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New South Hall parkway finally opens

Four-lane road traces to 1972, gained steam decades later



Cars pass through the intersection of Thurmon Tanner Parkway and Plainview Road Friday afternoon in Oakwood.

Hall County finally has its Satellite Boulevard.

With the completion of the final segment of Thurmon Tanner Parkway Thursday, motorists now can travel parallel to Interstate 985 between Phil Niekro Boulevard in Flowery Branch and Atlanta Highway near I-985's Exit 17 in Oakwood.

It's a drive similar to the one on its more developed and longer Gwinnett County counterpart, Satellite Boulevard, which runs next to Interstate 85 and ends at Ga. 20 in Buford.

"We saw it as an economic stimulus opportunity," said Lula City Manager Dennis Bergin, who led Flowery Branch's government around the project's inception more than a decade ago.

"It was easy for us to look at the Satellite Boulevards of the world and say you could see the real benefit long term. Who would have known it would have taken as long it has to get (the road) built?"

The road project traces back to 1972, when the Gainesville-based Georgia Mountains Regional Commission, as it is now known, did some mapping work on it, Bergin said.

Less than 30 years later, the project caught interest again as a joint effort between Hall County, Flowery Branch, Oakwood and the Georgia Department of Transportation.

Flowery Branch was responsible for the segment running between Phil Niekro and the southern tip of Atlanta Highway. Hall County oversaw the road's construction between Atlanta Highway and Plainview Road.

The DOT added its segment between the northern tip of Atlanta Highway and Mundy Mill Road, as part of its \$74.6 million reconstruction of I-985 at Exit 16 and addition of Exit 17.

Oakwood opened the fourth and final four-lane leg between Plainview and Mundy Mill roads last week.

The Oakwood and DOT links featured federal funding "that created a lot of challenges" for the overall project, City Manager Stan Brown said.

"It just takes more time to go through that environmental process ... and it's more costly," he said.

Plus, the project took 10 months longer to complete than initially planned.

Some issues arose late last year over paving and traffic light installation, bumping the completion date along.

Millions went into the overall project — including \$9.1 million for the final 1.32-mile segment — with Oakwood incurring a large debt of its own.

"We will be paying for that project for years to come," Brown said. "Our hope is ... this (new road) opens up a lot of land development opportunities.

"Not only does it help the traffic flow for our area, it really completes a major transportation infrastructure system. We think we're in real good shape for the near term, transportationwise. We're hoping that will encourage development as (the economy) turns around."

The parkway, which followed the basic route of the old Thurmon Tanner Road, mostly passes by industrial sites and large tracts of land, including a vast, potentially commercial area near Phil Niekro.

Road planners see one crossing, the two-lane H.F. Reed Industrial Parkway, as making up part of the future Exit 14 off I-985, connecting to Martin Road on the east side of the interstate.

Earlier this month, Oakwood officials announced that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs had selected Tanners Creek Business Park off Thurmon Tanner Parkway for the site of a new veterans clinic.

Construction of the 24,500-square-foot medical office building is set to begin in early 2012 and is expected to be completed within 18 months, replacing the overcrowded clinic now on Mundy Mill Road across from Gainesville State College.

Without the parkway's completion, "I don't think the VA would have selected that site," Brown said.

Bergin said he believes the vision that was cast for Thurmon Tanner — as an economic catalyst for Hall County — will be realized.

"The truth will be in the pudding, but I think the project was well worth the effort," he said.

Longtime Oakwood Councilman Montie Robinson, who moved to the area in 1967 from Dalton with the parkway's namesake, already is impressed with the new road.

He took his first official spin on the road Thursday, heading toward Sam's Club off Mundy Mill.

"There were cars just whizzing along already, just flying" he said, with a chuckle.