



An Overview

Updated May 9, 2020

The Multi-use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance Program, or M-CORES, was signed into law by Gov. Ron DeSantis on May 17, 2019. M-CORES authorizes the design and construction of three new tolled road corridors through rural Florida:

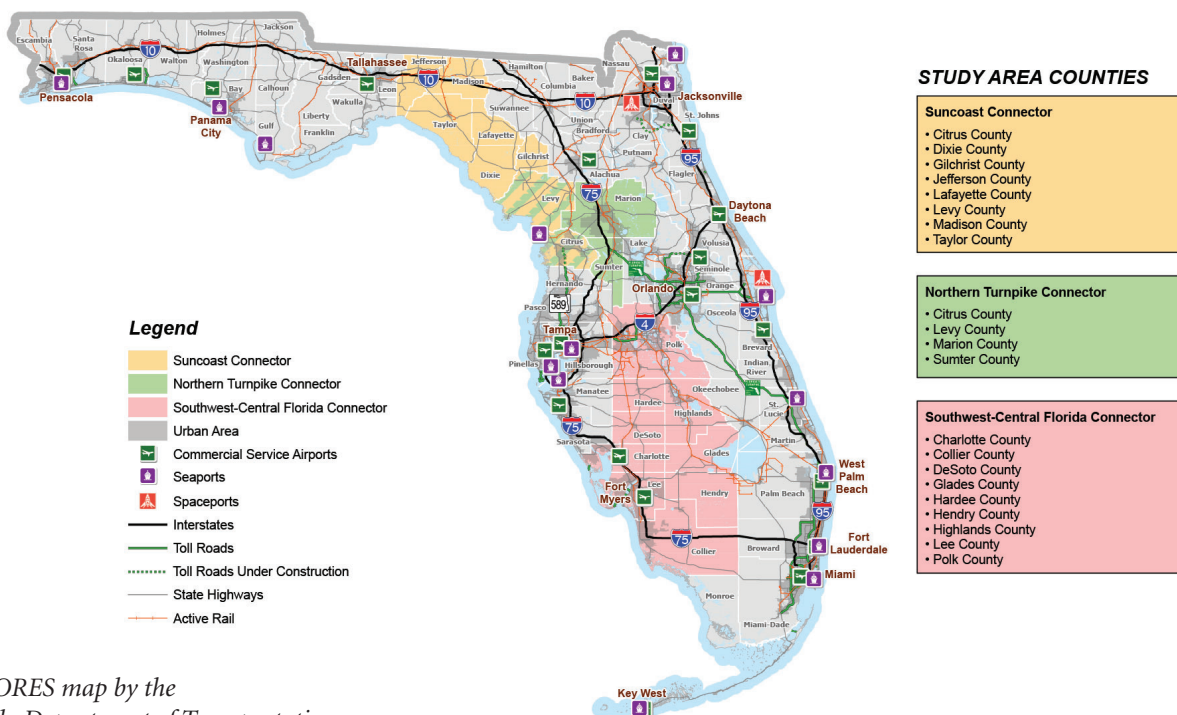
- Suncoast Connector extending from Jefferson County to Citrus County
- Northern Turnpike Connector extending from the Florida Turnpike to Suncoast Connector
- Southwest-Central Florida Connector extending from Polk County to Collier County; a previous highway planned for the route was called the Heartland Parkway

1000 Friends of Florida strongly opposed the M-CORES legislation because of its impacts on vast tracts of some of Florida's last remaining undeveloped lands which include vulnerable springsheds and wetlands, wildlife corridors that sustain panther and other endangered species, contiguous corridors of agricultural and timber lands essential to regional economies, and other significant environmental and cultural resources. Additionally, M-CORES promotes unneeded roads through rural areas in a manner that will stimulate sprawling development and diverts significant funding from addressing existing transportation problems in urbanized areas.

With the passage of M-CORES, however, these toll roads are on a fast track to becoming a reality.

Get Involved!

There are opportunities for citizens and local governments to shape the outcome. 1000 Friends of Florida has developed this series of primers to share how to participate in the planning process at the state, regional and local levels to better protect significant resources and curtail sprawl. To find out more, please visit www.1000fof.org/mcores.



M-CORES map by the
Florida Department of Transportation

An Overview

M-CORES will divert more than \$100 million per year from the state General Revenue Fund for planning, design and initial construction of the three corridors, which are “tolled facilities and approved turnpike projects that are part of the turnpike system and are considered as Strategic Intermodal System facilities.”

The bill also authorizes the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT or “the department”) to borrow billions of additional dollars from turnpike revenue bonds, form public private partnerships and utilize other funding sources to complete construction.

The stated objective is to “advance the construction of regional corridors that are intended to accommodate

multiple modes of transportation and multiple types of infrastructure.” Goals outlined in the legislation include to address hurricane evacuation, congestion mitigation, trade and logistics, broadband, water and sewer connectivity, energy distribution, autonomous and other vehicle technology, mobility as a service, and availability of trained workforce.

The bill also calls for protection or enhancement of wildlife corridors or environmentally sensitive areas, and protection or enhancement of primary springs protection zones and farmland preservation areas designated within local comprehensive plans.

The Task Forces

Under the legislation FDOT is required to establish “an inclusive, consensus-building mechanism” for each corridor. Each task force will include “appropriate representation” of a variety of state agencies, water management districts, metropolitan planning organizations, regional planning councils, the community “who may be an individual or a member of a nonprofit community organization, as determined by the department” and “appropriate environmental groups ... such as 1000 Friends of Florida, Audubon Florida, the Everglades Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, the Florida Sierra Club, and the Florida Wildlife Corridor, as determined by the department (FDOT).”

FDOT has hired technical consulting and public participation teams to facilitate each of the three task forces. The task forces “shall hold a public meeting in accordance with chapter 286 in each local government jurisdiction in which a project within an identified corridor is being considered.” (It is important to note that public participation at these meetings is essential to help shape a better outcome). Additionally, “to the maximum extent feasible, the department shall adhere to the recommendations of the task force created for each corridor in the design of the multiple modes of transportation and multiple types of infrastructure associated with the corridor.”

The Timeline

August 1, 2019	The Secretary of FDOT shall appoint the members of the three corridor task forces
November 15, 2020	Each task force shall submit its final report to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives. (deadline extended to November 15 due to COVID-19 pandemic)
December 31, 2022	To the maximum extent feasible, construction of the projects shall start no later than this date
December 31, 2023	Each affected local government with an interchange within its jurisdiction shall review the applicable task force report to determine whether its local comprehensive plan should be amended “to provide appropriate land uses and natural resources protections”
December 31, 2030	The corridors shall be open to traffic no later than this date

The Funding

Funding shall come from “increased revenues to the State Transportation Trust Fund derived from the amendments to s. 320.08 made by this act and deposited into the fund.” The legislation also includes allocations to the Small County Road Assistance Program, Small County Outreach Program, Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund, and Workforce Development program. Funds must be used as follows:

2019-2020 fiscal year	\$45 million retained in the State Transportation Trust Fund, with the remaining funds transferred to the General Revenue Fund
2020-2021 fiscal year	\$90 million retained in the State Transportation Trust Fund with the remaining transferred to the General Revenue Fund
2021-2022 fiscal year (and each FY thereafter)	All funds shall be retained in the State Transportation Trust Fund

Environmental and Comprehensive Planning Provisions in M-CORES

The M-CORES legislation includes provisions related to protecting significant resources and integrating the corridors into local comprehensive plans, as outlined here. This provides valuable guidance on avenues for advocacy throughout the M-CORES planning process.

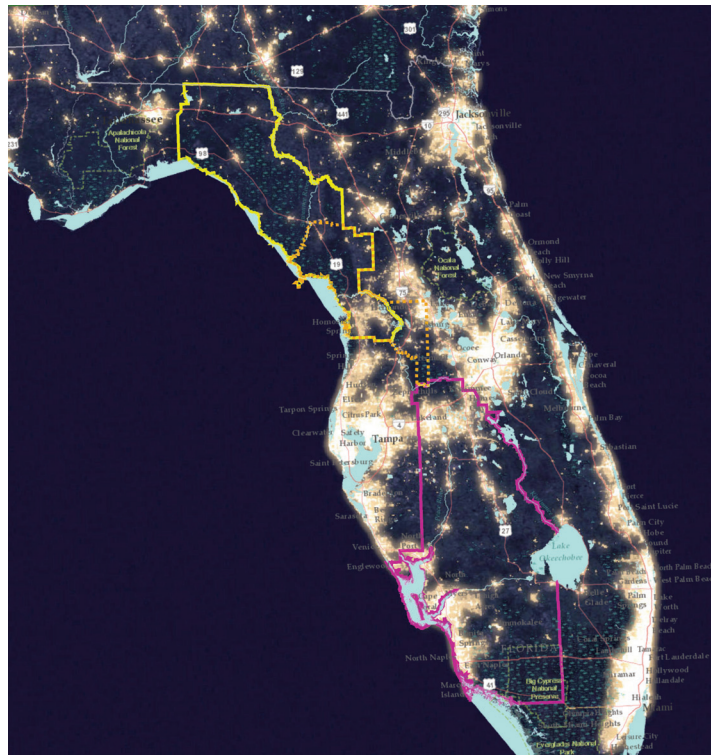
Project goals include “protection or enhancement of wildlife corridors or environmentally sensitive areas,” and “protection or enhancement of primary springs protection zones and farmland preservation areas designated within local comprehensive plans adopted under chapter 163.”

The **task forces** “shall evaluate the need for and the economic and environmental impacts of, hurricane evacuation impacts of, and land use impacts of, the related corridor.” Also, to the maximum extent feasible they “may consider and recommend innovative concepts to combine right-of-way acquisition with the acquisition of lands or easements to facilitate environmental mitigation or ecosystem, wildlife habitat, or water quality protection, or restoration. The department, in consultation with the Department of Environmental Protection, may incorporate those features into each corridor during the project development phase.”

Additionally, the **Southwest-Central Florida Connector task force** shall “address the impacts of the construction of a project within the corridor on panther and other critical wildlife habitat and evaluate in its final report the need for acquisition of lands for state conservation or as mitigation for project construction, and evaluate wildlife

crossing design features to protect panther and other critical wildlife habitat corridor connections.”

The **Suncoast Connector and Northern Turnpike Connector task forces** shall additionally “...evaluate design features and the need for acquisition of state conservation lands that mitigate the impacts of project



This nighttime aerial shows that M-CORES impacts some of Florida's last major swaths of natural and farmlands. Image courtesy of Defenders of Wildlife.

construction within the respective corridors on: the water quality and quantity of springs, rivers, and aquifer recharge areas; agricultural land uses; and wildlife habitat.”

Regarding **local comprehensive planning**, “the department shall provide affected local governments with a copy of the applicable task force report and project alignments. Not later than December 31, 2023, a local government that has an interchange within its jurisdiction shall review the applicable task force report and its local comprehensive plan as adopted under chapter 163. The local government review must include consideration of whether the area in and around the interchange contains appropriate land uses and natural resource protections and whether the comprehensive plan should be amended to provide such appropriate uses and protections.”

The legislation also outlines **compliance with required state and federal review**, noting that the projects “are subject to the department’s delegated responsibilities under s. 334.044(34) for environmental review, consultation, or other action required under any federal environmental law applicable to review or approval of such projects. For projects that do not receive federal aid

or projects that do not require federal action, the department must perform a project evaluation that considers the following:

- Project purpose and need;
- An alternative analysis;
- Existing conditions of the project area and potential impacts or enhancements the project may have on social, economic, cultural, natural, and connectivity issues and resources;
- Anticipated permits identified during the project development and environmental study;
- Opportunities for stakeholder and regulatory agency coordination; and
- Public and agency comments and coordination.”

Finally, “to the greatest extent practical, corridor configuration, project alignment, and interchange locations shall be designed so that project right-of-way are not located within conservation lands acquired under the Florida Preservation 2000 Act as established in s. 259.101, and the Florida Forever program as established in s. 259.105.”

Next Steps

Here’s how you can help:

- **Network with other concerned citizens** as M-CORES is sure to generate many documents to review and public meetings to attend. It is important to share the load!
- **Partner with conservation organizations, like-minded citizens and local governments** to identify significant natural, cultural and other resources and corridors meriting protection.

- **Attend M-CORES public meetings** to be held in each potentially impacted “local government jurisdiction” and provide written and spoken testimony.
- **Learn more** about the M-CORES process by reading other citizen primers in this series.

New information on M-CORES is coming out on a regular basis. 1000 Friends of Florida will provide updates at www.1000fof.org/mcores so please check back for the latest information.