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## I-75 culverts a no-go without new study, Lee says

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Running controversial culverts under Interstate 75 in Estero won't happen without an updated study, based on conditions negotiated between Lee County and South Florida Water Management District.

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The Lee County Commission approved the conditions Tuesday by a 4-0 vote, with Commissioner Brian Bigelow absent. What remains is for the nine-member water district board to approve, deny or alter the language at its meeting Thursday.

"This was a mutually agreed-upon language and we expect it won't have any problems getting approved," said Phil Flood, lower west coast director for the district.

Intense negotiations between the county and the district ended early Tuesday. The outcome was the commission agreeing to partner with the district to replace a 1999 study opponents argued is outdated.

Water district officials in Lee County want the Florida Department of Transportation to dig the culverts under I-75 as part of a permit for the next phase of the \$430 million interstate widening project, a stretch from the Lee/Collier boundary to Corkscrew Road.

The agreement keeps the county from challenging the permit in court.

The culverts, estimated to cost \$2 million to \$3 million, are proposed next to a 4,000-acre property. About 90 percent of the property is wetlands used for drinking water supply, water cleansing and wildlife habitat.

Culverts would take only excess water and floodwater from the wetlands to Halfway Creek and the Estero River, to prevent a repeat of Bonita Springs floods in 1995, according to the district.

The water would run through The Brooks, the four gated communities across the interstate from the wetlands, and residents there are concerned about flooding.

"It is a win. I think it is going in the right direction," said Nick Batos, a Brooks resident planning a bus trip for other residents to attend Thursday's meeting across

the state.

The water district and county will share the cost of a study to determine whether the culverts are needed, and if so, how many and how large. The study could cost "hundreds of thousands of dollars," said Natural Resources Director Roland Ottolini.

The county and district will use information from an in-depth Density Reduction /Groundwater Resource area study ongoing. The environmentally sensitive DRGR area encompasses much of southeast Lee County.

The district and county set a 15-month timeline to complete the study and make a decision. Under that time restraint, construction on I-75 will not be halted, Flood said.

Commissioner Ray Judah will represent the commission at Thursday's meeting.

"I am pleased," Judah said, "with how the community rallied to demonstrate the importance to the agency as to the need to protect critical water supply east of the interstate."

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