

SOUTHWEST-CENTRAL FLORIDA CONNECTOR TASK FORCE FINAL REPORT

November 15, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Section 338.2278 F.S. created the Multi-use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance (M-CORES) program. The purpose of the program is to revitalize rural communities, encourage job creation, and provide regional connectivity while leveraging technology, enhancing the quality of life and public safety, and protecting the environment and natural resources.

The statute directs the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) to advance the construction of regional corridors intended to accommodate multiple modes of transportation and multiple types of infrastructure in three defined study areas:

- Suncoast Corridor, extending from Citrus County to Jefferson County;
- Northern Turnpike Corridor, extending from the northern terminus of the Florida Turnpike northwest to the Suncoast Parkway; and
- Southwest-Central Florida Corridor, extending from Collier County to Polk County.

These corridors are viewed as part of a broader program to address the complete statutory purpose of M-CORES, creating strategic opportunities to revitalize rural communities and enhance economic development. The statute also provides FDOT with direction and tools to help advance other regional goals related to environmental stewardship and quality of life in parallel with corridor development.

With this broad approach, the intended benefits of M-CORES include addressing issues such as emergency evacuation and response; congestion mitigation; trade and logistics; broadband, water, and sewer connectivity; energy distribution; autonomous, connected, electric, and shared vehicle technology; multimodal options including shared-use non-motorized trails, freight and passenger rail, and public transit; mobility as a service; availability of a trained workforce skilled in traditional and emerging technologies; protection or enhancement of wildlife corridors or environmentally sensitive areas; and protection or enhancement of primary springs protection zones and farmland preservation areas.

The statute directed FDOT to convene a Task Force for each corridor as an inclusive, consensus-building mechanism comprised of representatives from state agencies, regional planning councils, metropolitan planning organizations, water management districts, local governments, environmental groups, and the community. Members of each Task Force were appointed by the FDOT Secretary.

The Florida Legislature charged each Task Force with providing recommendations and evaluations in a final report which will guide the Florida Department of Transportation in its subsequent study phases through the implementation of high-level needs, guiding principles and instructions. This report documents the Southwest-Central Florida Corridor Task Force's activities and recommendations.

38 TASK FORCE OVERVIEW

39

40 In August 2019, FDOT convened the Southwest-Central Florida Corridor Task Force with 47
41 members representing state agencies, water management districts, local governments, metropolitan
42 planning organizations, regional planning councils, environmental groups, and community
43 organizations (see **Appendix A** for Membership List).

44 The Task Force met 13 times between August 2019 and October 2020 through 9 Task Force
45 meetings and 4 webinars or virtual meetings. Over the course of 15 months, the Task Force reviewed
46 data, trends, and issues; discussed key considerations for planning transportation corridors; received
47 and reviewed public input; and developed high-level needs, guiding principles, and instructions for
48 project development and beyond. Subject matter experts joined the Task Force members to provide
49 information related to specific aspects of the Task Force's charge, including community planning,
50 economic and workforce development, agriculture, environmental resources, broadband and utilities,
51 emerging technology, and emergency management.

52 In March 2020, some unique challenges arose resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Task
53 Force adapted meeting formats to comply with the Governor's Executive Orders. The subsequent
54 Task Force meetings were designed with a combination of virtual and in-person methods for both
55 Task Force members and the public to participate (see **Appendix B** for Work Plan and **Appendix C**
56 for Meeting Locations).

57 FDOT staff developed and maintained a geographic information system (GIS) tool to provide the Task
58 Force with access to a wide variety of data on existing demographic, economic, land use,
59 environmental, infrastructure, and other resources in the study area. This tool specifically was used to
60 help identify areas where direct impacts from corridors should be avoided, as well as areas where a
61 connection to a corridor is desired. FDOT staff conducted one-on-one technical briefings to provide
62 Task Force members with a tutorial of the GIS tool and to discuss data-related questions. The Task
63 Force used the GIS tool to help understand the linkage between draft guiding principles and potential
64 corridor location decisions. The GIS tool served as a living tool and was updated based on feedback
65 and suggestions from the Task Force members. The GIS tool remains publicly accessible at all times
66 on the project website (Floridamcores.com) including through a mobile-friendly format.

67 During Task Force meetings, a facilitator and staff supported the Task Force in effective discussion
68 and collaboration. Additional documentation of the Task Force activities including meeting agendas,
69 materials, and summaries, as well as the GIS tool, can be found on the project website.

70 Public engagement was a critical component of the Task Force process. Opportunities for public
71 engagement were included at each Task Force meeting through a dedicated public comment period
72 and comment stations were set up to receive written comments. Meetings were broadcast live and
73 recordings were posted on the project website for members of the public who could not attend in
74 person. The public also could attend the webinars and hybrid meetings virtually through the
75 GoToWebinar platform. Overall, a total of # people attended the in-person meetings and # people
76 attended the webinars and meetings virtually.

77 To further public engagement, Community Open Houses were held in Wauchula, Naples, Bartow,
78 Arcadia, and LaBelle to share information about the process and receive public input. **[Expand to**
79 **cover future activities]** At the Community Open Houses, members of the public were able to directly

80 ask questions of FDOT staff, view informational material, and experience hands-on use of the GIS
81 tool. A total of # people participated in the five open houses.

82 Additionally, FDOT received communication through the project website, FDOT Listens email
83 address, phone, social media, letters, newsletters, and more. In total, FDOT received # unique and #
84 form letter comments through these communication methods, which were shared with the Task
85 Force.

86 In addition to engaging the public, FDOT conducted active engagement with partners. FDOT
87 provided # presentations to interested agencies and organizations at their workshops, meetings, and
88 conferences. FDOT staff also attended metropolitan planning organization, regional planning council,
89 and local government board meetings to share updates on the Task Force's process and answer any
90 questions. The Task Force also considered resolutions adopted by the Board of County
91 Commissioners in Hardee County, City Commissions in the City of Bowling Green and the City of
92 Wauchula, and Town Council of the Town of Lake Placid. *[Staff to add others received before the
93 date of the final Task Force meeting]*

94 The Task Force received the compiled and summarized written public comments. FDOT tracked
95 topics at a high level to ensure the Task Force discussed and considered those topics throughout the
96 process at their meetings. *[Public comment summary to be expanded at Meeting #8]*

STUDY AREA OVERVIEW

The Southwest-Central Florida Corridor study area extends from Collier County to Polk County. This nine-county area spans more than 9,500 square miles.

ENVIRONMENT

The study area is well known for its scenic beauty and natural environment that includes land, water, and habitat of statewide, and in some cases, global significance:

- The eastern portion of the region includes the Kissimmee River and Lake Okeechobee, which flow into the Everglades, a system of tropical wetlands found nowhere else on earth.
- The Green Swamp, at the northern edge of the region, is the heart of the Floridan aquifer and the headwaters of four rivers.
- The Lake Wales Ridge, near the center of the region, supports distinctive plant and wildlife species endemic to Florida, including the highest concentration of listed plant species in the study area.
- The southwestern coastal portion of the region is home to world renowned beaches, barrier islands, and one of the world's largest marine estuaries, Charlotte Harbor Estuary. It also is home to Babcock Ranch Preserve, nearly 68 thousand acres that includes diverse natural habitats, water resources and scenic landscapes.

Nearly one-third of the study area's acreage is held in conservation which is greater than the statewide average.¹ Much of the area has been identified as a high-priority critical linkage as part of the Florida Ecological Greenways Network, illustrating both the significance of the natural environment and the challenges involved in improving transportation and other connectivity in this region. Water resources include various rivers, lakes, wetlands, aquatic preserves, and designated Outstanding Florida Waters, such as Highlands Hammock State Park, Myakka River, and Cape Romano-Ten Thousand Islands Aquatic Preserve.

The region is currently home to 12 threatened and endangered animal species, the most notable of these is the Florida panther. The Florida panther habitat is almost entirely within the study area. Important wildlife corridors through the region include Big Cypress National Preserve to the Caloosahatchee River and the Caloosahatchee River to Kissimmee River.

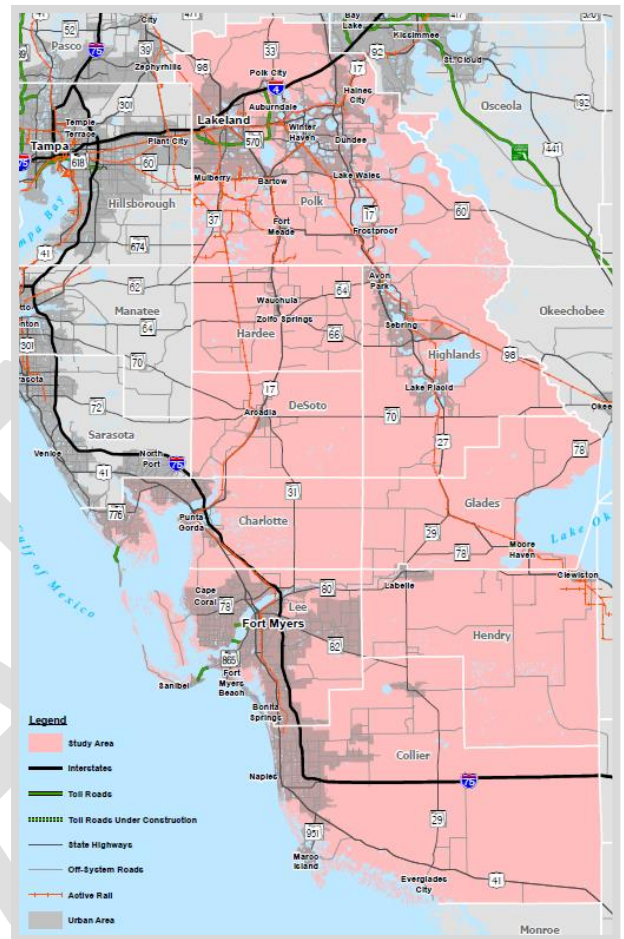


Figure 1. Southwest-Central Florida Corridor Study Area

¹ Florida Natural Areas Inventory, 2019

138 The study area’s natural environment is a key foundation of its quality of life and its economy,
 139 attracting millions of visitors each year to enjoy beaches, rivers, lakes, and opportunities for hunting,
 140 fishing, and eco-tourism.

141 **COMMUNITY**

142 The study area is home to nearly 2.3
 143 million residents in 37 municipalities
 144 and many unincorporated areas.
 145 About 90% of the population is along
 146 the coastline and near the Interstate
 147 4 (I-4) corridor. These urbanized
 148 portions of the region have exceeded
 149 statewide population growth during
 150 the past decade and are expected to
 151 be the areas of highest growth over
 152 the next 25 years.

153 The inland counties generally have
 154 lagged behind statewide growth
 155 rates with Hardee County
 156 experiencing a population decline
 157 over the past ten years.² All six
 158 inland counties have poverty rates above the
 159 statewide average, with the rate exceeding one
 160 out of every five residents in DeSoto, Hendry, and
 161 Hardee counties.³ Median household income is
 162 below the statewide level in every county except Lee and Collier.⁴

163 The study area includes some of the most historic parts of Florida, including cities like Arcadia and
 164 Bartow that were established in the late 1800s. The study area also includes newer communities
 165 such as the town of Ave Maria established in 2005, and, most recently, the planned community of
 166 Babcock Ranch, which welcomed its first residents in January 2018.

167 Agricultural lands account for about 43.5% of the study area land uses. Institutional and public lands,
 168 including publicly held conservation and recreation lands as well as the large military presence at
 169 Avon Park in Polk and Highlands counties, comprise 29% of the land acreage.^{5 6 7}

170 Local government comprehensive plans, as well as regional initiatives such as the Heartland 2060
 171 visioning process, establish the framework for future land use, conservation, and development of the
 172 region. Each county identifies conservation areas; six counties are planning for new activity centers to
 173 accommodate population and economic growth; and all counties have policies discouraging sprawl.

County	Population	Growth (2010 – 2018)	Projected Growth (2018 – 2045)
Lee	754,610	21.6%	38.5%
Polk	708,009	17.2%	29.4%
Collier	378,488	17.2%	36.4%
Charlotte	184,998	15.6%	23.8%
Highlands	105,424	6.4%	10.3%
Hendry	41,556	6.0%	11.9%
DeSoto	37,489	7.0%	5.4%
Hardee	27,245	-2.0%	0.6%
Glades	13,724	6.3%	5.7%

Table 1. Population and Growth by County
 Sources: Census Bureau, 2019; Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR), University of Florida, 2019

² U.S. Census Bureau, 2019
³ U.S. Census Bureau, *Small Area Income & Poverty Estimates, Model-Based Estimates for States, Counties, & School Districts, 2017*, released November 30, 2018
⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey, 2013-2017*
⁵ Florida Department of Revenue
⁶ County Property Appraisers
⁷ University of Florida GeoPlan Center

174 **ECONOMY**

175 The study area’s job count stood at just under 600,000 in 2019.⁸ Like other parts of Florida, the
176 region’s economy historically has emphasized the “three-legged stool” of agriculture and related
177 natural resources such as forestry, fishing, and mining; tourism; and industries related to population
178 growth such as construction, retail trade, and healthcare. These industries are anticipated to remain
179 the foundation for the economy in the future. The large base of agricultural activity is diversifying crop
180 bases, shifting toward more inland locations, and incorporating new technologies and production
181 practices. The tourism sector also is diversifying, with more growth anticipated in eco-tourism, agri-
182 tourism, and heritage tourism.

183 Significant job growth is needed by the year 2030 to support anticipated population growth as well as
184 recover from the economic shock of 2020. The Florida Chamber Foundation estimates the study area
185 will need to create more than 139,000 net new jobs by 2030.⁹ To diversify the economy and grow job
186 opportunities, regional and local economic development plans are focusing on targeted industries
187 such as advanced manufacturing, logistics and distribution, and life sciences and healthcare.
188 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies created by the regional planning councils identify
189 targeted opportunity and investment areas, including business and technology parks, logistics
190 centers, and airports. Many of these industries and sites require enhanced transportation and
191 communications connectivity to markets in other regions, states, and nations.

192 **INFRASTRUCTURE**

193 The region is currently served by 4,793 lane miles of State Highway System. I-4 in Polk County and
194 I-75 in Charlotte, Lee, and Collier counties are the major limited-access highways in the region. Major
195 state roads such as US 27, US 17, SR 60, SR 70, and SR 80 form the core elements of the regional
196 roadway network connecting existing communities. During peak times, traffic congestion is
197 experienced along portions of I-4, I-75, and US 27.

198 The study area has 600 miles of active rail lines including one freight rail terminal and three Amtrak
199 stations. The freight terminal is part of an intermodal logistics center in Winter Haven operated by
200 CSX.

201 Only three counties have fixed-route transit providers: Collier, Lee, and Polk. However, transit
202 remains a critical way for many residents to access jobs, health care, and other services. The study
203 area is also served by 12 Greyhound intercity bus stations.

204 There are two commercial airports (Southwest Florida International and Punta Gorda Airport), two
205 receiver airports (Lakeland Linder International Airport and Page Field) and 12 general aviation
206 facilities. Many residents and visitors use commercial service airports in surrounding regions. The
207 region has no deep-water seaports, requiring international and domestic waterborne freight to access
208 the region through seaports in South Florida, Tampa Bay, or other areas of the state.

209 Unlike the most populated areas, rural areas suffer from lack of broadband access including nearly
210 40% of DeSoto County residents and more than 40% for those in Hendry and Glades. Outside of the
211 major service providers in the populated areas, the City of Winter Haven and Hardee County have
212 invested in their own broadband networks to support both business and resident needs.

⁸ www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219

⁹ *Florida Chamber Foundation, Florida 2030 Blueprint*

213 Like broadband, access to public water services is limited to some of the inland rural counties.
214 DeSoto, Highlands, and Glades counties, for example, have known septic systems percentages of
215 39%, 42% and 63%, respectively. Additionally, more than one-third of Highlands and Hardee
216 counties are known to be utilizing well water for drinking water, with DeSoto County nearing 50%.¹⁰

217 The status of infrastructure networks is an important consideration to support the region's anticipated
218 and desired business diversification and growth, as well as the quality of life for the growing number
219 of residents.

DRAFT

¹⁰ *The Florida Water Management Inventory (FDOH: 2017-2018)*

220 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

221
222 **FRAMEWORK**

223 The Task Force developed recommendations in three areas:

- 224 • **High-Level Needs** - key regional opportunities and challenges corridor investments and
225 related actions are intended to address. These can be transportation-specific needs and
226 transportation-supported needs. The high-level needs are to be informed by the six purposes
227 and 13 potential benefits in s. 338.2278 (1), F.S. The high-level needs, along with the
228 purpose, answer the question “*why?*”.
- 229 • **Guiding Principles** - a set of core values that guides decision making related to a
230 transportation corridor or other type of project or program throughout the planning,
231 development, and implementation process. These answer the question “*how?*”.
- 232 • **Instructions for Project Development and Beyond** - direction provided by the Task Force
233 for future project development and implementation activities to ensure the Task Force’s
234 guiding principles are applied to subsequent activities as intended. This direction could
235 address corridor location and design, as well as strategies to be carried forward and refined
236 during planning, project development, design, and other implementation phases. These
237 answer the question “*what’s next?*”.

238 The guiding principles and instructions are intended to function as a set of directions to FDOT and
239 other partners in implementing the Task Force’s recommendations as they carry out future planning,
240 project development, and implementation activities related to the M-CORES program in s. 338.2278,
241 F.S. The guiding principles provide a high-level statement of value and direction that is intended to
242 apply in all decisions; the instructions detail specific commitments and actions. The Task Force
243 recommendations are intended to supplement the requirements of current FDOT processes during
244 planning, project development, design, and other implementation phases.

245 Section 338.2278 (3)(c)(6), F.S. states “To the maximum extent feasible, the department shall adhere
246 to the recommendations of the task force created for each corridor in the design of the multiple
247 modes of transportation and multiple types of infrastructure associated with the corridor.” The Task
248 Force views this statement as inclusive of both the guiding principles and the instructions and of the
249 full range of planning, project development, and implementation activities. The Task Force also
250 recognizes that as future work continues in the study area, additional information or changing
251 conditions may provide insight about the feasibility and value of specific implementation steps that
252 could warrant refinements to specific instructions; in these situations, the guiding principle and intent
253 of the Task Force will guide any such refinements, in consultation with a corridor advisory group
254 established following completion of the Task Force process.

255 **HIGH-LEVEL NEEDS**

256 High-level needs are key regional opportunities and challenges that corridor investments and related
257 actions are intended to address.

258 Florida Statute charged the Task Force to “evaluate the need for, and the economic and
259 environmental impacts of, hurricane evacuation impacts of, and land use impacts of” the corridor on
260 which the Task Force is focusing. Because the Task Force was in a pre-planning phase of the

261 corridor planning process, the high-level needs were identified based on review of partner and public
262 input, existing plans and studies, and available data and forecasts on trends and conditions in the
263 study area.

264 The Task Force has identified the following high-level needs for the study area, recognizing that
265 additional evaluation will be needed to develop more specific, quantifiable needs as part of project
266 development:

- 267 • **Support anticipated population growth in coastal communities and urban areas.** Lee,
268 Collier, and Charlotte counties (along the coastline) and Polk County (near I-4) represent 90% of
269 the population and are projected to be the areas of highest growth over the next 25 years with an
270 average of 32% per county.¹¹ This growth will increase travel within the urban areas and to/from
271 inland and urban areas within the region where employment and services are prevalent.
- 272 • **Improve safety and mobility.** Maintaining and improving safety and travel reliability are
273 continuous concerns. The annual cost of congestion per driver in the U.S. is \$1,348.¹² As traffic
274 continues to grow, congestion by the year 2050 will expand to more roadways including US 17,
275 SR 29, SR 60, SR 70, and SR 80. Additionally, the study area experienced more than 35
276 thousand crashes in 2018 with 358 fatalities. Although the number of crashes was highly
277 concentrated in the coastal counties and Polk County, the highest fatality rates are in the rural
278 counties such as Glades, DeSoto, and Hendry. The respective fatality rates of 6.5%, 3.6%, and
279 3.2% were higher than Florida's average of less than 1%.¹³ With 94% of crashes due to human
280 error according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, safety is a promising benefit
281 of connected and automated vehicles.
- 282 • **Help rural and underserved areas improve infrastructure for people, freight, and**
283 **technology.** For the inland portion of the study area, the infrastructure was largely developed to
284 serve then current rural and agrarian communities. To support a more diverse economy and
285 technologies now available for agriculture and resource-based businesses, this infrastructure
286 must evolve. For instance, lack of broadband availability in these rural areas makes access to
287 agricultural technologies, remote education, employment, and telehealth difficult. Additionally,
288 rural residents seek public amenities like potable water. The amount of land area varies with
289 public water supply serving a high of 64% in Glades County to just under 11% for Hardee and
290 Hendry Counties.¹⁴ With regard to freight, more than 651 million tons of cargo were transported
291 via truck within, into, and out of Florida in 2017.¹⁵ The truck traffic on key roadways in the inland
292 portion of the study area ranges from 19% - 31% of the total traffic. The growth of nationwide
293 e-commerce has increased by 13% - 16% annually over the past 5 years, and this trend is
294 expected to increase thereby contributing to additional cargo tonnage to be transported.¹⁶
295 Accommodations to efficiently handle this level of increase is an area for consideration.
- 296 • **Improve access and interregional connectivity for residents, freight, and visitors between**
297 **communities and markets.** Access to high capacity transportation corridors that provide
298 interregional connectivity is a key factor for business recruitment and retention. Currently, only

¹¹ Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR), University of Florida, 2019

¹² INRIX 2018 Global Traffic Scorecard

¹³ Florida Crash Dashboard, FHSMV, 2018

¹⁴ Florida Water Management Inventory (FDOH: 2017-2018)

¹⁵ FDOT Freight Mobility and Trade Plan, Technical Memorandum 4, Trends, April 2020

¹⁶ FDOT Freight Mobility and Trade Plan, Technical Memorandum 4, Trends, April 2020

299 four counties in the study area are served by a limited access highway: Polk, Charlotte, Lee, and
300 Collier. These access points are important for business attraction. Additionally, Winter Haven is
301 home to an Intermodal Logistics Center located near the region’s only rail terminal which
302 highlights the importance of freight flows into and out of the region including flows to seaports
303 located outside of the study area. Tourism, including eco- and agri-tourism, continues to grow
304 within the region in areas such as the Babcock Ranch Preserve as people seek outdoor
305 recreation and activities. Rural economic prosperity is a major concern tied to interregional access
306 and connectivity.

- 307 • **Expand transportation options, such as shared-use nonmotorized trails, freight and**
308 **passenger rail, and public transit.** Transportation options that provide opportunities for
309 residents to access services have also been identified for further exploration. Only three counties
310 have fixed-route transit providers: Collier, Lee, and Polk. However, transit remains a critical way
311 for many residents to access jobs, healthcare, and other services. There are 175 miles of existing
312 paved multi-use trails in the SUN Trail network throughout the area, and as residents desire
313 modes for recreation, expansion of trails is a consideration. There is also a shift of truckload
314 carriers transporting containers and trailers via rail for long hauls over 400 miles in order to
315 accommodate growth in cargo traffic with increasing shortages in truck drivers.¹⁷ Options to
316 improve travel while protecting existing communities and green/blue spaces are also
317 considerations when identifying modal options.
- 318 • **Help increase economic activity and economic diversity throughout the region with**
319 **emphasis on inland and rural areas.** The region is building on its traditional industry base:
320 agriculture, natural resources, and related industries; tourism, arts, entertainment, and recreation;
321 and construction. At the same time, emerging industries with different transportation needs
322 include education and health services; transportation, warehousing, and wholesale trade; and
323 manufacturing. To promote economic activity, multiple opportunity and investment areas have
324 been identified in local comprehensive economic development studies (CEDS) and
325 comprehensive plans.
- 326 • **Create employment opportunities, particularly to assist lower-income residents and help**
327 **retain younger residents in the area.** A major concern is providing children in the study area
328 with opportunities to remain in the area as adults. DeSoto, Glades, Hardee, Hendry, and
329 Highlands counties – as well as the community of Immokalee in Collier County – have been
330 designated as Rural Areas of Opportunity. Further, Hardee and Hendry counties have the highest
331 percentages of 25 and under population (35% and 36%, respectively). These two counties also
332 have experienced a net loss of residents to other states and nations.¹⁸ The nine counties need to
333 create more than 139,000 net new jobs by 2030 to accommodate population growth and keep
334 unemployment rates low.¹⁹
- 335 • **Enhance access to jobs, workforce training, education, healthcare, and goods and**
336 **services.** Access to critical quality of life services and employment are growing concerns within
337 the region. About 16% of residents in the study area have access to fresh food within 1/2 mile,
338 compared to a statewide average of 31%.²⁰ Hendry, Hardee, DeSoto, and Glades counties each

¹⁷ *FDOT Freight Mobility and Trade Plan, Technical Memorandum 4, Trends, April 2020*

¹⁸ *U.S. Census Bureau, 2020*

¹⁹ *Florida Chamber Foundation, Florida 2030 Blueprint*

²⁰ *Florida Department of Health, 2016*

339 have fewer than 20 licensed physicians and 50 hospital beds.²¹ Education attainment in most of
340 the study area counties lags the statewide average. For example, more than one in four residents
341 have not completed a high school diploma in Hendry, DeSoto, Hardee and Glades counties.²²
342 Also, given the region's targeted industry growth in areas such as advanced manufacturing,
343 logistics and distribution, it is necessary to provide better access to these emerging jobs and the
344 related education and training opportunities. Without convenient access to goods and services,
345 many residents must drive to surrounding counties for medical care, groceries, training, and
346 education.

- 347 • **Support agriculture and resource-based industries as major economic drivers and areas of**
348 **environmental sensitivity.** Agriculture and natural resource-based businesses are major
349 economic drivers. The availability of connectivity between working farms, other resource-based
350 businesses, and their associated supply chains is a growing concern among industry members.
351 Agricultural areas also provide open spaces for large wildlife, smaller areas for endemic species,
352 and water and wetland stewardship while at the same time providing for recreation and
353 agricultural tourism. These lands tend to be in private ownership and collaboration is important to
354 achieve economic, social, and environmental objectives.
- 355 • **Protect, connect and enhance environmentally sensitive areas, ecosystems, water**
356 **resources, and wildlife, including the Florida panther.** Fostering the study area's unique
357 natural characteristics and water resources are important considerations. About 32% of the study
358 area's acreage is held in conservation, compared to 28% statewide.²³ Much of the study area,
359 approximately 49%, has been identified as a high-priority critical linkage as part of the Florida
360 Ecological Greenways Network, and nearly five thousand square miles are the designated Florida
361 panther primary, secondary, and dispersal zones.^{24 25}
- 362 • **Strengthen disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.** Large portions of the
363 study area - particularly along the coast, Lake Okeechobee, and the Peace River - are designated
364 evacuation zones during emergencies. **[To be updated after Meeting #7.]**

365 **Needs Evaluation Process**

366 As input to project development, FDOT will conduct a robust evaluation of the existing and future
367 transportation and related needs in the study area, building on the recommendations of the Task
368 Force.

369 This process should:

- 370 • Evaluate and distinguish between conventional safety, mobility, and connectivity needs, and
371 broader regional needs or co-benefits related to transportation.
- 372 • Consider and document safety, mobility, and connectivity needs related to moving both people
373 and freight.

²¹ Florida Department of Health, 2018

²² U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2013-2017

²³ Florida Natural Areas Inventory, 2019

²⁴ FDEP: 2016 and Florida Panther Recovery Plan

²⁵ US Fish and Wildlife Service, November 21, 2008

- 374 • Consider and document mobility and connectivity needs related to both local/regional travel
375 originating and terminating within the study area and statewide/interregional travel through the
376 study area.
- 377 • Consider and document mobility and connectivity needs related to both routine daily traffic and
378 special events such as evacuation and response to major emergencies and disasters.
- 379 • Use population and economic growth projected in local government comprehensive plans and/or
380 the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) long-range transportation plans and the Florida
381 Transportation Plan as the basis for estimating future travel demand in the study area. Consider
382 the potential for additional population and economic growth that could be generated by proposed
383 land use and economic development changes in and surrounding the study area.
- 384 • Consider the mobility, economic, and fiscal impacts of potential shifts in economic activity from
385 existing communities and corridors to enhanced or new corridors, as well as potential net
386 economic benefits to the state.
- 387 • Consider potential changes in travel demand related to recovery from COVID-19 and potential
388 long-term changes in travel behavior, such as greater propensity for working from home, and
389 increased home delivery of goods and services.
- 390 • Consider potential changes in travel demand and transportation system capacity related to
391 increased use of emerging technologies such as automated and connected vehicles.
- 392 • Evaluate the ability of a full range of proposed alternatives for corridor improvements in the study
393 area to accomplish the high-level needs, including the specific economic, environmental, land
394 use, and emergency management impacts called for in s. 338.2278, F.S. These alternatives
395 should consider operational and capacity improvements, existing and new facilities, multiple
396 transportation modes, and a “no build” option.
- 397 • Evaluate the economic and financial feasibility of corridor alternatives, including whether they
398 would meet statutory requirements for designation as part of Florida’s SIS and for financing as
399 part of Florida’s Turnpike system.
- 400 • Be supported by high quality data and technical analyses; and
- 401 • Incorporate comprehensive public and agency involvement, including reporting of the results and
402 how specific alternatives will be advanced into project development.

403 The Task Force believes the formal determination of need and feasibility pursuant to statutory
404 requirements and consistent with accepted statewide processes is an important milestone in corridor
405 planning and development. The Task Force has developed a series of guiding principles and
406 instructions for future planning and development of corridors for which high-level needs have been
407 identified. While these determinations will be made after the Task Force has completed its
408 deliberations, the guidance provided by the Task Force will instruct the evaluation process, and an
409 ongoing corridor advisory group will review and provide feedback on the findings and conclusions of
410 these analyses.