further citizen frustration regarding an already confusing assignment of government responsibility.

The Walton County Democratic Party understands the complexity of major highway construction projects and the intense competition for federal and state construction funds. FDOT must deal with environmental and citizen groups, local government officials, MPOs, Department of Environmental Protection, and the Army Corp of Engineers as well as the engineering and construction companies needed to do the work. However, we believe response to critical safety issues was inadequate in the initial decision to four-lane U.S. 98 and in the response to traffic problems around the Mack Bayou intersection during construction. Yet, we **do not believe** these issues were related to "preservation of FDOT bureaucracy" or that they were a deliberate disregard for public safety.

Some intersections still need traffic lights and the speed limit around these intersections should be reduced. Traffic through the Highway 395 and U.S. 98 intersection is a good example of the need for a traffic light and reduced speeds. A steady stream of traffic made up of construction workers, delivery trucks, tourist and school children turn at this intersection and to make matters worse the speed limit has been increased to 65 miles per hour. We were told that the reason for the speed limit and no traffic light was that this section of U.S. 98 is "rural". It is our understanding that our county commissioners can request a reduction in speed limits. We recommend they formally request a reduction in the speed limit and the installation of a traffic light at this intersection.

We believe it is better if not absolutely necessary to get as many citizens, groups and businesses as possible involved when soliciting highway improvements from FDOT. Solicit help from our county commissioners, MPO members, and citizen groups. We recommend that businesses get involved, especially the St. Joe Company. They appear to have a successful record of dealing with the governor's office.