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# SUNCOAST CONNECTOR TASK FORCE FINAL REPORT

3 November 15, 2020

4

## INTRODUCTION

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

10

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

- 14
- 15 • Suncoast Corridor, extending from Citrus County to Jefferson County;
  - 16 • Northern Turnpike Corridor, extending from the northern terminus of the Florida Turnpike  
17 northwest to the Suncoast Parkway; and
  - 18 • Southwest-Central Florida Corridor, extending from Collier County to Polk County.

19

20 The statute specifies these corridors as part of a broader program to address the complete statutory  
21 purpose of M-CORES, including revitalizing rural communities and enhancing economic development.  
22 The statute also provides FDOT with direction and tools to help advance other regional goals related  
23 to the statutory purpose, including enhancing quality of life and protecting the environment. The breadth  
24 of the program's purpose, the scale of the identified corridors, and the additional tools provided to FDOT  
25 all point to the need for a thoughtful, collaborative approach to implementing the M-CORES program,  
26 analyzing corridor needs and alternatives, and building consensus around future actions among FDOT  
27 and a wide range of partners.

28

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

33

34 The Florida Legislature charged each Task Force with evaluating key issues and creating  
35 recommendations in a final report that will guide the FDOT in its subsequent study phases through the  
36 implementation of high-level needs, guiding principles, and instructions. This report documents the  
37 Suncoast Corridor Task Force's activities and recommendations.

# TASK FORCE OVERVIEW

## Membership

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

## Meetings

The Task Force met 13 times between August 2019 and October 2020 through nine Task Force meetings and four webinars or virtual meetings. Over the course of 15 months, the Task Force reviewed data, trends, and issues; discussed key considerations for planning transportation corridors, including specific issues as identified in Florida Statute (see box); and received and reviewed public input. Subject matter experts joined the Task Force meetings to provide information related to specific aspects of the Task Force’s charge, including community planning, economic and workforce development, agriculture, environmental resources, broadband and utilities, emerging technology, and emergency management. The Task Force developed specific recommendations related to identifying and evaluating high-level needs related to the statutory purpose, as well as guiding principles and instructions for advancing corridor development and related activities to help accomplish these needs, as documented in subsequent sections of this report. The report also includes an action plan for moving forward.

In March 2020, some unique challenges arose resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Task Force adapted meeting formats to comply with the Governor’s Executive Order Number 20-122. The later Task Force meetings were designed with a combination of virtual and in-person locations for both Task Force members and the public to participate (see **Appendix B** for Work Plan and **Appendix C** for Meeting Locations – **these will be updated prior to final publication**).

### Issues for Consideration by All M-CORES Task Forces

s. 338.2278 (1), Florida Statute

- Hurricane evacuation
- Congestion mitigation
- Trade and logistics
- Broadband, water, and sewer connectivity
- Energy distribution
- Autonomous, connected, shared, and electric vehicle technology
- Other transportation modes, such as shared-use nonmotorized 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
- Protection or enhancement of primary springs protection zones and farmland preservation areas designated within local comprehensive plans adopted under Chapter 163.

### Issues for Consideration by Suncoast Corridor Task Force

s. 338.2278 (3) (c) 8, Florida Statute

Evaluate design features and the need for acquisition of state conservation lands that mitigate the impact of project construction within the respective corridors on:

- a. The water quality and quantity of springs, rivers, and aquifer recharge areas;
- b. Agricultural land uses; and
- c. Wildlife habitat.

1 A facilitator and staff supported the Task Force meetings to assist with discussion, provide technical  
2 support, and document the Task Force’s deliberations and recommendations. Additional  
3 documentation of the Task Force activities including meeting agendas, materials, and summaries can  
4 be found on the project website [www.FloridaMCORES.com](http://www.FloridaMCORES.com).

## 5 6 **Data and Mapping Tools**

7 FDOT staff developed and maintained a Geographic Information System (GIS) tool to provide the Task  
8 Force with access to a wide variety of data on existing demographic, economic, land use,  
9 environmental, infrastructure, and other resources in the study area. This tool was specifically used to  
10 help identify areas where direct impacts from corridors should be avoided, as well as areas where a  
11 connection to a corridor may be appropriate for future evaluation. FDOT staff conducted one-on-one  
12 technical briefings to provide Task Force members with a tutorial of the GIS tool and to discuss data-  
13 related questions. The Task Force used the GIS tool to help understand the linkage between draft  
14 guiding principles and potential corridor location decisions. Task Force members suggested other data  
15 sources related to topics such as conservation lands, water resources, and wildlife habitat that were  
16 included in the tool as GIS layers for Task Force discussion to support development of guiding  
17 principles and instructions.

18 The GIS tool served as a living tool and was updated based on feedback and suggestions from the  
19 Task Force members. The GIS tool remains publicly accessible at all times on the project website  
20 including through a mobile-friendly format.

## 21 22 **Public Engagement**

23 Public engagement was a critical component of the Task Force process. Opportunities for public  
24 engagement were included at each Task Force meeting through a dedicated public comment period  
25 and comment stations were available to receive written comments. Meetings were broadcast live and  
26 recordings were posted on the project website for members of the public who could not attend in person.  
27 The public could also attend the webinars and hybrid meetings virtually through the GoToWebinar  
28 platform. Overall, a total of # people attended the in-person meetings and # people attended the  
29 webinars and meetings virtually.

30  
31 To further public engagement, Community Open Houses were held in Old Town, Mayo, Perry,  
32 Chiefland, Crystal River, and Monticello to share information about the process and receive public input.  
33 *[Expand to cover future activities]* At the Community Open Houses, members of the public were able  
34 to directly ask questions of FDOT staff, view informational material, and experience hands-on use of  
35 the GIS tool. A total of # people participated in the eight open houses.

36  
37 Additionally, FDOT received communication 24/7 through the project website, FDOT Listens email  
38 address, phone, social media, letters, newsletters, and more. In total, FDOT received # unique and #  
39 form letter comments through these communication methods, which were shared with the Task Force.

40  
41 In addition to engaging the public, FDOT conducted active engagement with partners. FDOT provided  
42 # presentations to interested agencies and organizations at their workshops, meetings, and  
43 conferences. FDOT staff also attended metropolitan planning organization, regional planning council,  
44 and local government board meetings to share updates on the Task Force’s process and answer any  
45 questions. The Task Force also considered resolutions adopted by the Board of County Commissioners

1 in Citrus County, Levy County, and Madison County; City Commissions in the City of Cedar Keys and  
2 the City of Chiefland; Town Council of the Town of Greenville; and the Hernando/Citrus Metropolitan  
3 Planning Organization. The Task Force also considered letters from the City of Williston and the Town  
4 of Yankeetown. *[Expand to include others received before the date of the final Task Force meeting]*  
5

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

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## STUDY AREA OVERVIEW

The Suncoast Corridor study area is located along Florida's Nature Coast through Citrus, Dixie, Gilchrist, Jefferson, Lafayette, Levy, Madison, and Taylor Counties and is home to more than 280,000 residents (Figure 1).

### Environment

The predominately rural counties located within the Suncoast Corridor study area have been a draw to residents and year-round visitors for decades. This area has many unique features and natural resources including rivers, springs, wetlands, aquifer recharge areas, coastal areas, conservation areas, state parks, and agricultural lands. Some notable resources include the Big Bend Seagrasses Aquatic Preserve, the Suwannee and Santa Fe Rivers, Blue Springs, Fanning Springs, Crystal River, and the Goethe State Forest. These areas support significant fish, wildlife, and plant populations including threatened and endangered species such as the West Indian manatee, the Florida scrub-jay, and the gopher tortoise. The study area also includes an abundance of prime farmlands and agricultural properties that serve both economic and environmental functions in addition to Spring Protection and Recharge Areas, Florida Forever Lands, and Florida Ecological Greenways Network critical linkages.

### Community

The population of the eight-county study area is projected to increase approximately 15% by 2045, adding over 40,000 more residents to the area (Table 1).



1

**Table 1. Existing and Projected Population<sup>1</sup>**

County	2019	2045	Percentage Change
Citrus	147,744	177,346	20%
Dixie	16,610	17,135	3%
Gilchrist	17,766	21,382	20%
Jefferson	14,776	15,686	6%
Lafayette	8,482	10,109	19%
Levy	41,330	45,460	10%
Madison	19,570	20,124	3%
Taylor	22,458	24,675	10%
Study Area	288,736	331,917	15%
Florida	21,208,589	27,266,909	29%

2

3 Citrus County currently contributes almost half the population of the study area and will account for  
4 most of the population growth in the future. Citrus, Gilchrist, and Lafayette Counties are projected to  
5 have the highest growth by 2045 (approximately 20%) with Dixie and Madison Counties projected to  
6 have the lowest population growth (approximately 3%) during the same period. The state’s projected  
7 population increase is approximately 29% during this same time period, nearly twice the growth rate of  
8 the overall study area. Population within the study area is mostly driven by domestic migration from  
9 other parts of the state. All of the counties in the study area, except Gilchrist, experienced more deaths  
10 than births over the last decade, reflecting an older population.<sup>2</sup>

11

12 The study area is a blend of coastal and inland areas, which are mostly rural and agricultural with  
13 conservation areas, small towns, and scattered suburban communities. Approximately 88% is in  
14 agricultural or recreation/park use, while residential use accounts for approximately 8% of the overall  
15 land use.<sup>3</sup> The remaining 4% of land uses are comprised of primarily industrial, institutional, and  
16 commercial development. While mostly rural in nature, there are 21 towns and cities within the study  
17 area with an abundance of community resources including schools, parks, places of worship, and  
18 downtown main streets. There are also several historic resources within the study area including the  
19 Monticello Historic District, the Crystal River Archaeological Site, and the Letchworth-Love Mounds  
20 Archaeological State Park.

21

22 As one of the more rural areas of the state, the study area has limited infrastructure and lower levels  
23 of adequate broadband internet access, sewer and water service, and transit than the rest of the state.  
24 In addition, all of the counties have limited access to fresh food (within half a mile) and significantly  
25 lower access to healthcare (hospitals and physicians) than the rest of the state. Dixie, Gilchrist,  
26 Jefferson, and Lafayette Counties do not have any hospital facilities and all of the counties (except for  
27 Citrus) have fewer than 10 licensed physicians.<sup>4</sup> These deficiencies affect the quality of life for residents  
28 in the study area and limit the ability to attract new residents and businesses. Future vision and land  
29 use plans for the counties in the study area generally focus on the need to protect and enhance the

<sup>1</sup> Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research. *Population Demographics 2019 Medium Projections*.

<sup>2</sup> US Census. *2013-2017 American Community Survey – 5 Year Estimates*.

<sup>3</sup> FDOT *Generalized Land Use*, Florida Dept. of Revenue (2015), and University of Florida (UF) Institute of Food and Agricultural Science *Florida Agriculture 2018 Fast Facts*.

<sup>4</sup> Florida Department of Health. *County Health Profiles and Resource Availability 2018*.

1 environment and quality of life for residents while providing economic opportunity and growth in an  
2 environmentally and economically sustainable manner.

### 3 4 **Economy**

5 The local economy within the study area is primarily based on the trade, education, healthcare, and  
6 construction industries. In addition, all of the counties list government services as one of their top  
7 employers with many residents working in the county government (administration and schools) and  
8 state correctional institutions. Several counties also list agricultural businesses as some of their largest  
9 employers. The presence of various natural resources also provides local economic benefits as the  
10 study area has a successful and growing mining, silviculture, and ecotourism industries.

11  
12 All eight counties have a median household income below the 2017 state median income (\$50,833)  
13 and all counties (except Jefferson County) have a poverty rate that exceeds the 2017 state poverty rate  
14 (15.5%). In addition, educational attainment levels are lower in all eight study area counties than the  
15 state average and the unemployment rates for counties within the study area have historically been  
16 near or above the state unemployment average.<sup>5</sup> All of the counties, except for Citrus, have also been  
17 designated as Rural Areas of Opportunity by the Governor in need of expansion of economic  
18 development projects.<sup>6</sup> Specific areas targeted for economic development include the City of  
19 Monticello, the City of Madison, the Town of Greenville, the Town of Cross City, northern Gilchrist  
20 County, northern Lafayette County, the City of Perry, and northeast Citrus County.

### 21 22 **Infrastructure**

23 Much of the study area is served by state highways and county roads with varying speed limits and  
24 partial or full access. Many of these facilities are older and were not developed with the benefit of  
25 environmentally sensitive design features and modern stormwater facilities. There are no high speed,  
26 high capacity transportation facilities in the central portion of the study area. There are two high speed,  
27 high capacity facilities within the study area at the northern- and southern-most boundaries. The  
28 Suncoast Parkway (S.R. 589) is a toll road that runs north out of the Tampa Bay region in the southern  
29 portion of the study area and terminates in Citrus County. I-10 runs east-west across the state at the  
30 northern portion of the study area through Jefferson and Madison Counties. I-75, located east of the  
31 study area, is the only north-south high speed, high capacity transportation facility serving this area.  
32 There is also freight rail located in the northern and southern ends of the study area; however, there is  
33 no rail within the central portion of the study area. The CSX “S” line, a major north-south freight line in  
34 the state, is located east of the study area and I-75.

35  
36 Traffic data shows that approximately 60% of vehicular trips stay within the study area, 30% of the trips  
37 are to and from the study area, and only 10% of the trips pass through the study area.<sup>7</sup> In addition,  
38 future traffic conditions modeling based on growth projections indicate that I-75 (east of and outside  
39 the study area) and several roadways within the study area could operate at a poor Level of Service  
40 (LOS) E or F with high to excessive levels of delay at peak times. FDOT analyzed future traffic in the  
41 study area based on population growth projections from local government comprehensive plans. Based  
42 on improvements currently in the FDOT Work Program and existing cost-feasible plans for the Strategic

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<sup>5</sup> Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research. *Statistics and County Profiles 2019*.

<sup>6</sup> Florida Department of Economic Opportunity. *North Central Rural Areas of Opportunity*.

<sup>7</sup> AirSage, Inc. *Study Area Daily Trips Summary 2016*.

1 Intermodal System and MPOs in the study area, this traffic growth could produce significant congestion  
2 along much of I-75 and portions of U.S. 41, S.R. 44, S.R. 200, and S.R. 121 by the year 2050.<sup>8</sup>

3  
4 Approximately 3,800 vehicle crashes resulting in nearly 90 deaths occurred along roadways within the  
5 study area in 2018. This was a 44% increase in total traffic fatalities from 2010 to 2018 in the study  
6 area, compared to 28% statewide over the same period.<sup>9</sup> In addition, I-75, the primary north-south high  
7 speed, high capacity transportation corridor serving (but outside of the study area), also experiences  
8 crashes above the state average. Mobility options are limited within the study area as most existing  
9 roadways do not provide transit or safe bicycle and pedestrian facilities. In addition, five counties within  
10 the study area (Citrus, Levy, Dixie, Jefferson, and Taylor Counties) are coastal counties susceptible to  
11 hurricanes and storm surge with designated emergency evacuation zones.

12  
13 As previously noted, the study area has lower levels of adequate broadband internet access than the  
14 rest of the state. According to the Federal Communications Commission, all eight counties in the study  
15 area are below the Florida average (96.2%) for access to fixed speed broadband internet. Only 1% of  
16 residents in Dixie County and less than 20% of residents in Levy County have access to the common  
17 standard of broadband speed of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps) download.<sup>10</sup> In addition, some  
18 portions of the study area have no broadband service and many residents are unable to afford what  
19 service is available.

20  
21 **Appendix D** includes a complete demographic profile and overview of each county. (To be updated  
22 and included in final report)

## 23 RECOMMENDATIONS

### 24 APPROACH AND FRAMEWORK

25  
26 The Task Force recognized the scope of the M-CORES purpose and program, as well as the scale of  
27 the corridors authorized in statute, called for thoughtful decision making supported by the best available  
28 data, analysis, and subject matter expertise and extensive public input. The Task Force recognized  
29 decisions about where these corridors should be located and how they should be developed,  
30 particularly in relation to environmental resources and existing communities, could have  
31 transformational impacts not only on the study area but also on the state as a whole.

32 Since the Task Force process was designed to occur prior to the corridor planning process, the Task  
33 Force was not able to review data on nor discuss every potential impact of the corridor in detail. The  
34 Task Force focused on developing recommendations for how FDOT and other agencies should  
35 implement the M-CORES program in this study area in three areas:

- 36 • **High-Level Needs** – The Task Force identified key regional opportunities and challenges  
37 related to the six statutory purposes for M-CORES that should be priorities for the M-CORES  
38 program in the study area. The Task Force also developed guidance for how FDOT should work  
39 with partners to evaluate these potential needs and form more specific purpose and need

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<sup>8</sup> FDOT. Traffic Forecast Input. 2018 Existing Conditions and 2050 Traffic Conditions.

<sup>9</sup> Florida Dept. of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. Traffic Crash 2018 Annual Report.

<sup>10</sup> Federal Communications Commission. Access to Fixed 25Mbps/3Mbps Broadband by County 2019.



1 statements for corridor improvements moving forward. The high-level needs, along with the  
2 purpose, answer the question “why?”.

- 3 • **Guiding Principles** – The Task Force recommended a set of core values to guide decision-  
4 making related to the M-CORES program in the study area throughout the planning,  
5 development, and implementation process. These answer the question “how?”.
- 6 • **Instructions for Project Development and Beyond** – The Task Force recommended specific  
7 directions for future project development and implementation activities to ensure the Task  
8 Force’s guiding principles are applied to subsequent activities as intended. These answer the  
9 question “what’s next?”.

10 In completing this report, the Task Force’s intent is to provide these consensus recommendations for  
11 how FDOT can effectively carry out the M-CORES program as specified in s. 338.2278, F.S.  
12 Consensus on the report does not constitute agreement by all Task Force members that at this phase  
13 in program delivery, project specific needs or environmental and financial feasibility are fully developed;  
14 but rather, the report is intended to provide consensus recommendations for how needs should be  
15 evaluated and how corridor development and related activities should move forward to implement the  
16 statute and support the environment, quality of life, and prosperity of the study area and the state.

17 s. 338.2278 (3)(c) 6, F.S. states “To the maximum extent feasible, the department shall adhere to the  
18 recommendations of the task force created for each corridor in the design of the multiple modes of  
19 transportation and multiple types of infrastructure associated with the corridor.” The Task Force viewed  
20 this statement as inclusive of all of the recommendations contained in this report and applicable to  
21 activities associated with the M-CORES program. The Task Force also recognized that as future work  
22 continues in the study area, additional information or changing conditions may provide insight about  
23 the feasibility and value of specific implementation steps that could warrant refinements to specific  
24 recommendations; in these situations, the guiding principles and intent of the Task Force will guide any  
25 such refinements.

### 26 27 **High-Level Needs**

28 High-level needs are key regional opportunities and challenges that the M-CORES program, including  
29 corridor investments and related actions are intended to address. The high-level needs build on the six  
30 purposes and 13 potential benefits in s. 338.2278 (1), F.S. The potential high-level needs include  
31 conventional transportation needs such as safety, mobility, and connectivity, as well as broader regional  
32 needs that could be supported through a transportation corridor, such as economic development and  
33 quality of life.

34  
35 Florida Statute charged the Task Force to “evaluate the need for, and the economic and environmental  
36 impacts of, hurricane evacuation impacts of, and land use impacts of” the corridor on which the Task  
37 Force is focusing. Because the Task Force was in a pre-planning phase of the corridor planning  
38 process, its activities focused on review of partner and public input, existing plans and studies, and  
39 available data and forecasts on trends and conditions in the study area. FDOT provided preliminary  
40 baseline forecasts for future population, employment, and traffic, but the amount and precision of the  
41 information provided was not sufficient to define specific corridor needs at a level of detail necessary  
42 to initiate project development.

43 In general, the Task Force found significant needs in the study area related to the six statutory  
44 purposes, including revitalizing rural communities, supporting economic development, enhancing

1 quality of life, and protecting the environment. The Task Force also recognized general needs to  
2 enhance transportation safety, mobility, and connectivity in the study area. The Task Force identified  
3 a series of potential high-level needs for future evaluation by FDOT and developed recommendations  
4 for how FDOT should assess the need for a corridor of the scale specified in statute:

5 • **Support projected statewide and regional population and economic growth**

6 FDOT preliminary traffic analysis indicates that projected growth could produce significant  
7 congestion along much of I-75 and portions of U.S. 41, S.R. 44, S.R. 200, and S.R. 121 by the year  
8 2050. The Task Force recommended further refinement of these traffic projections, including  
9 evaluation of whether potential improvements to or development of a new inland corridor would  
10 relieve future traffic on I-75, as well as how traffic on the Suncoast Corridor would be impacted by  
11 completion of the Northern Turnpike Corridor. The Task Force recommended that the traffic analysis  
12 consider future demand for moving both people and freight, as well as both local/regional travel  
13 originating and terminating within the study area and statewide/interregional travel to, from, and  
14 through the study area. The traffic analysis also should consider potential changes in travel demand  
15 related to the state's recovery from COVID-19 and potential long-term changes in travel behavior,  
16 such as greater propensity for working from home and increased home delivery of goods and  
17 services. The analysis also should consider potential changes in travel demand and transportation  
18 system capacity related to increased use of emerging technologies such as automated and  
19 connected vehicles and the next generation of mobility. Finally, the analysis should consider  
20 potential shifts in economic activity that could be related to a significant industry expansion or  
21 recession in the study area during the analysis period.

22  
23 The Task Force also recommended that FDOT use population and economic growth projected in  
24 local government comprehensive plans and/or the metropolitan planning organization long range  
25 transportation plans and the Florida Transportation Plan (FTP) as the baseline for estimating future  
26 travel demand in the study area. These projections generally are consistent with the mid-range  
27 projections developed annually by the University of Florida Bureau of Economic and Business  
28 Research (BEBR), which could serve as a proxy for those counties who have not updated their  
29 comprehensive plans in recent years.

30  
31 • **Improve safety, mobility, and connectivity through access to a high speed, high capacity  
32 transportation corridor for people and commercial goods**

33 The Task Force discussed and received subject matter and public input on how access to high  
34 capacity transportation corridors that provide interregional connectivity are a key factor for business  
35 recruitment and retention, particularly for underserved rural areas in need of economic  
36 enhancement. They also emphasized the need to have a better understanding of how a new corridor  
37 or corridors (Suncoast Corridor and Northern Turnpike Corridor) would affect the existing  
38 transportation network and if it would relieve traffic on existing roadways (such as I-75) and  
39 potentially divert traffic to/from northwest Florida and the study area. The Task Force recommended  
40 additional refinement of traffic analysis (as noted in the previous bullet) in addition to working with  
41 local governments on potential operational improvements, existing facility enhancements, and  
42 interchange locations.

1 • **Protect, restore, enhance, and connect public and private environmentally sensitive areas**  
2 **and ecosystems**

3 The Task Force reviewed multiple data sources and maps and discussed the unique characteristics  
4 of the region's environment and natural resources including aquifer recharge areas, major  
5 watersheds, springs, rivers, farmlands, wildlife habitats, native plants, and ecosystems within the  
6 study area. They discussed how many of these resources need protection and enhancement and  
7 that many have already been identified for conservation and acquisition. The Task Force  
8 recommended guiding principles and instructions for how the M-CORES program could help achieve  
9 environmental goals, including proactive opportunities to restore, connect, and enhance resources.  
10 The Task Force recommended that FDOT give particular attention to these resources through  
11 application of these guiding principles in addition to standard project development and environmental  
12 review processes  
13

14 • **Enhance travel options and safety for all transportation users**

15 FDOT presented recent crash data within the study area indicating that traffic fatalities over the last  
16 decade are higher than the state average during the same period. The Task Force also heard how  
17 mobility options are limited within the study area as most existing roadways do not provide transit or  
18 safe bicycle and pedestrian facilities. The Task Force received subject matter and public input on  
19 the need for transportation facilities that use innovative design and technology to improve automobile  
20 safety, reduce the number of incidents, and accommodate multi-modal transportation, including  
21 multi-use trails separated from the roadway. They also discussed the need to have a better  
22 understanding of how a new corridor would improve safety and if other modes of transportation could  
23 be developed independent of a roadway. The Task Force recommended guiding principles and  
24 instructions that the corridor safely accommodate and enhance multiple modes of transportation  
25 (pedestrian, bicycle, transit, and rail) and that strategies/technology be explored to reduce incidents  
26 and improve response.  
27

28 • **Enhance emergency management at the local, regional, and state levels**

29 The Task Force heard from an industry expert on emergency response planning and discussed  
30 evacuation and sheltering needs as five counties within the study area are coastal counties with  
31 emergency evacuation zones. In addition, they discussed how I-75 serves as the primary  
32 evacuation/response route for the study area in addition to large portions of central and southwest  
33 Florida, including the heavily populated Tampa Bay region. The Task Force discussed the need for  
34 local and regional emergency response and evacuation studies to inform and support the needs  
35 within the study area. The Task Force discussed the ongoing updates to the Statewide Regional  
36 Evacuation Study by regional planning councils and asked FDOT to consider those studies as they  
37 will provide updated information including travel behavior and sheltering needs. They also suggested  
38 that FDOT conduct analysis that considers and documents mobility and connectivity needs related  
39 to both routine daily traffic and special events such as evacuation and response to major  
40 emergencies and disasters.  
41

42 • **Improve access to ecotourism and recreational assets**

43 The Task Force discussed the multitude of natural resources that serve as the basis of the  
44 ecotourism and nature-based recreation industry in the study area. They also received subject  
45 matter and public input on how many of the outdoor activities and resources in the study area not  
46 only create economic development opportunities for local businesses, but also provide unique

1 opportunities for recreation, wildlife viewing, and the ability to develop an appreciation of the natural  
2 environment and conservation. The Task Force recognized the importance of access to the  
3 resources in addition to the need to protect and enhance the very resources that serve as the basis  
4 for the industry and draw many residents to live in the area.  
5

6 • **Enhance economic and workforce development, access to education, and job creation**

7 The Task Force reviewed socio-economic data for the study area and heard from subject matter  
8 experts, local governments, and the public on the challenges in the study area with regards to  
9 employment and educational opportunities. They discussed how key demographic statistics indicate  
10 the need for increased opportunities for educational attainment, job training, workforce development,  
11 and overall economic development within the study area. The Task Force also discussed how  
12 infrastructure improvements (roadway, multi-modal, and communications) can create a competitive  
13 environment to attract businesses, investment, and talent to a region. They also discussed the need  
14 for FDOT to consider the mobility, economic, and fiscal impacts of potential shifts in economic activity  
15 from existing communities and corridors to enhanced or new corridors, as well as potential net  
16 economic benefits to the region and state. They also suggested working with economic development  
17 organizations to fully evaluate and understand these economic development needs as the project  
18 moves forward and consider ways that FDOT and the M-CORES program can support and build on  
19 their existing economic plans.  
20

21 • **Improve connectivity to agricultural businesses, manufacturing, warehousing, freight  
22 terminals, and intermodal logistics centers**

23 The Task Force reviewed GIS data of available transportation facilities and received subject matter  
24 and public input on the importance of centrally located high speed, high capacity corridors for  
25 logistics and movement of commercial goods and agricultural, forestry, and mining products. They  
26 recognized that while transportation is often the most vital component to ensure economic  
27 competitiveness of these business, agricultural and rural land also need protection and  
28 enhancement in order to be productive. They also discussed the fact that several counties have  
29 already identified areas for farmland preservation and those areas should be taken into  
30 consideration. The Task Force recommended additional analysis be conducted in addition to  
31 working with local governments and stakeholders (businesses, farmers, organizations, etc.) to fully  
32 evaluate and understand emerging trends and connectivity needs as the project moves forward.  
33

34 • **Expand rural broadband infrastructure and access to broadband service**

35 The Task Force reviewed data on the limited availability of broadband access within the study area  
36 and heard from experts on a utility panel and the public on how it is crucial for education,  
37 employment, business operations, and access to healthcare and has become part of a community's  
38 critical infrastructure. They discussed how the lack of access to healthcare (physicians and hospitals)  
39 and college/technical schools within the rural study area increases the need for improved broadband  
40 service for virtual healthcare and learning opportunities. The Task Force recommended additional  
41 analysis be conducted to see if there are ways to accommodate increased broadband independent  
42 of a transportation facility and consider programs that make the service more affordable. There was  
43 also discussion on the need to consider expansion of other utility needs at a regional scale  
44 (sewer/water, solar, etc.).

1 • **Preserve and improve the rural character and quality of communities**

2 The Task Force discussed and heard from the public on the importance of preserving the character  
3 of the area and protecting the variety of community resources in the study area including downtowns,  
4 parks, schools, places of worship, and various cultural (historic and archaeological) resources. While  
5 a key purpose of M-CORES is to revitalize rural communities with additional infrastructure and  
6 economic development opportunities, input from the Task Force members and the public  
7 emphasized the importance of preserving the quality of life in these communities. The Task Force  
8 stressed the importance of working with local communities, listening to their concerns and  
9 preferences, and understanding their goals and visions throughout the corridor development  
10 process. They also discussed the need for minimization of negative impacts to the human  
11 environment to ensure the project does not negatively impact the very communities it was designed  
12 to improve.

13  
14 **Evaluation of Needs Moving Forward**

15 As input to project development, FDOT will conduct a robust evaluation of the potential high-level needs  
16 in the study area, building on the recommendations of the Task Force. This process will evaluate and  
17 distinguish between conventional safety, mobility, and connectivity needs, and broader regional needs  
18 related to transportation that also are included in the statutory purpose in s. 338.2278, F.S. Additional  
19 details on the needs evaluation process as well as the steps involved in identifying and evaluating  
20 alternatives are specified in the Action Plan on page 23 of this report.

21  
22 The Task Force believes that the formal determination of need pursuant to statutory requirements and  
23 consistent with accepted statewide processes is an important milestone in corridor planning and  
24 development. The Task Force has developed a series of guiding principles and instructions for future  
25 planning and development of corridors for which high-level needs have been identified. While these  
26 determinations will be made after the Task Force has completed its deliberations, the guidance  
27 provided by the Task Force will instruct the evaluation process and FDOT will create ongoing  
28 opportunities for partners and the public to be engaged during the process.

29  
30 **Guiding Principles and Instructions**

31 The Task Force recommended guiding principles and instructions that are intended to function as a  
32 set of directions to FDOT and other partners as they carry out future planning, project development,  
33 and implementation activities related to the M-CORES program in s. 338.2278, F.S. These guiding  
34 principles and instructions are intended to supplement the requirements of current FDOT processes  
35 during planning, project development, design, and other implementation phases.

36 The Task Force developed a series of 13 guiding principles and associated instructions. The text  
37 below lists the specific guiding principles and instructions with supporting text to document the intent  
38 of the Task Force. The guiding principles function as an integrated set and are not presented in a  
39 specific priority order.

40  
41 **CONSISTENCY WITH STATEWIDE, REGIONAL, AND LOCAL PLANS**

42 The Task Force recognizes that there are plans specifically called out in statute, where consistency is  
43 the standard by law or policy; these include the local government comprehensive plans, metropolitan  
44 long-range transportation plans, strategic regional policy plans, and the statewide Florida  
45 Transportation Plan (FTP). They stressed the importance of preventing growth form occurring in areas

1 that have not planned for that growth. They also suggested exploring opportunities to provide technical  
2 and financial assistance to local governments for comprehensive plan reviews and amendments as the  
3 statute requires local governments with a planned interchange in their jurisdiction to review land use  
4 and natural resource protections and make any necessary comprehensive plan amendments by  
5 December 31, 2023. The following guiding principle and instructions were developed by the Task Force  
6 to address the consistency issue. *It is important to note that this is considered a cross-cutting guiding*  
7 *principle with associated instructions to serve all high-level needs and support all other guiding*  
8 *principles in this report.*

9  
10 **Guiding Principle #1:** Be consistent with statutorily required statewide, regional, and local plans  
11 including the local government comprehensive plans, Long Range Transportation Plans (LRTPs),  
12 Regional Planning Council (RPC) Strategic Regional Policy Plans, and the Florida Transportation Plan  
13 (FTP).

14  
15 **Instructions:**

- 16 • Be consistent with goals, objectives, policies, and resources identified in local government  
17 comprehensive plans (s. 163.3177, F.S. and s. 163.3178, F.S.), metropolitan long range  
18 transportation plans (s. 339.175, F.S.), and strategic regional policy plans (s. 186.507, F.S.),  
19 placing emphasis on future land use maps and growth projections, as well as regional and  
20 community visions as adopted into strategic regional policy plans and/or local government  
21 comprehensive plans.
- 22 • Be consistent with the vision, goals, and strategies of the FTP (s. 339.155, F.S.).
- 23 • Coordinate among agencies to address differences among statutorily required state, regional,  
24 and local plans related to transportation corridors and future growth and development  
25 projections, including differences related to the timing and horizon years of plan updates as well  
26 as the geographical areas covered by regional plans.
- 27 • Identify needs to update statutorily required plans to address Task Force recommendations, such  
28 as designation and management of transportation corridors (s. 337.273, F.S.), and consideration  
29 of whether areas around potential interchange locations contain appropriate land use and  
30 environmental resource protections (s. 338.2278, F.S.); coordinate among local governments,  
31 regional planning councils, metropolitan planning organizations, and FDOT on plan updates.
- 32 • Provide technical support to coordinate with local governments for best practices to implement  
33 as part of plan updates.

34  
35 **MAXIMIZE USE OF EXISTING FACILITIES**

36 The Task Force emphasized the importance of examining the potential to upgrade or use existing  
37 transportation facilities or corridors to meet the purpose and need of the project before planning a new  
38 location corridor in order to minimize project impacts. The following guiding principle and instructions  
39 were developed by the Task Force to address the use of existing facilities. *This is considered a cross-*  
40 *cutting guiding principle with associated instructions to serve all high-level needs and support all other*  
41 *guiding principles in this report.*

42  
43 **Guiding Principle #2:** Evaluate potential alternatives for addressing the M-CORES purposes and  
44 interregional statewide connectivity and mobility needs in this priority order:

- 45  
46 1. Make safety and operational improvements to existing transportation facilities.

2. Add capacity to existing transportation facilities or other publicly owned right-of-way in or near the study area, including co-location of facilities within existing disturbed right-of-way and other approaches to transforming existing facilities and right-of-way to accommodate additional modes, uses, and functions.
3. In circumstances where purpose and need, and/or other guiding principles cannot be addressed by operational or existing facility improvements, then new alignment alternatives may be evaluated.

#### **Instructions:**

- Identify and advance safety and operational improvements to existing transportation facilities, particularly those that would be adjacent to a new or improved north-south corridor.
- Evaluate potential capacity improvements to a broad range of existing transportation facilities (rail and roadway) in or near the study area, including their impact on surrounding environmental resources, land uses, and communities.
- Evaluate opportunities for co-location within or adjacent to existing disturbed rail, utility, and roadway right-of-way in or near the study area, including their impact on surrounding environmental resources, land uses, and communities.
- Assess connectivity gaps between existing transportation facilities and areas identified as priorities for attraction, and potential opportunities for closing those gaps.
- Advance specific improvements that support a system meeting the long-term needs of statewide and interregional flows of people and freight.
- Collaborate with local governments on operational improvements, existing facility enhancements, and, if needed, interchange locations to ensure consistency with local government comprehensive plans. This collaboration should consider how proposed improvements can help enhance the vitality of the residential and business communities and provide access to vital resources (police, fire, shelters, etc.).

#### **TECHNOLOGY**

The Task Force encouraged FDOT to explore ways for new and emerging technology to meet the needs of the corridor and potentially reduce impacts to the natural and human environment. The following guiding principle and instructions were developed by the Task Force to address technology. *This is considered a cross-cutting guiding principle with associated instructions to serve all high-level needs and support all other guiding principles in this report.*

**Guiding Principle #3:** Incorporate technology into corridor planning, design, construction, operations, and maintenance. Accommodate emerging vehicle and information technologies such as autonomous, connected, electric, and shared vehicles (ACES) and mobility as a service (MaaS).

#### **Instructions:**

- Leverage existing technology to help avoid, minimize, or mitigate adverse impacts from the corridor.
- Consider how future and emerging technologies, such as electronic and automated vehicles, may be accommodated.
- Apply innovative planning and design strategies such as using state-of-the-art and/or energy efficient methodologies, technologies, and materials to develop the corridor.

- Plan and design the corridors to accommodate technologies/applications, considering their ability to evolve/adapt over time.

## RESILIENCE

The Task Force stressed the importance of ensuring that new or improved infrastructure is designed to adapt to significant changes or unexpected impacts in order to make the state's transportation system more resilient. The following guiding principle and instructions were developed by the Task Force to address infrastructure resilience. *This is considered a cross-cutting guiding principle with associated instructions to serve all high-level needs and support all other guiding principles in this report.*

**Guiding Principle #4:** Plan and develop corridors that consider vulnerability to risks such as inland flooding, storm surge zones, and changing coastlines/sea level rise. Design and construct infrastructure to withstand and recover from potential risks such as extreme weather events and climate trends.

### Instructions:

- Identify sea level rise projections appropriate to the planning horizon of road and bridge infrastructure.
- When developing and evaluating corridors, place a high priority on the ability of existing, co-located or new infrastructure to withstand and recover from risks such as storm surge (tropical storm through category 5), inland flooding, extreme weather events, and climate trends.

## TRANSPORTATION MODES

The Task Force emphasized the importance of examining opportunities to include other transportation modes such as shared-use trails, freight and passenger rail, and public transit in the corridor. They encouraged FDOT to think beyond personal automobile travel to meet a variety of mobility needs and travel options. The following guiding principle and instructions were developed by the Task Force to address multi-modal transportation. *It is important to note that this is considered a cross-cutting guiding principle with associated instructions to serve all high-level needs and support all other guiding principles in this report.*

**Guiding Principle #5:** Plan, design, construct, and operate a corridor that accommodates multiple modes of transportation.

### Instructions:

- Consult with local communities and the public on needs and preferences for multimodal forms of transportation that could be included with the corridor.
- Consider innovative planning and design strategies to accommodate multiple modes of transportation.
- Enhance mobility and accessibility in areas with high concentrations of transportation-disadvantaged populations.
- Review applicable metropolitan planning organization long range transportation plans, local government comprehensive plans, and transit development plans. Use these plans to help inform and refine the corridor's purpose and need for evaluating modal solutions and identifying potential alternatives.



1 **COMMUNITY IDENTITY AND CHARACTER**

2 Enhancing communities was an area of focus for Task Force members. While they recognized the  
3 need to enhance the quality of life for residents, they also emphasized the importance of preserving  
4 many of the rural qualities of this area. The following guiding principle and instructions were developed  
5 by the Task Force to address the need to preserve and improve the rural character and quality of  
6 communities in the study area.

7  
8 **Guiding Principle #6:** Seek opportunities to maintain and enhance the rural character and quality of  
9 life in communities, and ensure the corridor provides for their future vitality.

10  
11 **Instructions:**

- 12 • Work with communities on preferences to enhance and maintain safety, quality of life, and  
13 character of communities. Community preferences for incorporation into corridor planning,  
14 interchange locations, additional infrastructure needs, and project development may include:
- 15     ➤ access (toll vs. limited access and access locations),
  - 16     ➤ aesthetics (including signs, billboards, etc.) and native landscaping,
  - 17     ➤ branding, and
  - 18     ➤ signage.
- 19
- 20
  - 21 • Explore opportunities to view, understand, and access the environmental uniqueness of the Big  
22 Bend Ecosystem.
  - 23 • Plan, design, construct, operate, and maintain corridors that recognize and incorporate the  
24 surrounding community character (including downtown areas, social and cultural centers) while  
25 accommodating potential growth and development. Balance the need to move vehicles safely  
26 and efficiently while preserving and enhancing scenic, aesthetic, historic, and environmental  
27 resources.
- 28

29 **HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES**

30 The Task Force discussed many of the important cultural resources in the study area including historic  
31 districts and archaeological sites that contribute to the community and enhance the quality of life in the  
32 study area. They encouraged the preservation, protection, and enhancement of existing resources as  
33 well as any new resources that are discovered throughout the project planning and development  
34 process. The following guiding principle and instructions were developed by the Task Force to address  
35 the need to preserve and improve the rural character and quality of communities in the study area with  
36 regards to historic and cultural resources.

37 **Guiding Principle #7:** Avoid adverse impacts to these identified resources:

- 38
- 39 • Known cultural sites with human remains
  - 40 • Known cemeteries
  - 41 • Known lands owned by Native American Tribes
  - 42 • Historic resources listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP)

43 If new resources are discovered, they will be addressed consistent with state and federal policies and  
44 regulations.

1 **Instructions:**

- 2 • Work with communities and their stakeholders to identify needs for enhancement or protection  
3 of historic and cultural resources.
- 4 • Follow (FDOT) Project Development & Environment (PD&E) Manual; Part 2 Chapter 8, Section  
5 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966 as amended; 36 Code of Federal  
6 Regulations (CFR) Part 800; and the Florida Historical Resources Act (FHRA), Chapter 267,  
7 Florida Statutes (F.S.), for coordination of involvement with historic and cultural resources,  
8 including lands owned by Native American Tribes.

9

10 **NATURAL ENVIRONMENT**

11 Among the six statutory purposes for M-CORES, protecting the environment and natural resources was  
12 the focus of the greatest portion of the Task Force’s discussion time. The Task Force acknowledged  
13 its statutory direction to evaluate design features and the need for acquisition of state conservation  
14 lands that mitigate the impact of project construction on the water quality and quantity of springs, rivers,  
15 and aquifer recharge areas and on wildlife habitat. The Task Force also recognized the potential  
16 impacts of corridor development on significant environmental resources in the study area from both  
17 direct impacts from corridor development as well as indirect impacts from future population and  
18 economic growth and land development that could occur in areas with greater transportation  
19 connectivity, particularly around interchanges.

20 The Task Force developed an integrated approach for addressing environmental resources including  
21 conservation lands, wildlife and plant habitat, and water resources. This approach reflects a priority  
22 order of first, avoiding negative impacts to resources; second, restoring, connecting, and enhancing  
23 resources; and third, minimizing the mitigating negative impacts. This order reflects the Task Force’s  
24 consensus that the optimal approach should be to avoid negative impacts to environmental resources,  
25 but that if an impact cannot be avoided, proactive efforts should be taken to provide net positive benefits  
26 to the resource.

27 To help implement this approach, FDOT identified and committed to specific environmental resources  
28 that will not be impacted by a corridor or where no new corridor will be placed through the resource,  
29 such as existing conservation lands or habitat already fragmented by existing transportation facilities.  
30 In these cases, the existing facilities or right of way could be improved, but steps should be taken to  
31 restore or enhance the environmental resource at the same time. In addition, the Task Force identified  
32 other important resources where avoidance is not explicitly defined at this time, but where great care  
33 should be taken to evaluate potential corridors and their impacts moving forward.

34 In addition, the Task Force recognized the opportunities to contribute toward broader regional and  
35 statewide environmental goals though the decisions made about corridor development as well as the  
36 abilities the statute provides to FDOT regarding right of way acquisition and other mitigation activities.  
37 The Task Force recommended that FDOT commit to working closely with other local, regional, state,  
38 and federal agencies and nongovernmental organizations to advance key priorities such as high priority  
39 land conservation, habitat and water resource protection, and ecosystem connectivity initiatives  
40 developed by other partners.

41 The following guiding principle and instructions were developed by the Task Force to address the  
42 purpose and need to protect the environment and natural resources and to restore, enhance, and  
43 connect public and private environmentally sensitive areas and ecosystems.

44

1 **Guiding Principle #8:** Avoid adverse impacts to these identified resources:  
2

3 • **Do not impact:**  
4

- 5 ➤ Springheads
- 6 ➤ Named Lakes
- 7 ➤ High Risk Coastal Areas
- 8

9 • **Apply the following priority order for all of the below listed resources:**  
10

- 11 1. Avoid negative impacts to these resources
- 12 2. Restore, connect, and enhance these resources while continuing to avoid negative  
13 impacts
- 14 3. Minimize and mitigate negative impacts to these resources
- 15

16 FDOT will consider these resources during the development, analysis, and comparative evaluation of  
17 project alternatives including the no-build. Resources include:  
18

19 • **Do not develop a new corridor through:**  
20

- 21 ➤ Coastal Areas
- 22 ➤ Aquatic Preserves
- 23 ➤ Mitigation Banks
- 24 ➤ Florida Forever Acquired Lands
- 25 ➤ Managed Conservation Areas
- 26 ➤ State Forests
- 27 ➤ State Parks
- 28

29 • **Additional resources identified as priorities by Task Force members:**  
30

- 31 ➤ Waccasassa Flats
- 32 ➤ Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Floodways
- 33 ➤ Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) Surface Water Sites
- 34 ➤ SWFWMD Groundwater Sites
- 35 ➤ SWFWMD Atmospheric Sites
- 36 ➤ SWFWMD Proposed Well Sites
- 37 ➤ Water Management Lands (including Fee and Conservation Easements)
- 38 ➤ State Owned Lands
- 39 ➤ Other Park Boundaries
- 40 ➤ Wildlife Refuges
- 41 ➤ Florida Forever Targeted Property
- 42 ➤ Prime Farmland
- 43 ➤ Springs Priority Focus Areas
- 44 ➤ Tri-Colored Bats, Critical Wildlife Areas
- 45 ➤ Florida Ecological Greenway Network – Priority 1 & 2
- 46 ➤ Aquifer Recharge Priorities

- 1           ➤ Surface Water Resource Priorities
- 2           ➤ Rare Species Habitat Conservation Priorities
- 3           ➤ Preservation 2000 Lands
- 4           ➤ Basin Management Action Plans (BMAPs)
- 5           ➤ Natural Resources of Regional Significance

6

7 **Instructions:**

8

9 **GENERAL**

- 10           • Place a high priority on avoiding impacts to:
  - 11
  - 12           ➤ Florida Ecological Greenway Network – Priority 1 and 2 lands
  - 13           ➤ High Priority Critical Lands and Waters Identification Project (CLIP) lands

14

15 **CONSERVATION LANDS**

- 16           • Continue to identify and prioritize private and public conservation lands for enhancement or avoidance.
- 17
- 18           • Coordinate with agencies and partners early in the project development process to identify land acquisition plans and identify strategic opportunities to advance acquisition priorities [including s. 338.2278 (3)(c)(6) & (8), F.S.] with the intent to acquire lands prior to or in parallel with corridor development.
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22           • Coordinate with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and other agencies for Florida Forever Program projects that are in the highest priority for acquisition (including consideration for Florida Ecological Greenway Network Priority 1 & 2), potential Water Management District lands, conservation easements by land trusts, and lands within the optimal boundaries of the adopted management plan for regional, state and national parks, forests, refuges, and water management areas.
- 23
- 24
- 25
- 26
- 27
- 28

29 **WILDLIFE HABITATS**

- 30           • Continue to identify and prioritize wildlife areas for enhancement or avoidance.
- 31           • Ensure corridor minimizes impacts to wildlife corridors and gives high priority to design features that establish functional wildlife crossing that maintain connectivity of critical linkages to provide for adequate wildlife/water passage.
- 32
- 33
- 34           • Use best available technology to limit impacts to wildlife including road kills and notify vehicles of other hazards such as smoke from prescribed burns and wildfires.
- 35
- 36

37 **WATER RESOURCES**

- 38           • Work with local jurisdictions (including the water management districts) to ensure best management practices (BMP) and emerging technologies are utilized to maintain, restore, and enhance water quality within the corridor.
- 39
- 40
- 41           • Continue to identify and prioritize water resources for enhancement or avoidance.
- 42           • Look for opportunities to improve water quality as part of new corridor construction as well as upgrades to upgrading existing facilities that do not have the benefit of environmentally friendly design and modern stormwater improvements.
- 43
- 44
- 45
- 46

1 **ECOSYSTEM CONNECTIVITY**

- 2 • Continue to identify and prioritize ecosystems for enhancement or avoidance while  
3 considering wildlife crossing linkages and overall ecosystem connectivity.  
4 • Work with local organizations and businesses to understand the needs for ecotourism  
5 improvements and protections.  
6

7 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

8 Economic development was another major focus area for the Task Force as it serves several  
9 purposes including revitalization of rural communities, job creation, and enhancing the quality of life.  
10 The following guiding principle and instructions were developed by the Task Force to address the  
11 need to enhance economic and workforce development, access to education, and job creation in the  
12 study area.  
13

14 **Guiding Principle #9:** Maximize opportunities to enhance local community and economic  
15 development with an emphasis on rural areas. Avoid and minimize adverse economic impacts to  
16 individual communities, businesses, and resources.  
17

18 **Instructions:**

- 19 • Be consistent with economic development elements of local government comprehensive plans  
20 (s. 163.3177, F.S. and s. 163.3178, F.S.), and comprehensive economic development  
21 strategies developed by regional planning councils in their capacity as federal economic  
22 development districts.  
23 • Conduct early outreach to communities and the public and private sectors to fully understand  
24 economic development needs including job training, education, and workforce development.  
25 • Give priority to and enhance potential economic development opportunities and employment  
26 benefits in the study area by providing, improving, or maintaining accessibility to activity  
27 centers, employment centers, learning institutions, and agricultural lands, and locating  
28 interchanges in a manner that is consistent with the local government existing and future land  
29 uses.  
30 • Build on existing economic development priorities and plans by state and local organizations  
31 including economic development organizations, partnerships, chambers of commerce, and  
32 regional planning councils. Work with the community and organizations to look for  
33 opportunities for the corridor to help them reach their economic development goals.  
34 • Review analysis done by the Land and Water Conservation Fund to support opportunities for  
35 recreational tourism.  
36

37 **AGRICULTURAL LAND USES**

38 The Task Force acknowledged its statutory direction to evaluate design features and the need for  
39 acquisition of state conservation lands that mitigate the impact of project construction on agricultural  
40 land uses. The Task Force emphasized the importance of protecting and enhancing the abundance  
41 of productive agricultural lands (including mining and silviculture) in the study area as they serve both  
42 environmental and economic purposes and contribute to revitalization of rural communities through  
43 job creation and protection of the environment. The following guiding principle and instructions were  
44 developed by the Task Force to address the need to improve connectivity to agricultural businesses,  
45 manufacturing, warehousing, freight terminals, and intermodal logistics centers.

1 **Guiding Principle #10:** Plan and develop transportation corridors in a manner that protects the  
2 region’s most productive agricultural lands and other rural lands with economic or environmental  
3 significance. Improve transportation connectivity to, from, and between working farms and other  
4 economically valuable rural lands.

5  
6 **Instructions:**  
7

- 8 • Work with landowners/operators of agriculture, silviculture, mining, equine, aquaculture,  
9 horticulture, and nursery lands to understand their needs and plans.
- 10 • Emphasize protection and enhancement and coordinate any impacts of farmland preservation  
11 areas designated within local government comprehensive plans and lands in the Florida Rural  
12 and Family Lands Program.
- 13 • Minimize the fragmentation of agriculture, forestry tracts, and facilities and consider how the  
14 project could affect mobilization of equipment and prescribed burning activities.

15  
16 **HIGHWAY SAFETY**

17 Enhancing public safety was also an area of focus for Task Force members. The following guiding  
18 principle and instruction was developed by the Task Force to address the need to enhance travel  
19 options and safety for all transportation users.

20  
21 **Guiding Principle #11:** Plan, design, construct, and operate a corridor that safely accommodates  
22 multiple modes of transportation and types of users.

23  
24 **Instruction:**

- 25 • Reduce transportation incidents and improve response by using advanced safety strategies  
26 including innovative technology, design, and operations.
- 27 • Consult with the Florida Highway Patrol (FHP) and counties to determine current  
28 bottlenecks/safety hazards and mitigate or correct these issues during the Design phase.
- 29 • Consider the provision of truck parking facilities.

30  
31 **EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

32 The Task Force emphasized the importance of ensuring the corridor supports existing emergency  
33 management plans. The following guiding principle and instructions were developed by the Task  
34 Force to address the need to enhance emergency management at the local, regional, and state  
35 levels.

36  
37 **Guiding Principle #12:** Support and enhance local, regional, and state emergency management  
38 plans in all phases: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

39  
40 **Instructions:**

- 41 • Evaluate the immediate and long-term needs and demand for emergency evacuation and  
42 sheltering at the local, regional, and state levels for natural and man-made disasters (including  
43 but not limited to flooding, hurricanes, wildfires, terrorist threats/attacks, industrial  
44 accidents/chemical spills, etc.).

- 1 • Consider both existing emergency response plans and ongoing updates to the Statewide  
2 Regional Evacuation Studies underway by the regional planning councils, including updated  
3 data being developed on travel behavior during emergencies.
- 4 • Support emergency evacuation needs by enhancing emergency evacuation and response  
5 time including providing, maintaining, or expediting roadway access to emergency shelters  
6 and other emergency facilities.
- 7 • Conduct additional emergency management needs analysis as part of the project related  
8 traffic studies.
- 9 • Consider fueling facilities and charging stations.

## 10 **BROADBAND AND OTHER UTILITIES**

11 The Task Force emphasized the importance of ensuring the project supports the need to expand  
12 broadband and utility service (water, sewer, electric, gas, solar, etc.) to the area for the purposes of  
13 revitalizing rural communities, encouraging job creation, and leveraging technology. The following  
14 guiding principle and instructions were developed by the Task Force to address the need to expand  
15 rural broadband infrastructure and access to broadband service in the study area.  
16

17  
18 **Guiding Principle #13:** Plan and design the corridor to enable co-location of broadband and other  
19 utility infrastructure in right-of-way. Plan for broadband and other utility needs at a regional scale,  
20 independent from the transportation facility; address these needs through the corridor, where  
21 feasible.

### 22 **Instructions:**

- 23 • Ensure broadband provider access to FDOT right-of-way is non-discriminatory and  
24 competitively neutral.
- 25 • Coordinate with private internet service providers (ISPs) to determine how construction of the  
26 corridor identifies opportunities for reducing rural broadband deployment costs.  
27

### 28 **Action Plan**

29 In addition to the high-level needs, guiding principles, and instructions, FDOT will commit to the  
30 following actions to move forward with implementation of the recommendations of the Task Force's  
31 report in developing the M-CORES program in this study area, consistent with  
32 s. 338.2278, F.S.:  
33

- 34 • **Evaluate needs.** FDOT will conduct a robust evaluation of corridor needs, building on the Task  
35 Force's recommendations on high-level needs. This process will evaluate and distinguish  
36 between conventional safety, mobility, and connectivity needs, and broader regional needs or  
37 co-benefits related to transportation, such as economic development benefits. The needs  
38 evaluation will include a detailed technical analysis of current and future traffic conditions in the  
39 study area building on the guidance provided by the Task Force in this report. This needs  
40 analysis will support development of a Purpose and Need statement for potential corridor  
41 improvements.
- 42 • **Identify and evaluate alternatives.** FDOT will conduct additional corridor planning activities,  
43 including the Alternative Corridor Evaluation process, and initiate the Project Development and

1 Environment (PD&E) process to identify and evaluate a range of potential alternatives for  
2 corridor improvements in the study area that could accomplish the Purpose and Need.

3 These alternatives will consider operational and capacity improvements, existing and new  
4 facilities including co-location options, and a “no build” option. Consideration will be given to  
5 multiple transportation modes and to application of emerging technologies. The alternatives  
6 will be consistent with the guiding principles and instructions developed by the Task Force.

7 The alternatives evaluation will include the specific economic, environmental, land use, and  
8 emergency management impacts called for in s. 338.2278(3)(c)4, F.S. and the standard  
9 processes outlined in FDOT’s PD&E manual. The evaluation will be consistent with the guiding  
10 principles and instructions recommended by the Task Force.

11 The planning process also will include initial, high-level consideration of potential costs and  
12 funding approaches based on reasonable assumptions at this early stage. It is not likely that  
13 any alternatives would be sufficiently defined at this stage to conduct detailed analysis of  
14 economic feasibility, but early identification of the order of magnitude of potential costs and  
15 funding sources can be used to support decision making on the range of alternatives.

16 The planning and PD&E processes combined will narrow the range of alternatives and identify  
17 opportunities to segment corridor development into multiple projects.

- 18 • **Support consistency review and update of local and regional plans.** FDOT will coordinate  
19 early and often with local governments, metropolitan planning organizations (MPO), and  
20 regional planning councils (RPC) to ensure consistency with applicable local and regional plans  
21 throughout all activities. As required by s. 338.2278(3)(c)10, F.S., FDOT will provide affected  
22 local governments with a copy of the Task Force report and project alignments identified through  
23 the PD&E process so each local government with one or more planned interchanges within its  
24 jurisdiction can meet the statutory requirement to review the Task Force report and local  
25 government comprehensive plan no later than December 31, 2023. Each local government  
26 will consider whether the area in and around the interchange contains appropriate land uses  
27 and environmental protections and whether its comprehensive plan should be amended to  
28 provide appropriate uses and protections. FDOT will coordinate with the local governments,  
29 RPCs, and Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) to assist with plan updates,  
30 including consideration of technical and financial support needs.

- 31 • **Assess economic feasibility and identify potential funding sources.** Following PD&E,  
32 FDOT will evaluate the economic feasibility of the corridor at the 30 percent design phase, when  
33 sufficient information is available to assess the ability to meet statutory requirements for projects  
34 as part of Florida’s Turnpike system consistent with s. 338.223, F.S. The economic feasibility  
35 will account for required costs to develop and implement the corridor, such as engineering, right-  
36 of-way, construction, mitigation, enhancement, and utility costs. This economic feasibility test  
37 will focus on specific corridor projects; additional analyses may be needed to examine the cost  
38 and funding of all M-CORES program initiatives.

39 FDOT also will identify potential funding sources for preferred corridor alternatives identified  
40 during PD&E, including a combination of the specific sources allocated to the M-CORES  
41 program in s. 338.2278, F.S.; toll revenues and associated revenue bonds; and other applicable  
42 state, local, and private revenue sources. FDOT has committed that projects currently in its  
43 Five-Year Work Program for Fiscal Years 2021-2025 will not be impacted by



1 M-CORES funding needs. M-CORES program costs that are not covered through the dedicated  
2 funding sources identified in statute or through toll revenues and associated revenue bonds  
3 would need to be prioritized along with other needs for future Five Year Work Programs, working  
4 through the standard process including the applicable MPO transportation improvement  
5 programs (TIP) and rural transportation planning processes. All M-CORES projects, regardless  
6 of funding source, will be included in applicable MPO TIPs and long-range transportation plans,  
7 consistent with federal guidance about projects of regional significance.

- 8 • **Advance innovative land acquisition concepts.** As provided by s. 338.2278(3)(c) 6, FDOT,  
9 in consultation with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Florida Fish and  
10 Wildlife Conservation Commission, will address the Task Force's recommendations for  
11 combining right-of-way acquisition with the acquisition of lands or easements to facilitate  
12 environmental mitigation or ecosystem, wildlife habitat, or water quality protection or restoration.  
13 A key focus will be on how M-CORES program decisions can support broader regional or  
14 statewide conservation and environmental stewardship goals. This process will identify  
15 opportunities to advance specific land acquisition and related recommendations prior to or in  
16 parallel with corridor construction.
- 17 • **Advance multi-use opportunities.** FDOT will coordinate with local governments, RPCs, other  
18 state agencies, and industry organizations to help advance multi-use opportunities for the  
19 corridor as provided for in statute. An early emphasis will be on broadband and other utility co-  
20 location opportunities, including coordination with DEO on the development of the statewide  
21 broadband strategic plan.
- 22 • **Continue robust partner and public engagement.** FDOT will continue robust coordination  
23 with local, regional, state, and federal agencies and environmental, community, economic  
24 development, and other interest groups, with an intent of exceeding the requirements of the  
25 PD&E process. FDOT will use the Efficient Transportation Decision Making process to facilitate  
26 early and ongoing coordination with resource agencies. FDOT also will create ongoing  
27 opportunities for the range of organizations involved in the Task Force process to be informed  
28 about and provide input to subsequent planning and project development activities. FDOT also  
29 will create multiple ongoing opportunities for members of the public to be aware of and provide  
30 input to this process, with emphasis on direct engagement of the public in local communities.
- 31 • **Commit to transparency and process improvement.** Because of the scale and scope of the  
32 M-CORES program, FDOT will continue to place public engagement as a priority and will  
33 continue to engage all stakeholders during M-CORES planning, project development, and  
34 implementation, including key decision points. FDOT also will report on how decisions are  
35 made, including a periodic report on the status of the specific guiding principles and instructions  
36 committed to in this document. An annual M-CORES budget update will be made publicly  
37 available as part of FDOT's annual work program presentation to the Legislature and the Florida  
38 Transportation Commission.

39 FDOT also recognizes the need for continued improvements to its planning, project  
40 development, and related processes to fully implement the M-CORES purpose and objective  
41 as identified in statute and the guiding principles and instructions as recommended by the Task  
42 Force.