



1000 Friends of Florida Statement

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Broadband, Economic Development and M-CORES

Many of the counties and communities in the M-CORES corridor face serious economic challenges that need to be addressed. Insufficient broadband services is but one example. Swaths of the rural lands in the proposed M-CORES corridor are not adequately serviced with broadband, leading to significant short- and long-term economic implications.

Now more than ever people are using broadband to conduct their professional and personal business remotely. A significant number of Floridians have been working from home, using video-conferencing applications to connect with co-workers, family and friends; attending school online; taking advantage of telemedicine; and using other online platforms.

In the short-term, some rural residents' ability to maintain social distancing requirements while continuing to work or participate in online schooling has been severely compromised. **In the long-term, the residents and businesses of rural areas of Florida — and not just those within the M-CORES corridor — will continue to fall behind in economic, education and other indices if broadband connectivity is not significantly enhanced in the near future.**

Successful and sustainable 21st century rural economic development is not contingent on building roads to attract new rooftops or manufacturing plants. Instead the provision of broadband allows residents who want to choose a rural lifestyle to participate in the global economy. And in turn, this rural lifestyle allows greater protection of natural lands that store and cleanse drinking water for millions of Floridians, and agricultural lands that serve as a backbone of Florida's economy.

It is not necessary to build roads to provide broadband. In fact, tying the provision of broadband to road construction is likely to delay its availability considerably as, notwithstanding the ambitious timeline outlined in the M-CORES legislation, it will take years for the roads to move from the planning to construction phase. This is particularly troublesome given the current pandemic and increased need to conduct more business and schooling online.

Instead, the State of Florida should explore opportunities to speed up the provision of broadband independent of road construction. This includes allowing broadband lines along existing highways and public utility lines to serve rural areas of Florida by creating "smart hubs" in rural communities. State-of-the-art broadband could be provided first to public buildings including city halls, libraries, schools and other facilities which then could serve as "trunks" to

extend broadband to residences and business locations in the communities. This would speed up considerably the timeline on providing broadband along with its economic development benefits.

In the aftermath of COVID-19 it is likely that significantly more Floridians will choose to work from home, online education opportunities will expand, and telemedicine and other online services will proliferate. If communities in the M-CORES corridors (and indeed other rural parts of the state) are not allowed to participate in this new reality as soon as possible, the economic disparities will only worsen.

At least one thing is clear: Workers and others with broadband access do not need to be tethered to a specific location. This allows people in even the most remote communities to participate in the global economy. It's time to uncouple the provision of broadband from road construction to choose a more sustainable and economically strengthened economy for rural communities in the 21st century. Uncoupling broadband from road construction is an opportunity to choose a more sustainable and prosperous future for all of Florida.

Improving and sustaining the economy of Florida's rural areas requires broadband service immediately; it does not require new highways.