

Poinciana Parkway to open Saturday

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The remaining days of April will be extremely busy for Atlee Mercer.

The former county commissioner and chairman of the Osceola County Expressway Authority (OCX) is waiting for Saturday's official opening of the northern end of Poinciana Parkway, the first leg in the tolled beltway around the southern end of its urban area.

Drivers will be able to go north from Marigold Avenue to U.S. Highway 17-92 beginning at noon, but runners of a 5k race as part of an opening festival will cut the ribbon on the road beginning at 7:30 a.m.

The county and OCX spent \$70 million to build the road, but cars won't be part of the grand opening. For the 5k race, parking will be at Deerwood Elementary (and then Koa Elementary as overflow). Shuttle vans provided by Osceola County Council on Aging will take runners to the race, as there is no parking at the start/finish line due to space constraints.



The runners won't pay the \$1.75 toll, but neither will drivers for the entire month of May. Those driving the Parkway, even in May, will need a transponder to use it. They can go to www.cfxway.com to get a free one. Free transponder stickers will also be available at the opening 5K and festival.

That opening – coming on time and on budget – represents a long race that ends with the grand opening celebration for Mercer.

"We have three groups working in harmony," he said. "CFX has exceeded expectations as a partner. The team managing the production of the opening event has been doing a phenomenal job. And (Osceola County Manager) Don Fisher made this happen with his insane belief we'd accomplish this mission. It helped that he loaned us \$15 million.

"Without all that, we'd be saying it would be July, August, September or later. It's been a community effort to get our beltway started with the road we needed the most. It will really make life better for a lot of people."

Mercer lauded Kissimmee firm Jr. Davis Construction for its work building OCX's first road.

"We couldn't be happier with who we picked to build our road," he said. "I recently drove the bridge at 70 miles per hour – the speed limit signs weren't up yet – and I had a cup of coffee in the middle console. It didn't even ripple."

Tony Iorio of AV Homes, Poinciana's dominant developer, said the road meets "all the checkmarks for the community."

“We have 3,000 acres focused for development, a mixed use of residential and commercial, so it’s good for economic development, as well as connectivity and education,” he said, also noting he’s been part of a the process to build this road since 1990.

“We thought it would never get built once the housing downturn started,” Iorio said. “It’s a true success of a public-private partnership that brought in two counties and a developer.”
The southern portion of the road, from Marigold south to Cypress Parkway, should open sometime this fall.

Under the terms of an agreement with CFX, the regional authority will take over toll collections, operations and management of Poinciana Parkway. CFX can refinance the bond debt to build the \$70 million road, since there is the capability to widen the road to six lanes – land has already been cleared next to the Reedy Creek Bridge for expansion.