

DOT REVIEWING POSSIBILITY OF MOVING COASTAL HIGHWAYS

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Florida's coastal roads offer a clear view of the state's palm-studded shore, but they also are weak front lines of defense against hurricane winds and tides.

Searching for ways to protect the roads from damage and the state from frequent rebuilding costs, transportation officials are studying a plan to move miles of Florida coastal roads inland.

Sections of US Hwy 98 along the Gulf Coast and A1A in Palm Beach County are among nearly 20 roadways around the state under review, said Tom Drawdy, secretary of the Department of Transportation.

He said a report of the study, which began before Hurricane Elena, should be completed in the next several weeks.

However, shortly after Hurricane Kate struck the Panhandle, transportation officials said they weren't inclined to move US Hwy 98 inland.

The report will consider the cost of moving the roads vs the cost of repairing the highways every time a storm undermines them, the cost of acquiring new rights of way and whether the county or state will take care of the old roads.

"I guess one of the first pluses is that it would fit in better with Florida's new growth-management legislation to move some of those coastal routes away from the shoreline," Drawdy said in an interview last week.

The 17 or 18 locations under study are "where we have experienced repeated and considerable damage, not just (from) hurricanes, but from severe storm tides as well," he said.

In addition, sections of US Hwy 1 in the Florida Keys and the Courtney Campbell Causeway in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties also are under consideration for relocation.

Most cost estimates were unavailable, but the price for moving 13 miles of US Hwy 98 in Franklin County between Carrabelle and Eastpoint could run near \$8 million, said Ken Klein, spokesman for DOT.

That stretch of road, which in some places sits only feet from the surf, was hard hit during Elena. It was torn up at 21 different locations and suffered several million dollars in damage, according to Lee Rivers, acting director of civil defense for the county.

And almost as soon as repair crews patched up the road, Kate undid the repairs and caused more damage. As late as Thanksgiving Day, sections of pavement as wide as the road itself remained slumped down in the surf.

In total, it will cost an estimated 42 million to rebuild US Hwy 98, plus another \$50,000 to repair damage the storm inflicted on the St George Island Causeway, transportation officials said recently.

Payroll alone for the Elena repairs nearly depleted the transportation department's \$1 million emergency fund.

Drawdy said the study began before Hurricane Elena, but that damaging Labor Day weekend storm focused attention on the idea.

"We started it after the unusual spring tides had done some damage to the A1A Route in Palm Beach County," he said. "We had not reached very far in its development until Hurricane Elena. At that point, Governor Graham became interested."

Other options under study instead of moving the roads include, continuous beach re-nourishment or armoring the coast with sea walls and rock revetments, he said.

If the state goes ahead with relocation, Drawdy said he would expect some opposition from residents living on the coast.

"I think some will object, that's assuming that's the alternative we choose," he said. "Undoubtedly in some locations, you're going to have to relocate."