

# The Bridge Project Will Fail in Orange Beach

800 words

Rauf Bolden, Orange Beach

January 6, 2019

## The Bridge Project Will Fail in Orange Beach

ALDOT (Alabama Department of Transportation) Director John Cooper ([cooperjr@dot.state.al.us](mailto:cooperjr@dot.state.al.us)) went on the record with John Sharp of [al.com](http://al.com) (<https://www.al.com/news/2018/12/dangerous-situation-at-alabamas-beach-behind-aldot-directors-support-for-bridge.html>). Cooper said, "People just hesitate to pay that toll," justifying his decision to approve spending \$60-65 million on a taxpayer funded Flyover Bridge that will be toll free (End The #Bridge2Nowhere - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/155706324781200/>). Construction is slated to start as soon as the permit is approved by the Army Corps of Engineers.

National Marine Fisheries Service, a division of NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) wrote a letter dated May 10, 2018 to the Corps of Engineers, authored by Virginia Fay ([virginia.fay@noaa.gov](mailto:virginia.fay@noaa.gov)), Southeast Assistant Regional Administrator with the Habitat Conservation Division, "Alternative alignments to avoid wetlands and utilize existing roads should be further explored." Fay wrote, "There are two bridge crossings within three miles of the project site and expansion of these existing structures should be explored." NOAA has legitimate wetlands and fisheries concerns for blocking bridge construction in Orange Beach, according to a report in [al.com](http://al.com) (<https://www.al.com/news/2018/12/dangerous-situation-at-alabamas-beach-behind-aldot-directors-support-for-bridge.html>).

The idea of the Flyover Bridge germinated and grew from complaints about traffic congestion on Canal Road during the tourist season. Basically ALDOT Director Cooper says the congestion is caused by traffic moving toward the Holmes Bridge on Hwy 59, avoiding the Foley Beach Express because of "toll avoidance", according to a report in [al.com](http://al.com) (<https://www.al.com/news/2018/12/dangerous-situation-at-alabamas-beach-behind-aldot-directors-support-for-bridge.html>).

Assuming Director Cooper's instincts are correct, and "toll avoidance" (<https://www.al.com/news/2018/12/dangerous-situation-at-alabamas-beach-behind-aldot-directors-support-for-bridge.html>) is the problem, lets look for a solution.

I suggest marketing toll passes to vacation rental agencies, combining the benefit of pre-paid tolls, bundled with renting from a premier company like Brett-Robinson. When a reservation is confirmed, the customers are emailed bridge passes for their vacation rental, or the passes are downloaded from the toll-bridge app onto their phones, or the passes are validated by license plate recognition when the customer's vehicle passes through the toll booth. Either method increases bridge capacity, and customer satisfaction.

## The Bridge Project Will Fail in Orange Beach

Bundling has several key issues, primarily legal agreements between The Foley Beach Express (American Roads) and the vacation rental companies. Finding an innovative way to increase traffic across the Foley Beach Express Bridge, and minimize “toll avoidance” requires trust from both parties.

Creating an alternative like bundling to minimize “toll avoidance” satisfies Director Cooper’s explanation, pushing more traffic to the Foley Beach Express while minimizing the need for a third bridge on the island, but there is still a lot of work to do before summer.

Some residents like Joe Emerson (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/155706324781200/>) do not support the State of Alabama spending \$60-\$65 million on a Flyover Bridge in Orange Beach, arguing the bridge is not needed. He holds the state should prioritize these funds for other projects where the need is fully documented.

Director Cooper cites statistics (<https://www.al.com/news/2018/12/dangerous-situation-at-alabamas-beach-behind-aldot-directors-support-for-bridge.html>), but his assertions are not tied to any formal traffic studies ALDOT has released to the public, supporting the concept of a third bridge.

According to a report by John Mullen on the OBA Website, residents and elected officials in Orange Beach and Gulf Shores are in favor of a Flyover Bridge (<https://www.obawebsite.com/oba-news/2018/orange-beach-officials-residents-back-bridge-project>), but no Referendum is planned, verifying constituent opinions.

This rendering is looking south, going over the bridge, exiting onto Canal Road.



Image courtesy of ALDOT

Cheering for the bridge, and getting approval from the Corps of Engineers are two different things. The Corps must listen to multiple sides of the story, weighing special interests’ voices, politicians’ desires, environmental concerns, traffic studies, and residents’

## The Bridge Project Will Fail in Orange Beach

blowback. Once ALDOT Director Cooper's reasoning about "toll avoidance" is fully explained, bundling the toll pass with vacation rentals becomes a viable alternative to new construction.

The Flyover Bridge project is presently on hold, waiting for the Corps of Engineers. It must be argued, spending \$60-\$65 million for a third bridge on an island that is eight miles long produces one of those neck-snapping moments of cognitive reality. A common sense solution like bundling toll passes with vacation rentals, eliminating "toll avoidance" makes sense, defeating the dark arts of bridge politics.

ENDS.

Rauf Bolden is retired IT Director at the City of Orange Beach, working as an IT & Web Consultant on the Beach Road. He can be reached by email: [publisher@velvetillusion.com](mailto:publisher@velvetillusion.com).