

Poinciana poised for big change, finally



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Good news in Poinciana.

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Poinciana is a poster child for the dangers that come with unchecked Florida sprawl.

The 23,000-home development began among swampland in southern **Osceola County** in the early 1970s.

Only now are its more than 50,000 residents starting to get the roads, schools and parks they need.

One day when 2016 is in the history books, this year could prove to be the tinder that ignites a full-blown renaissance for Poinciana.

At the end of this month, a new toll-road called the Poinciana Parkway will open with a bridge over Reedy Creek that connects U.S. Highway 17-92 to Cypress Parkway.

The highway has the potential to cut commute times for residents who work at Walt Disney World or International Drive by at least 15 minutes in each direction. Right now two roads, one with two lanes and the other with four, serve as the only routes in and out of the community.

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This summer construction is set to begin on a new Valencia College campus near the heart of Poinciana, which will dramatically decrease the time it takes for students to get to class. Right now Poinciana students spend nearly two and a half hours on a bus or 45 minutes by car traveling to the closest college — Valencia's Osceola campus in **Kissimmee**.

And work is slated for this fall on the southern leg of SunRail, which will run from Sand Lake Road in Orange County through Kissimmee and end in Poinciana.

Together, the three projects will go a long way toward ending Poinciana's isolation from major transportation and education.

"It's really been an effort after the fact to bring in the infrastructure that other communities take for granted," said state Sen. Darren Soto, who represents the area. "We've had to fight for a post office, for a hospital and for roads."

A full-size post office didn't open in the community until about seven years ago. A hospital arrived in 2013. The first public swimming pool, which residents must pay to use, opened just six months ago.

The "biggest game-changer" will be the new \$27 million Valencia campus because it will make college possible for more high school grads, says Keith Laytham, a resident who has advocated for many of the changes.

Jackie Grimm, co-director of New Dimensions High School, says the new campus will mean more of her students can take dual enrollment classes and begin earning their degrees.

"Definitely, it's a big deal," she said.

The distance caused one of her students to drop out of the dual enrollment program recently because an accident left her

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totaled and she no longer had transportation to the Kissimmee campus.

That story isn't unusual.

Osceola County has one of the lowest rates of students attending college after high school — ranked 57th out of Florida's 67 counties.

"We identified that the high schools with the lowest college-going rates are in Poinciana," said Kathleen Plinske, president of Valencia's Osceola and Lake Nona campuses. "Our hypothesis is that this has everything to do with lack of access to higher education ... If you have to work or if you're taking care of your family it's really difficult to spend five hours on a commute."

The new campus, which could open as early as the fall of 2017, will be just minutes from many Poinciana neighborhoods.

As welcome as these changes are, the needs in the community still rival the size of some of the prize bass caught in Lake Toho — huge.

Poinciana, which straddles Osceola and Polk counties, isn't a city. The community is still run by a giant homeowners association.

A group of homeowners is attempting to challenge the way the association runs its elections and the influence wielded by the community's developer, Avatar Holdings.

Legislators have shut down multiple attempts to let residents vote on whether Poinciana should become an official city.

But people in the community are accustomed to long waits.

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After all, the Poinciana Parkway, which will officially open on April 30, has been more than three decades in the making.

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