



Road Projects Run Into Gridlock

By **ANTHONY McCARTNEY** The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - Plans to relieve congestion on some of Hillsborough County's busiest roads are stuck in a bureaucratic traffic jam.

The bottleneck has proven to be buying the land - voluntarily or forcibly - from property owners along popular thoroughfares such as Race Track Road and Gunn Highway.

County commissioners last year approved \$460 million in new road projects, creating dozens of new transactions and sometimes lawsuits for county workers to handle.

In addition, the county has another half-billion dollars in projects being contemplated by a task force studying transportation needs.

Wednesday, commissioners are expected to approve hiring two new employees for the county's real estate office and two for the legal department.

The hires will cost about \$186,000 this year, and \$348,000 annually after that, Management and Budget Director Eric Johnson said.

An additional \$165,000 will be spent on a consultant to review the county's road-building process and find ways to streamline it.

The increased workload for the county's attorneys and real estate agents is related directly to growth, Real Estate Director Mike Kelly said.

Kelly's department handles all land purchases and has about 15 people dedicated to transportation projects.

In the best cases, property owners agree to sell to the county voluntarily. If not, the county begins the lengthy process of taking the land through eminent domain.

County attorneys now are involved in more than 170 eminent-domain cases, which can range from wrangling over the offered price to disputes with other governments pursuing county land.

The most involved cases occur when the county seeks to force a property owner to sell, said Dean DiRose, a county attorney who handles eminent-domain cases.

Some of the county's lawsuits to secure land for the widening of Race Track Road and Gunn Highway date back to 2005.

County commissioners must approve a resolution before a lawsuit can be filed. Then it can be months, even years, before a case is resolved.

DiRose, who has worked eminent-domain cases for the county since 2000, said plans to widen Race Track Road started a noticeable increase in the number of cases his office handles.

Some of those cases are complicated because business owners must be compensated for lost profits.

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