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## I-4 expansion includes moving threatened plants, animals

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While Interstate 4 commuters look forward to a wider, safer highway between DeLand and Daytona Beach, the Florida Department of Transportation, its consultants and volunteers work to lessen the project's impact on plants and wildlife.



Tom Roberts

The Florida Department of Transportation, working with volunteers, moves a patch of endangered pawpaws in the path of the Interstate 4 widening project.

They have transplanted threatened and endangered native flowers to other locations.

Gopher tortoises were moved. Crews are keeping an eye out for rare indigo snakes. And, when the widening is complete, a series of underpasses will provide a safer way for the wildlife that remains to cross the road.

"We do the best we can," said the department's Steve Tonjes, an environmental scientist. The \$134 million, 12-mile widening project began in May and is scheduled to take 900 days.

Construction began with a series of stormwater retention ponds. Two species of plants were moved from the work site: the endangered Rugel's pawpaw and the threatened scarlet ladies' tresses, also known as leafy beaked ladies' tresses.

Such projects have great value because they "keep ecosystems healthy," said Lisa Roberts, executive director of the Florida Wildflower Foundation. Similar projects have taken place in other areas, she said, as "people are becoming more aware of how we need these plants."

The pawpaw, a federally listed species, is believed to grow only in Volusia County, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Using a backhoe and carefully removing the plants to avoid damage to taproots, a team moved the pawpaw plants from the I-4 roadside near the former rest area and transplanted them to a new pawpaw patch at the Lake Monroe Conservation Area in Osteen.

A shade cloth canopy was built over the plants to try to avoid the need for watering, and the rainy summer "helped tremendously" in getting the plants established, said Tom Roberts with E Sciences, a consultant to the department.

They worked with native plant expert Dr. Eliane Norman, who led the first local project years ago to move a patch of pawpaws from along State Road 44, Roberts said. Those plants also were moved to Lake Monroe, where they continue to thrive.

The Volusia County Orchid Society worked with the department to move the ladies' tresses, a native orchid species.

Society member Jennifer Reinoso has a long relationship with the department, since first winning its permission to flag an orchid path on U.S. 92 between DeLand and Daytona Beach in 2004. She flags the patch each spring so mowing crews work



around the plants, to allow the flowers to bloom and spread seeds. The flags are removed once the blooming season ends.

Reinoso said she knew she would have to move orchids as soon as she learned the highway would be widened. A group of volunteers, including off-duty staff with the department, gathered on the shoulder of the eastbound lanes on an "extremely hot" day in June to move the first batch. Reinoso, who works in sales support for a promotional company in Daytona Beach, calls the department's willingness to work with her "a godsend."

Also moved from the path of construction were six gopher tortoises, which were relocated to a state-permitted mitigation site.

Because the consultants found 28 tortoise burrows, the department also was required to take special precautions for any indigo snakes that might be sharing the burrows, Tonjes said.

Brochures were distributed, contractors were briefed, and construction crews are keeping an eye out for the snakes, he said.

The department's cost for the gopher tortoise and plant surveys and relocations, including permitting and moving the tortoises, was about \$90,000, state officials said. The cost of the planned wildlife underpasses and fencing are included in the overall cost projections for the entire project.

The underpasses are planned because the highway bisects the Volusia-Flagler Conservation Corridor and a larger planned corridor of undeveloped land between the Everglades and the Okefenokee Swamp along the Florida-Georgia line. Included are three large underpasses, 100 feet wide by 10 feet tall, to allow large mammals such as black bear and panther to move freely and undisturbed under the busy highway.

The underpasses will be constructed in areas where publicly owned land — Tiger Bay State Forest and the Port Orange city wellfield — border both sides of the highway, said Beata Stys-Palasz, a department engineer.

The project also includes special wildlife fencing and a series of pipes under the road about every mile or so to allow smaller animals to move from one side of the highway to the other, said Stys-Palasz. The fencing will be buried about a foot deep into the soil to prevent animals from burrowing under.

And finally, she said, the redesigned bridge over the Tomoka River will include a shelf for animals to move along over the river when water levels are high.

## **WILDFLOWERS**

Scarlet ladies' tresses: Large terrestrial orchid. Flowers, usually coral-red, emerge in early spring on spikes up to 2 feet tall.

Rugel's pawpaw: Thought to be found only in Volusia County, the pawpaw is a low shrub that bears yellow flowers and yellow-green berries. It depends on mowing or fire to help it bloom and resprout.

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