

Big Seven straddles pipeline, eases passage through Keys

BRIDGE / From 1A

bridge, made speeches praising the project. They dedicated the new mainland-to-Keys water pipeline too.

The bulk of the accolades went to Fascell, the Miami Democrat who represents the Keys. Fascell was credited with leading the fight for federal funding for both projects.

Fascell played down his role. "You people had to want it very much and be willing to pay the taxes to make it possible," he said.

Indeed, many inhabitants of the chain of islands wanted the bridge and the new pipeline badly. Driving the narrow old bridge, constructed 71 years ago as part of Henry Flagler's railroad to the sea, is so treacherous that many people never leave the Lower Keys because they fear the drive.

The new bridge has two 12-foot driving lanes and two six-foot safety lanes, making it about twice as wide as the old bridge.

"I've never been to Key West," said one lifelong Key Colony Beach resident. "I still don't know if I want to go, but now I'm not so afraid."

But runners, not drivers, got the first crack at the bridge at 7:30 a.m. Saturday. More than 1,200 runners started the 10-kilometer race that kicked off the dedication ceremonies.

Jim Kinney, 27, of Indian Rocks Beach, finished first in the race with a time of 33 minutes 16 seconds. That bested Barry Dusch, 31, of Fort Lauderdale by 38 seconds. The first woman to finish was Sharon Beal, 35, of Fort Lauderdale

'I've never been to Key West. I still don't know if I want to go, but now I'm not so afraid.'

Key Colony Beach resident

ment of Transportation officials say.

The technique involves drilling four-foot-wide holes into the ocean floor. Then a steel-reinforced cylinder is placed into the holes. Concrete is poured into the cylinder, creating the piers. The segments of the bridge — precast in Tampa and shipped to the Keys by barge — are hoisted by large cranes onto the

piers.

Seven miles of the Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority's \$63-million, 135-mile pipeline runs through the hollow segments of the bridge. The pipeline, double the size of the old line that was built in 1941 by the Navy, already is pumping precious water to island residents. Water company officials predict the new line will solve the Keys' chronic water problems.

But all the progress hailed at the ribbon cutting ceremonies Saturday didn't mean the old Seven Mile Bridge will be forgotten. Most residents praised the new bridge as "marvelous," but old-timers, those who remember riding across the old span by train, remain skeptical about all this modern technology.

