

Residents: Raise Sunrise bridge height for safer access

BY BETH FEINSTEIN-BARTL
Waterfront News Writer

FORT LAUDERDALE — Go higher.

That's the near unanimous response from the 101 written comments submitted at a recent public meeting, held by Florida Department of Transportation officials, on replacing the Sunrise Boulevard Bridge over Fort Lauderdale's Middle River.

The majority of the 100 or so people in attendance at the gathering, held in early April, expressed support that the new bridge's vertical clearance exceed the existing structure's 6 feet to allow for easier and safer boating access.

Some residents from the surrounding neighborhoods want the design patterned after the 12-foot clearance at the North Federal Highway Bridge, also on the Middle River.

Due to its age, the present stationary bridge at Sunrise Boulevard is slated to be replaced in 2013. Funding, for now, only covers a new structure with the same 6-foot clearance, said Tom Turberville, FDOT designer.

The agency is researching options to determine whether additional height can be provided. Meanwhile, officials are moving ahead with the design phase, due to begin this summer and run through August, 2012, Turberville said.

One design that's unlikely is a drawbridge. Although

several proponents at the recent meeting were pushing the idea, the cost for construction, operation and maintenance are far above the project's estimated budget of \$7.7 million, said Ray Holzweiss, FDOT environmental section project manager.

Amy Jones Hamilton, president of the Lauderdale Isles Civic Association, said she understands a drawbridge is unrealistic. But higher clearance is possible, she said.

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"The bridge needs to be raised for the sake of public safety," said Hamilton whose neighborhood of waterfront homes sits on the Middle River, just north of Sunrise Boulevard.

When Hurricane Wilma blew through South Florida in October, 2005, several homeowners couldn't evacuate their large vessels, she said.

"They were trapped because of the high tide and the bridge's low clearance," Hamilton said. "It was a dangerous situation."

John Fiore, a board member with the Wilton Manors East Neighborhood Association, said there's a good chance local legislators will find extra money to boost the structure's height. Building a new bridge and not increas-

ing the clearance is unacceptable, he said.

"When the North Federal Highway Bridge was reconstructed over the Middle River, we were told the Sunrise Boulevard Bridge would be rebuilt to match the height," said Fiore, an associate planner with the Broward Parks and Recreation Division and staff liaison to the Broward County Marine Advisory Committee.

The new bridge will have a direct affect on the 302 residences in the Wilton Manors East Neighborhood Association. A larger structure will allow for bigger boats to be docked behind homes, making properties more desirable and valuable, Fiore said.

It will allow for smoother sailing too. "My 17-foot Whaler fits underneath," he said. "But I do know people who have to wait for low tide to get under the bridge."

The public will get another opportunity to voice their opinions and receive an update from transportation officials at a meeting tentatively scheduled for October, Turberville said.

Agency officials were pleased with the turnout and feedback at the gathering in April. "It was very positive," Holzweiss said.

But available funding for the new bridge design must be taken into consideration. Raising the bridge too high might require purchasing adjoining properties, he said.

"We're trying to be responsive."

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