

Toll road reports will arrive soon

Residents in project's path express fear, anticipation

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TRENTON – Jim and Joann Thomas studied the maps and charts for the Suncoast Connector on display at the Gilchrist County Women’s Club, curious about the proposed 150-mile toll road that may one day run through their community.

It was one of the first in-person open houses put on by the Florida Department of Transportation since March, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced most government meetings to go online.

The retired couple attended a similar open house back in January, at the College of Central Florida’s campus in nearby Chiefland, just months after the Suncoast Connector Task Force began looking into the proposed highway.

“I’m just curious if they made any headway and I don’t see anything,” Jim Thomas said. “After this long a time, I thought there’d be a proposed route or a couple of options under consideration. I guess it takes a long time to plan a road.”

About 20 people milled about, examining charts and maps and talking to Florida Department of Transportation staff and the consultant team hired to help facilitate the meeting.

Some asked whether there was a “no-build” option, others asked what “co-location” means, while others were told local governments would retain control through their comprehensive plans, a kind of community blueprint for growth.

Local real estate agent Gary Coleman said he was reassured by what he heard. “I’m getting great information. I’ve been hearing a lot of rumors.”

Coleman said growth is inevitable and the roads could be a boon to the local economy.

“I like the idea that we have a good road system in place, and could have the choice to go through town or pay a toll to take a bypass,” Coleman said, especially if that toll revenue helped the town.

Jim Thomas said he was concerned about how much land the project will take up, especially if it’s going to eventually be three to four lanes in either direction and involve interchanges, grading and other features.

He and his wife just want to make sure it's done right: "I guess it's just a sign of the times; the population is growing and coming this way," he said. "We left Cape Coral in 2004 and it's following us right up the road."

On a fast-track

Normally, the Florida Department of Transportation would spend years analyzing the need for a new highway, conducting alternative route studies, determining the economic feasibility and analyzing potential environmental impacts. That's all before placing the roadway on its five-year work schedule and authorizing state money to build it.

But when the Legislature created the Multi-use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance (M-CORES) two years ago, it upended normal procedure for highway planning. It's one of the most ambitious infrastructure proposals in years and a signature legislation of outgoing Senate President Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton.

For this 330-mile project linking three toll roads from Southwest Florida to the Big Bend, the Legislature front-loaded the project with three simultaneously conducted year-long task force studies of three different corridors, spanning Collier County to Jefferson County.

The enacting legislation also commits hundreds of millions of dollars to the project and sets a construction start date of Dec. 31, 2022, with a completion date of 2030.

Each task force – the Suncoast Connector, the Northwest Turnpike Connector and the Southwest Connector – has more than 40 members, appointed by the FDOT secretary, from state agencies, local governments, regional and metropolitan planning boards, water management districts, environmental groups, business and economic development groups and the community.

Those task forces have each met about a dozen times in person and virtually since last August, as well as held several open houses in towns within each of the connector's study areas.

"Input from the M-CORES Task Forces is a critically important component of the legislation we passed in 2019, and I am grateful for their work" Galvano said in an emailed statement.

"Our state's infrastructure is at the core of government's responsibility regarding public safety," Galvano said. "The impacts of the coronavirus highlight the need for the wide-ranging infrastructure improvements contemplated in the M-CORES Program, now more than ever."

Asked for a comment from Gov. Ron DeSantis about the release of the final draft, the governor's office sent this response: "We appreciate the task force members' continued support and participation in the M-CORES pre-planning process. The Governor looks forward to reviewing the final report when it is provided to him."

Final reports due soon

Tuesday's open house in Trenton coincided with the release of the final drafts of those task force reports, and the beginning of the public comment period that ends Oct. 14. Those comments will be compiled and provided to each task force for discussion before making their final recommendations for each corridor.

Task force members will also have an opportunity to file amendments to the final report.

The reports are due to DeSantis, incoming Senate President Wilton Simpson, R-Trilby, and House Speaker Chris Sprowls, R-Tarpon Springs, by Nov. 15.

M-CORES is more than roads.

It has the stated purpose of improving infrastructure, revitalizing rural communities, encouraging job creation and providing greater regional connectivity using technology, enhancing quality of life and public safety and at the same time protecting the environment and natural resources.

Specific purposes include expanding broadband, relieving congestion in other areas and improving hurricane evacuation.

But independent reports from Florida TaxWatch and environmental groups conclude the toll roads would be financially unfeasible and cause great environmental damage.

A report by Cornell Consulting commissioned by the Sierra Club and the No Roads to Ruin Coalition also finds the plan impractical, and that some of the socioeconomic goals such as improving education, training a workforce and expanding broadband can be achieved without building new highways, and for far less.

The overwhelming majority of the public comments have questioned the need for new toll roads. Over the course of the past 13 months, FDOT has received more than 12,000 written comments. More than 2,200 were original, with another 10,000 form letters.

The most comments concerned environmental and land conservation issues, followed by quality of life, economic opportunity, corridor consideration and making sure it meets both financial and environmental feasibility standards. That's according to Will Watts, a chief FDOT engineer, who spoke with Suncoast task force members last month.

Charles Lee, director of advocacy for Audubon Florida said he'd like to see the report include a tally of how many people opposed or supported the toll road project. He also recommended that language go into the report that the most comments presented at task force meetings and in writing either supported the no-build option or avoiding impacts on communities, the environment, water quality, conservation areas and wildlife habitat.

But Citrus County Commissioner Scott Carnahan said he objected to the large volume of form letters.

“When you see the majority of these complaints or public comments generated from one source, and the majority are, I don’t think they should be considered,” Carnahan said.

“As a local official when we start getting those generated responses, I don’t pay much attention to them. If you can’t put your name on it and write it yourself, I don’t think it holds much value.”

Not enough time?

Several task force members, mostly representing environmental groups and regional planning boards, complained that two weeks is not enough time to digest and comment on the draft report. They’ve also consistently raised the alarm that the entire process is being fast-tracked and rammed down the throats of the general public.

“We had many challenge throughout the process, starting with an aggressive schedule and the perception that toll roads would be a foregone conclusion,” said Leon County Commissioner Kristin Dozier, who sits on the Suncoast task force as a member of the Capital Region Transportation Planning Agency.

The task force discussions were dominated by whether to build or not to build, and then coming up with guiding principles for new roads, Dozier said, when she thinks the time could have been better spent discussing the real needs of the region “and coming up with real solutions.”

The three task force draft reports each follow the same format and content, and are similarly worded throughout and come out to about 40 pages.

All three task forces state up front that they were “not able to fully address its charge of evaluating the need for and impacts of the Suncoast Corridor” because of the “early stage of planning for this corridor and the limited data and analysis on potential need and impacts available at this time”

The task forces also don’t recommend a no-build option, but ask FDOT to keep it on the table, which FDOT has agreed to do. The task forces were not created to give a final recommendation to build or not to build, officials said, but to reach a consensus on guiding principles, instructions and action plans that will guide the DOT’s next steps.

Instead, the task forces are delivering a list of high-level needs, recommendations, guiding principles and an action plan for each connector as FDOT goes forward.

The task forces also urge that any future parkways or toll roads be co-located with existing highways and rights of way, or run parallel to existing road systems through the area. They also recommend that any planning by FDOT include input from the local communities affected and conform with their comprehensive plans. Ken Armstrong, president and CEO of the Florida Trucking Association, and a Suncoast task force member, disagreed there was strong consensus for co-locating a new highway along U.S. 19/98.

“It seems to me there are several possibilities in play,” he said.

FDOT officials said that they must meet two statutory hurdles to go forward with any road project: Economic and environmental feasibility. If they don't meet those standards, they can't recommend approval or use state dollars on the project.

They also said they will seek input from local communities that could potentially be affected by any co-location with existing roadways.

Trenton real estate agent Coleman said he was reassured by what he heard. "I'm getting great information. I've been hearing a lot of rumors.

Coleman said growth is inevitable, and the roads could be a boon to the local economy.

"I like the idea that we have a good road system in place, and could have the choice to go through town or pay a toll to take a bypass," Coleman said, especially if that toll revenue helped the town.

In fact, any toll revenue would be used to pay off construction bond debt, but several independent studies demonstrated that the new roads won't generate enough traffic to pay for themselves.

"Speaking as a person who lives and pays taxes in Lamont, Florida, and from what I can tell, it is projected to be pretty much destroyed if this project goes through," said Tracie Seale, a resident of the small Jefferson County community established in 1848.

As Seale told the task force in September, "Our environment is pristine and that is why we chose to live here, and we feel we will lose that if the road goes through Lamont."

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