

## Bruce B. Downs Construction: Progressive Inconvenience

By Rory Crump September 3, 2011

**New Tampa exploded during the real-estate boom, and payback is 1,000 days of road construction.**

Dreams of a rush-hour Starbucks latte drift away into the rock pile sleeping next to Bruce B. Downs Boulevard. The light at Highwoods Preserve Parkway is backed up to Interstate 75, and the weeknight clock is ticking.

Road construction is a way of life for New Tampa residents waiting on the 3.5-mile stretch — Segments B and C — from Palm Springs Boulevard to Pebble Creek Drive to be completed. Both commuters and businesses along Bruce B. Downs have suffered.

The project, in the works since 2001, will take Bruce B. Downs from four to eight lanes of divided traffic. Landscaped medians, a five-foot sidewalk on the west side of the road, a 10-foot asphalt path on the east side of the road, and designated bus bays accent the plan.

### **A Bit Behind Schedule**

And despite a wet summer and utility delays, the project is only slightly behind schedule and current projections point to a late 2012 or early 2013 completion for segments B and C only.

KCI Technologies, headquartered in Sparks, MD, is heading the project in conjunction with Hillsborough County. The county assigned an individual project code for Segments B and C only, and more area road construction is planned. But the forecasted \$40 million, 1,000-day adventure for B and C — although complex — is not the chaos it may seem.

“Road construction is like doing heart surgery when a patient is running a marathon,” said Scott Passmore, KCI’s resident engineer.

Whether visible or not, school, hurricanes and even swampy conditions have been met head on.

The first day of school was on KCI's agenda. With more cars and buses filling up Bruce B. Downs during the day, construction crews work deep into the night. Try getting around Bruce B. Downs after midnight — you may be sorry you did.

"It's such a major project. We try to do a lot of the work at night and as much as we can to maintain side streets," Passmore said. "We try and minimize the impact."

With hurricane season in full swing, last weekend's Irene and the heating tropics have posed a dangerous threat to the construction area. Just like the hurricane spaghetti models, KCI casts a wide net of possibilities for storm tracks. Disaster plans quickly take priority.

"We pick the barrels up so those don't become projectiles and keep the debris to a minimum," Passmore said. "If we know it's coming four days out, we stop what we are doing. We do have those plans in place."

And KCI has learned to work around the wet weather and soupy landscape native to Tampa.

"The area here is swampy; the weather does cause them to lose productivity," said Passmore. "And New Tampa is swampier than a lot of places."

Both abundant labor and inexpensive materials have knocked \$3 million from the original price tag, reducing the project to approximately \$37 million — a benefit of Florida's tough economy.

### **Commercial Tenants Feel the Pain**

But don't sell local businesses on the merits of progress or the project's master plan. Convenient stops along Bruce B. Downs have become inconvenient, and attracting new customers is a challenge.

"It's killing our delivery business," said Chris Sohrabi, general manager of Jimmy John's Gourmet Sandwiches at 17521 Preserve Walk Ln. "If we don't meet our delivery-time criteria, our business service area gets smaller and smaller."

And retail consumers are driving out of their way for services they would normally find in New Tampa.

"When construction first started, we had customers going to another location in Wesley Chapel," said Holly Gregory, spa director of [Planet Beach](#), located behind Jimmy John's and

victimized by the same congestion at Highwoods Preserve and Bruce B. Downs.

Turn lanes have tested drivers throughout Segments B and C since the project broke ground. But according to KCI, the cramped turn lanes and delays are concessions made in order to meet the project's timeline — something has to give.

Ramping up the turn lanes during construction would involve more phases and stretch the project timeline.

"We are always analyzing the plans. We can't eliminate it completely, but we try to minimize it," said Passmore.

### **Less Inconvenience On Horizon**

Drivers will begin to feel progress in the near future. Most of the underground construction is complete, and parts of B and C will soon get some relief from congestion.

"We are about to switch our southbound traffic between Pebble Creek Drive to Hunters Green Drive," Passmore said. "The ride will be much better, on permanent pavement."

Segment by segment, you may no longer have to leave Starbucks in your rearview mirror.