

Planning under way for northern outer beltway

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NORTHEAST FLORIDA — Planning has begun for a northern extension of the First Coast Outer Beltway, which would complete the toll road around Jacksonville.

The proposed Northern Beltway will loop north of Interstate 10 and Jacksonville International Airport to continue on into Nassau County and connect with Interstate 95, said Scott Clem, the director of strategic planning for the Jacksonville Transportation Authority. The southern end will also tie into the First Coast Outer Beltway, which will go south from I-10, through Clay County and across the St. Johns River to I-95.

The JTA and North Florida Transportation Planning Organization are launching a study group this summer to look at the traffic projections for the Northern Beltway Project, Clem said. They also want to examine the best place for the northern toll road to connect with the Outer Beltway.

Nassau County officials are looking forward to the construction of the Northern Beltway because of the numerous benefits having a limited access toll road could bring to the area, said Steve Rieck, executive director of the Nassau County Economic Development Board.

The Northern Beltway could generate more economic development in the area by allowing greater access to the infrastructures at Cecil Field, the Jacksonville Port Authority, the Port of Fernandina and on the rail lines, he said. "It will create jobs in Nassau County. That's the most important thing."

Although the plans are just now beginning to flourish, the idea of a Northern Beltway has been in the making for two years, said Art Graham, chairman of the North Florida TPO.

Graham said these beltways are key for future economic development in Northeast Florida at the Northeast region strategic planning forum last week. Although getting

funding for the Outer Beltway has been a long-time project, he thinks the Northern Beltway will be pretty simple to produce.

"All the land is owned by one company, so it should be fairly easy," Graham said.

Rayonier Inc. owns a lot of property in Nassau County, said Mike Bell, a spokesman for Rayonier, and it expects the Northern Beltway to go through a large amount of its land. "We hold 130,000 acres in Nassau County."

The JTA and TPO are splitting the cost of the study group, said Jeff Sheffield, the planning director at the North Florida TPO, but they aren't funding the entire Northern Beltway project.

Clem said there is a possibility of government funding, but they will most likely use public-private partnerships. Like the Outer Beltway project, local companies will be able to contribute to the Northern Beltway and receive a return on investment from revenue brought in by the tolls.