

1 **SOUTHWEST-CENTRAL FLORIDA CONNECTOR**
2 **TASK FORCE FINAL REPORT**

3 November 15, 2020

4 **INTRODUCTION**

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

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

- 13
- 14 • Suncoast Corridor, extending from Citrus County to Jefferson County;
 - 15 • Northern Turnpike Corridor, extending from the northern terminus of the Florida Turnpike
16 northwest to the Suncoast Parkway; and
 - Southwest-Central Florida Corridor, extending from Collier County to Polk County.

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

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

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

TASK FORCE OVERVIEW

Membership

In August 2019, FDOT convened the Southwest-Central Florida Corridor Task Force with 47 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 associated 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 subsequent Task Force meetings were designed with a combination of virtual and in-person methods for both Task Force members and the public to participate (see **Appendix B** for Work Plan and **Appendix C** for Meeting Locations).

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 Southwest-Central Florida Corridor Task Force

s. 338.2278 (3) (c) 7, Florida Statute

- Address the impacts of the construction of a project within the corridor on panther and other critical wildlife habitat and evaluate in its final report the need for acquisition of lands for state conservation or as mitigation for project construction; and
- Evaluate wildlife crossing design features to protect panther and other critical wildlife habitat corridor connections.

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).

5 **Data and Mapping Tools**

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

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

20 **Public Engagement**

21 Public engagement was a critical component of the Task Force process. Opportunities for public
22 engagement were included at each Task Force meeting through a dedicated public comment period
23 and comment stations were set up to receive written comments. Meetings were broadcast live and
24 recordings were posted on the project website for members of the public who could not attend in
25 person. The public also could attend the webinars and hybrid meetings virtually through the
26 GoToWebinar platform. Overall, a total of # people attended the in-person meetings and # people
27 attended the webinars and meetings virtually [*attendance numbers will be updated after October’s*
28 *Task Force Meeting #9*].

29 To further public engagement, Community Open Houses were held in Wauchula, Naples (twice),
30 Bartow, Arcadia, LaBelle, Winter Haven and Punta Gorda to share information about the process and
31 receive public input. [*Includes future Community Open Houses tentatively scheduled in September*
32 *and October*] At the Community Open Houses, members of the public were able to directly ask
33 questions of FDOT staff, view informational material, and experience hands-on use of the GIS tool. A
34 total of # people participated in the eight open houses [*attendance numbers will be updated after the*
35 *October Community Open House*].

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

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

1 questions. The Task Force also considered resolutions adopted by the Board of County
2 Commissioners in Hardee County, City Commissions in the City of Bowling Green, City of Wauchula,
3 and the Town of Zolfo Springs, and Town Council of the Town of Lake Placid. *[All current resolutions*
4 *received to-date are listed]*

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

DRAFT

STUDY AREA OVERVIEW

The Southwest-Central Florida Corridor study area extends from Collier County to Polk County. This nine-county area spans more than 10,500 square miles shown on **Figure 1**.

ENVIRONMENT

The study area is well known for its scenic beauty and natural environment that includes connected rural landscapes and wildlife corridors, water, and habitat of statewide, and in some cases, international 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 biodiversity of international significance with 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 68,000 acres that includes diverse natural habitats, water resources and scenic landscapes.
- The study area south of the Caloosahatchee River is home to the Big Cypress National Preserve and key habitat for the Florida panther, an endangered species. The Florida panther habitat is almost entirely within the study area and is dependent on large blocks of functionally connected habitat. The southern portion of the study area is home to several important wildlife management areas and wildlife corridors connecting the Big Cypress National Preserve to the Caloosahatchee and Kissimmee Rivers.

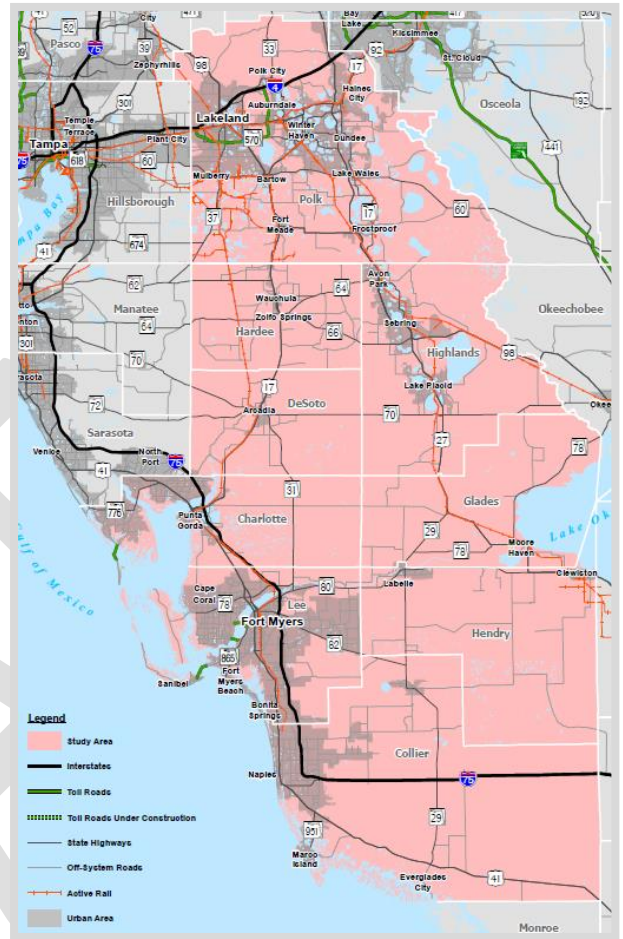


Figure 1. Southwest-Central Florida Corridor Study Area

About 32% of the study area’s acreage is held in conservation.¹ There are two National Wildlife Refuge complexes in the study area that include the Panther National Wildlife Refuge in the southwest and the Lake Wales Ridge National Wildlife Refuge in the central portion of the study area. The region is currently home to 12 threatened and endangered animal species, the most notable of these is the Florida panther. Much of the area has been identified as a high-priority critical linkage as

¹ Florida Natural Areas Inventory, 2019

1 part of the Florida Ecological Greenways Network, illustrating both the significance of the natural
 2 environment to achieve wildlife and water conservation goals and the challenges involved in
 3 improving transportation and other connectivity in this region. Water resources include various rivers,
 4 lakes, wetlands, aquatic preserves, and designated Outstanding Florida Waters, such as Highlands
 5 Hammock State Park, Myakka River, and Cape Romano-Ten Thousand Islands Aquatic Preserve.

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

9 **COMMUNITY**

10 The study area is home to nearly 2.3
 11 million residents in 37 municipalities
 12 and many unincorporated areas.
 13 About 90% of the population is along
 14 the coastline and near the Interstate 4
 15 (I-4) corridor. These urbanized
 16 portions of the region have exceeded
 17 statewide population growth during
 18 the past decade and are expected to
 19 be the areas of highest growth over
 20 the next 25 years. Previous and
 21 projected population growth in the
 22 nine-county area is shown in **Table 1**.

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

Table 1. Projected Population Growth (Medium Series)

Sources: Census Bureau, 2019; Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR), University of Florida,

23 The inland counties generally have
 24 lagged behind statewide growth rates
 25 with Hardee County experiencing a
 26 population decline over the past ten years.² All six
 27 inland counties have poverty rates above the
 28 statewide average, with the rate exceeding one
 29 out of every five residents in DeSoto, Hendry, and Hardee Counties.³ Median household income is
 30 below the statewide level in every county except Lee and Collier.⁴

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

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*

1 Agricultural lands account for about 43% of the study area land uses. Institutional and public lands,
2 including publicly held conservation and recreation lands as well as the large military presence at
3 Avon Park in Polk and Highlands Counties, comprise about 29% of the land acreage.^{5 6 7}
4 Local government comprehensive plans, as well as regional initiatives such as the Heartland 2060
5 visioning process, establish the framework for future land use, conservation, and development of the
6 region. Each county identifies conservation areas; six counties are planning for new activity centers to
7 accommodate population and economic growth; and all counties have policies discouraging sprawl.

8 **ECONOMY**

9 The study area's job count stood at just under 600,000 in 2019.⁸ Like other parts of Florida, the
10 region's economy historically has emphasized the "three-legged stool" of agriculture and related
11 natural resources such as forestry, fishing, and mining; tourism; and industries related to population
12 growth such as construction, retail trade, and healthcare. These industries are anticipated to remain
13 the foundation for the economy in the future. The large base of agricultural activity is diversifying crop
14 bases, shifting toward more inland locations, and incorporating new technologies and production
15 practices. The tourism sector also is diversifying, with more growth anticipated in eco-tourism, agri-
16 tourism, and heritage tourism.

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

26 **INFRASTRUCTURE**

27 The region is currently served by 4,860 lane miles of State Highway System. I-4 in Polk County and
28 I-75 in Charlotte, Lee, and Collier Counties are the major limited-access highways in the region. Major
29 state roads such as US 27, US 17, SR 29, SR 31, SR 60, SR 70, and SR 80 form the core elements
30 of the regional roadway network connecting existing communities. During peak times, traffic
31 congestion is experienced along portions of I-4, I-75, and US 27.

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

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

⁵ Florida Department of Revenue

⁶ County Property Appraisers

⁷ University of Florida GeoPlan Center

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

⁹ Florida Chamber Foundation, Florida 2030 Blueprint

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

6 Unlike the most populated areas, rural areas suffer from lack of broadband access including nearly
7 40% of DeSoto County residents and more than 40% for those in Hendry and Glades. Outside of the
8 major service providers in the populated areas, the City of Winter Haven and Hardee County have
9 invested in their own broadband networks to support both business and resident needs.

10 Like broadband, access to public water services is limited to some of the inland rural counties.
11 DeSoto, Highlands, and Glades Counties, for example, have known septic systems percentages of
12 39%, 42% and 63%, respectively. Additionally, more than one-third of Highlands and Hardee
13 Counties are known to be utilizing well water for drinking water, with DeSoto County nearing 50%.¹⁰

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

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

1 RECOMMENDATIONS

3 APPROACH AND FRAMEWORK

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

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

- 14 • **High-Level Needs** – The Task Force identified key regional opportunities and challenges
15 related to the six statutory purposes for M-CORES that should be priorities for the M-CORES
16 program in the study area. The Task Force also developed guidance for how FDOT should
17 work with partners to evaluate these potential needs and form more specific purpose and
18 need statements for corridor improvements moving forward. The high-level needs, along with
19 the purpose, answer the question “*why?*”.
- 20 • **Guiding Principles** – The Task Force recommended a set of core values to guide decision-
21 making related to the M-CORES program in the study area throughout the planning,
22 development, and implementation process. These answer the question “*how?*”.
- 23 • **Instructions for Project Development and Beyond** – The Task Force recommended
24 specific directions for future project development and implementation activities to ensure the
25 Task Force’s guiding principles are applied to subsequent activities as intended. These
26 answer the question “*what’s next?*”.

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

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

1 **HIGH-LEVEL NEEDS**

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

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

16 In general, the Task Force found significant needs in the study area related to the six statutory
17 purposes, including revitalizing rural communities, supporting economic development, enhancing
18 quality of life, and protecting the environment. The Task Force also recognized general needs to
19 enhance transportation safety, mobility, and connectivity in the study area. The Task Force identified
20 a series of potential high-level needs for future evaluation by FDOT and developed recommendations
21 for how FDOT should assess the need for a corridor of the scale specified in statute:

- 22 • **Support anticipated population growth in coastal communities and urban areas.** Lee,
23 Collier, and Charlotte Counties (along the coastline) and Polk County (near I-4) represent 90% of
24 the population and are projected to be the areas of highest growth over the next 25 years with an
25 average of 32% per county.¹¹ This growth will increase travel within the urban areas and to/from
26 inland and urban areas within the region where employment and services are prevalent.

27 FDOT conducted a preliminary analysis of future traffic in the study area based on population
28 growth projections from local government comprehensive plans. Based on improvements
29 currently in the FDOT Work Program and existing cost-feasible plans for the Strategic Intermodal
30 System (SIS) and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) in the study area, this traffic
31 growth could produce significant congestion along much of I-4 and I-75, portions of US 27 and SR
32 29, and several east-west routes by the year 2050. The Task Force recommended further
33 refinement of these traffic projections, including evaluation of whether potential improvements to
34 or development of new inland corridors would relieve future traffic on I-4 and I-75. The Task Force
35 recommended FDOT use population and economic growth projected in local government
36 comprehensive plans and/or the MPO long-range transportation plans, and the Florida
37 Transportation Plan as the baseline for estimating future travel demand in the study area. These
38 projections generally are consistent with the mid-range projections developed annually by the
39 University of Florida Bureau of Economic and Business Research, which could serve as a proxy
40 for those counties who have not updated their comprehensive plans in recent years.

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

1 The Task Force recommended the traffic analysis consider future demand for moving both people
2 and freight, as well as both local/regional travel originating and terminating within the study area
3 and statewide/interregional travel to, from, and through the study area. The traffic analysis also
4 should consider potential changes in travel demand related to the state's recovery from COVID-
5 19 and potential long-term changes in travel behavior, such as greater propensity for working
6 from home and increased home delivery of goods and services. The analysis should also
7 consider potential changes in travel demand and transportation system capacity related to
8 increased use of emerging technologies such as automated and connected vehicles. Finally, the
9 analysis should consider potential shifts in economic activity that could be related to a significant
10 industry expansion or recession in the study area during the analysis period.

11 • **Improve safety and mobility.** Maintaining and improving safety and travel reliability are
12 continuous concerns. The annual cost of congestion per driver in the U.S. is \$1,348.¹² As traffic
13 continues to grow, congestion by the year 2050 will expand to more roadways including US 17,
14 SR 29, SR 60, SR 70, and SR 80. Additionally, the study area experienced more than 35,000
15 crashes in 2018 with 358 fatalities. Although the number of crashes was highly concentrated in
16 the coastal counties and Polk County, the highest fatality rates are in the rural counties such as
17 Glades, DeSoto, and Hendry. The respective fatality rates of 6.5%, 3.6%, and 3.2% were higher
18 than Florida's average of less than 1%.¹³ With 94% of crashes due to human error according to
19 the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, safety is a promising benefit of connected and
20 automated vehicles. The Task Force recommended guiding principles and instructions to
21 maximize the use of existing transportation facilities to address shifting mobility and freight needs
22 and to evaluate the potential benefits from connected and automated vehicles in the region. The
23 Task Force recommended that FDOT evaluate how specific transportation corridor improvements
24 could support safety and mobility opportunities in the region.

25 • **Help rural and underserved areas improve infrastructure for people, freight, and**
26 **technology.** For the inland portion of the study area, the infrastructure was largely developed to
27 serve the rural and agrarian communities that historically were the emphasis of this study area.
28 To support a more diverse economy and technologies now available for agriculture and resource-
29 based businesses, this infrastructure must evolve. For instance, lack of broadband availability in
30 these rural areas makes access to agricultural technologies, remote education, employment, and
31 telehealth difficult. Additionally, rural residents seek public amenities like potable water. The
32 amount of land area varies with public water supply serving a high of 64% in Glades County to
33 just under 11% for Hardee and Hendry Counties.¹⁴ With regard to freight, more than 651 million
34 tons of cargo were transported via truck within, into, and out of Florida in 2017.¹⁵ The truck traffic
35 on key roadways in the inland portion of the study area ranges from 19% to 31% of the total
36 traffic. The growth of nationwide e-commerce has increased by 13% to 16% annually over the
37 past five years, and this trend is expected to increase, thereby contributing to additional cargo
38 tonnage to be transported.¹⁶ Accommodations to efficiently handle this level of increase is an area
39 for consideration. The Task Force recommended FDOT evaluate opportunities to improve
40 infrastructure connections between communities and regional roadway networks and support the

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

1 expansion of rural utility infrastructure, including broadband, water, and sewer to enhance quality
2 of life for rural and underserved areas. The Task Force recommended that FDOT evaluate how
3 the M-CORES program could help improve infrastructure in rural and underserved areas.

- 4 • **Improve access and interregional connectivity for residents, freight, and visitors between**
5 **communities and markets.** Access to high capacity transportation corridors that provide
6 interregional connectivity is a key factor for business recruitment and retention. Currently, only
7 four counties in the study area are served by a limited access highway: Polk, Charlotte, Lee, and
8 Collier. These access points are important for business attraction and expansion. Additionally,
9 Winter Haven is home to an Intermodal Logistics Center located near the region's only rail
10 terminal, which highlights the importance of freight flows into and out of the region including flows
11 to seaports located outside the study area. Tourism, including eco- and agri-tourism, continues to
12 grow within the region in areas such as the Babcock Ranch Preserve as people seek outdoor
13 recreation and activities. Rural economic prosperity is a major concern tied to interregional access
14 and connectivity.
- 15 • **Expand transportation options, such as shared-use nonmotorized trails, freight and**
16 **passenger rail, and public transit.** Transportation options that provide opportunities for
17 residents to access services have also been identified for further exploration. Only three counties
18 have fixed-route transit providers: Collier, Lee, and Polk. However, transit remains a critical mode
19 for many residents to access jobs, healthcare, and other services. There are 175 miles of existing
20 paved multi-use trails in the SUN Trail network throughout the area, and as residents desire
21 modes for recreation, expansion of trails is a consideration. There is also a shift of truckload
22 carriers transporting containers and trailers via rail for long hauls over 400 miles in order to
23 accommodate growth in cargo traffic with increasing shortages in truck drivers.¹⁷ Options to
24 improve travel while protecting existing communities and green/blue spaces are also
25 considerations when identifying modal options.
- 26 • **Help increase economic activity and economic diversity throughout the region with**
27 **emphasis on inland and rural areas.** The region is building on its traditional industry base:
28 agriculture, natural resources, and related industries; tourism, arts, entertainment, and recreation;
29 and construction. At the same time, emerging industries with different transportation needs
30 include education and health services; transportation, warehousing, and wholesale trade; and
31 manufacturing. To promote economic activity, multiple opportunity and investment areas have
32 been identified in CEDS, economic development elements of local government comprehensive
33 plans, and similar plans. With the challenges faced by the inland counties related to lack of
34 economic diversity and limited availability of higher wage job opportunities for residents, the Task
35 Force recommended continued collaboration on the region's economic development. The Task
36 Force recommended FDOT evaluate how the M-CORES program could support regional and
37 local economic development opportunities. This evaluation should consider the mobility,
38 economic, and fiscal impacts of potential shifts in economic activity from existing communities and
39 corridors to enhanced or new corridors, as well as potential net economic benefits to the region
40 and state.

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

- 1 • **Create employment opportunities, particularly to assist lower-income residents and help**
2 **retain younger residents in the area.** A major concern is providing children in the study area
3 with opportunities to remain in the area as adults. DeSoto, Glades, Hardee, Hendry, and
4 Highlands Counties - as well as the community of Immokalee in Collier County - have been
5 designated as Rural Areas of Opportunity. Further, Hardee and Hendry Counties have the highest
6 percentages of 25 and under population (35% and 36%, respectively). These two counties also
7 have experienced a net loss of residents to other states and nations.¹⁸ The nine counties need to
8 create more than 139,000 net new jobs by 2030 to accommodate population growth and keep
9 unemployment rates low.¹⁹
- 10 • **Enhance access to jobs, workforce training, education, healthcare, and goods and**
11 **services.** Access to critical quality of life services and employment are growing concerns within
12 the region. About 16% of residents in the study area have access to fresh food within half a mile,
13 compared to a statewide average of 31%.²⁰ Hendry, Hardee, DeSoto, and Glades Counties each
14 have fewer than 20 licensed physicians and 50 hospital beds.²¹ Education attainment in most of
15 the study area counties lags the statewide average. For example, more than one in four residents
16 have not completed a high school diploma in Hendry, DeSoto, Hardee and Glades Counties.²²
17 Also, given the region’s targeted industry growth in areas such as advanced manufacturing,
18 logistics, and distribution, it is necessary to provide better access to these emerging jobs and the
19 related education and training opportunities. Without convenient access to goods and services,
20 many residents must drive to surrounding counties for medical care, groceries, training, and
21 education.
- 22 • **Support agriculture and resource-based industries as major economic drivers and areas of**
23 **environmental sensitivity.** Agriculture and natural resource-based businesses are major
24 economic drivers. The availability of connectivity between working farms, other resource-based
25 businesses, and their associated supply chains and markets is a growing concern among industry
26 members. Agricultural areas also provide open spaces for large wildlife, smaller areas for
27 endemic species, and water and wetland stewardship while at the same time providing for
28 recreation and agricultural tourism. These lands tend to be in private ownership and collaboration
29 is important to achieve economic, social, and environmental objectives.
- 30 • **Protect, connect, and enhance environmentally sensitive areas, ecosystems, water**
31 **resources, and wildlife, including the Florida panther.** Fostering the study area’s unique
32 natural characteristics and water resources are important considerations. About 32% of the study
33 area’s acreage is held in conservation, compared to 28% statewide.²³ Much of the study area,
34 approximately 50%, has been identified as Priorities 1 and 2 of the Florida Ecological Greenways
35 Network, and nearly 27% are designated as Florida panther primary, secondary, and dispersal
36 zones.²⁴ ²⁵ The Task Force recommended guiding principles and instructions for how the
37 M-CORES program could help achieve environmental goals, including proactive opportunities to

¹⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, 2020

¹⁹ Florida Chamber Foundation, *Florida 2030 Blueprint*

²⁰ Florida Department of Health, 2016

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*

1 restore, connect, and enhance resources. The Task Force recommended that FDOT give
2 particular attention to these resources through application of the guiding principles in addition to
3 standard project development and environmental review processes.

- 4 • **Strengthen disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.** Large portions of the
5 study area - particularly along the coast, Lake Okeechobee, and the Peace River - are designated
6 evacuation zones during emergencies. Stronger storms and emergency events increase pressure
7 for evacuation, increase recovery challenges, and put additional pressure on major north-south
8 routes like I-75. Other factors related to COVID-19 and social distancing practices reduce
9 sheltering capacities and reduce the likelihood the public will choose shelters during emergencies.
10 The Task Force recommended FDOT evaluate how specific multi-use transportation corridor
11 improvements would help strengthen mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery efforts in
12 the region. The Task Force recommended FDOT closely tie the development of the M-CORES
13 program to the forthcoming updates of the Statewide Regional Evacuation Study underway by the
14 regional planning councils and evaluate changes in human behavior when coping with disasters.

15 **Needs Evaluation Process**

16 As input to project development, FDOT will conduct a robust evaluation of the potential high-level
17 needs in the study area, building on the recommendations of the Task Force. This process will
18 evaluate and distinguish between conventional safety, mobility, and connectivity needs, and broader
19 regional needs related to transportation that also are included in the statutory purpose in s. 338.2278,
20 F.S. Additional details on the needs evaluation process as well as the steps involved in identifying
21 and evaluating alternatives are specified in the Action Plan on page 24 of this report.

22 The Task Force emphasized 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 **GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND INSTRUCTIONS**

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

35 The Task Force developed a series of 16 guiding principles and associated instructions. The text
36 below lists the specific guiding principles and instructions with supporting text to document the intent
37 of the Task Force. The guiding principles function as an integrated set and are not presented in a
38 specific priority order.

39 **1. CONSISTENCY WITH STATEWIDE, REGIONAL, AND LOCAL PLANS**

40 This first guiding principle is a cross-cutting principle to address all high-level needs and support all
41 other guiding principles in this report. The emphasis of the principle is on consistency with local,
42 regional, and statewide plans specifically called out in statute; these include the local government

1 comprehensive plans, metropolitan long-range transportation plans, strategic regional policy plans,
2 and the statewide Florida Transportation Plan.

3 **Guiding Principle:** Be consistent with statutorily required statewide, regional, and local plans.

4 **Instructions:**

- 5 • Be consistent with the goals, objectives, policies, and resources identified in local government
6 comprehensive plans (s. 163.3177, F.S. and s. 163.3178, F.S.), metropolitan long-range
7 transportation plans (s. 339.175, F.S.), and strategic regional policy plans (s. 186.507, F.S.),
8 placing emphasis on future land use maps and growth projections, as well as regional and
9 community visions as adopted into strategic regional policy plans and/or local government
10 comprehensive plans.
- 11 • Be consistent with the vision, goals, and strategies of the Florida Transportation Plan (s.
12 339.155, F.S.).
- 13 • Be consistent with the Heartland 2060 regional vision developed and maintained by the
14 Central Florida Regional Planning Council in collaboration with the local governments in inland
15 counties.
- 16 • Coordinate among agencies to address differences among statutorily required state, regional,
17 and local plans related to transportation corridors and future growth and development
18 projections, including differences related to the timing and horizon years of plan updates as
19 well as the geographical areas covered by regional plans.
- 20 • Identify needs to update statutorily required plans to address Task Force recommendations,
21 such as designation and management of transportation corridors (s. 337.273, F.S.) and
22 consideration of whether areas around potential interchange locations contain appropriate
23 land use and environmental resource protections (s. 338.2278, F.S.); coordinate among local
24 governments, regional planning councils, metropolitan planning organizations, and FDOT on
25 plan updates.

26 **2. MAXIMIZING USE OF EXISTING FACILITIES**

27 This guiding principle is a cross-cutting principle addressing all high-level needs and supporting all
28 other guiding principles in this report. This principle reflects the Task Force’s strong preference for
29 using existing transportation facilities and right-of-way to address the M-CORES purposes and high-
30 level needs.

31 **Guiding Principle:** Evaluate potential alternatives for addressing statewide and interregional
32 mobility and connectivity needs in this priority order:

- 33 1. Make safety, operational, and capacity improvements to existing transportation facilities and
34 right-of-way.
- 35 2. Develop new transportation facilities.

36 **Instructions:**

- 37 • Identify and advance safety and operational improvements to existing transportation facilities.
- 38 • Evaluate potential capacity improvements to existing transportation facilities, including their
39 impact on the surrounding environmental resources, land uses, and communities.
- 40 • Evaluate opportunities for co-location of transportation and utility facilities within or adjacent to
41 existing disturbed right-of-way, and other approaches to transforming existing facilities and

1 right-of-way to accommodate additional modes, uses, and functions, including their impact on
2 the surrounding environmental resources, land uses, and communities.

- 3 • Assess connectivity gaps between existing transportation facilities and areas identified as
4 priorities for attraction, and potential opportunities for closing those gaps.
- 5 • Advance specific improvements that support a system meeting the long-term needs of
6 statewide and interregional flows of people and freight.

7 **3. SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT**

8 The Task Force developed the following guiding principle and instructions to address four high-level
9 needs:

- 10 • Support anticipated population growth in coastal communities and urban areas.
- 11 • Help increase economic activity and economic diversity throughout the region with emphasis
12 on inland and rural areas.
- 13 • Enhance access to jobs, workforce training, education, healthcare, and goods and services.
- 14 • Create employment opportunities, particularly to assist lower-income residents and help retain
15 younger residents in the area.

16 **Guiding Principle:** Maintain and enhance community character and quality of life consistent with
17 local and regional plans.

18 **Instructions:**

- 19 • Do not impact known cemeteries.
- 20 • Do not impact Avon Park Air Force Range and its mission critical lands.
- 21 • Do not impact lands owned by known Native American Tribes and associated historical sites
22 not owned by Native American Tribes.
- 23 • Do not place new corridor through National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) listed sites.
- 24 • Plan and develop transportation corridors in a manner that improves connectivity to and
25 enhances the quality of existing communities, while avoiding or minimizing adverse impacts
26 on these communities and developments.
- 27 • Plan and design transportation corridors so that their purpose and scale is compatible with the
28 communities that they serve.
- 29 • Consult with Native American Tribes to understand future plans and identify opportunities for
30 enhanced connectivity.
- 31 • Consult with the military to understand future plans and identify opportunities for enhanced
32 connectivity.
- 33 • Plan transportation corridors to avoid safety impacts to K-12 schools.

34 **4. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

35 The Task Force developed the following guiding principle and instructions to address four high-level
36 needs:

- 37 • Help increase economic activity and economic diversity throughout the region with emphasis
38 on inland and rural areas.
- 39 • Enhance access to jobs, workforce training, education, healthcare, and goods and services.
- 40 • Create employment opportunities, particularly to assist lower-income residents and help retain
41 younger residents in the area.

- 1 • Improve access and interregional connectivity for residents, freight, and visitors between
2 communities and markets.

3 While the agriculture industry is included within the industries referenced in this guiding principle and
4 instructions, it is also the focus of the Agricultural Land Uses guiding principle and instructions which
5 follow.

6 **Guiding Principle:** Advance economic development, business retention and expansion, job
7 creation, and community development, with emphasis on rural areas of opportunity.

8 **Instructions:**

- 9 • Work with economic development organizations for opportunities to focus on retention and
10 expansion of existing industries, including ecotourism and recreation industries.
- 11 • Work with economic development organizations on opportunities to attract emerging
12 industries.
- 13 • Work with workforce development organizations on opportunities to enhance access to jobs
14 and workforce training.
- 15 • Plan limited access transportation facilities to serve economic activities dependent on
16 interregional travel.
- 17 • Provide connectivity to medical facilities, colleges, universities, and workforce training sites.

18 **5. AGRICULTURAL LAND USES**

19 The Task Force developed the following guiding principle and instructions to address the below high-
20 level need:

- 21 • Support agriculture and resource-based industries as major economic drivers and areas of
22 environmental sensitivity.

23 **Guiding Principle:** Protect, enhance, and minimize impacts to productive agricultural lands and
24 other productive lands with economic or environmental significance; and improve connectivity and
25 maintain access between working farms, other resource-based industries, their supply chains, and
26 their market destinations.

27 **Instructions:**

- 28 • Apply the guiding principle to prime farmlands (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural
29 Resources Conservation Service designation), irrigated cropland/non-irrigated agricultural
30 areas (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services) and timber lands, Florida
31 Rural and Family Lands Protection Program lands, and Farmland/Agricultural Preservation
32 Areas designated in local government comprehensive plans.
- 33 • Work with owners/operators of agricultural farms, including those with the honorary
34 designation of Century Farm, along with other resource-based industries to understand their
35 needs and plans to address access and fragmentation, and to support effective management
36 of agricultural properties.
- 37 • Work with economic development organizations and owners/operators of agricultural farms to
38 understand needs and opportunities to support the agritourism industry.
- 39 • Improve transportation connectivity between working farms, other resource-based industries,
40 and their supply chains.

- 1 • Improve broadband connectivity to promote and support efficiency, new and emerging
2 technologies, and best practices.

3 **6. CONSERVATION LANDS**

4 Among the six statutory purposes for M-CORES, protecting the environment and natural resources
5 was the focus of the greatest portion of the Task Force’s discussion time. The Task Force
6 recognized the potential impacts of corridor development on significant environmental resources in
7 the study area from both direct impacts from corridor development as well as indirect impacts from
8 future population and economic growth and land development that could occur in areas with greater
9 transportation connectivity, particularly around interchanges.

10 The Task Force developed a series of four interrelated guiding principles to address environmental
11 resources including conservation lands, the Florida panther, wildlife and plant habitat, and water
12 resources. Each of these four principles reflect a common priority order of first, avoiding negative
13 impacts to resources; second, restoring, connecting, and enhancing resources; and third, minimizing
14 the mitigating negative impacts. This order reflects the Task Force’s consensus that the optimal
15 approach should be to avoid negative impacts to environmental resources, but that if an impact
16 cannot be avoided, proactive efforts should be taken to provide net positive benefits to the resource.

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

24 In addition, the Task Force recognized the opportunities to contribute toward broader regional and
25 statewide environmental goals through the decisions made about corridor development as well as the
26 abilities the statute provides to FDOT regarding right-of-way acquisition and other mitigation activities.
27 The Task Force recommended that FDOT commit to working closely with other local, regional, state,
28 and federal agencies and nongovernmental organizations to advance key priorities such as
29 Everglades restoration and high priority land conservation, habitat and water resource protection, and
30 ecosystem connectivity initiatives developed by other partners.

31 The Task Force developed the following guiding principle and instructions to address the below high-
32 level need:

- 33 • Protect, connect, and enhance environmentally sensitive areas, ecosystems, water resources,
34 and wildlife, including the Florida panther.

35 **Guiding Principle:** Apply the following priority order for existing conservation lands (including
36 conservation easements and mitigation lands):

- 37 1. Avoid negative impacts to them;
- 38 2. Restore, connect, and enhance these lands while continuing to avoid negative impacts to
39 them; and
- 40 3. Minimize and mitigate negative impacts to them.

1 **Instructions:**

- 2 • Do not place new corridor through Preservation 2000 Lands, National Parks, State Parks,
3 State Forests, State-owned Mitigation Banks, and Florida Forever Acquired Lands.
- 4 • Leverage s.338.2278 (3)(c) 6, F.S. acquisition authority and other conservation programs to
5 identify and preserve additional land to accomplish multiple purposes with the intent of
6 acquiring property near or adjacent to the corridor prior to or parallel to corridor development.
- 7 • Coordinate with other entities to identify and prioritize targeted acquisitions such as those on
8 the Florida Forever targeted list, other state recognized planned conservation land lists, and
9 other locally recognized conservation land lists.
- 10 • Coordinate with landowners to apply the guiding principle to non-state-owned conservation
11 easements and mitigation lands to serve multiple purposes.
- 12 • Coordinate with landowners and operators of agricultural lands that also serve a conservation
13 purpose.
- 14 • Work with management agencies to obtain funding and to implement Best Management
15 Practices (BMP).
- 16 • Coordinate with the Division of Forestry, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer
17 Services to preserve the ability to use prescribed fire on public and private managed lands.
- 18 • Identify and prioritize opportunities to restore the purpose of existing conservation lands by
19 reversing the negative impacts of existing transportation facilities.

20 **7. THE FLORIDA PANTHER**

21 Section 338.2278, F.S. requires the Task Force to address impacts of the construction of the project
22 on the Florida panther, to evaluate the need for acquisition of lands for state conservation or as
23 mitigation, and to evaluate wildlife crossing design features. As such, the Task Force developed a
24 stand-alone guiding principle and associated instructions to address the below high-level need as it
25 pertains to the Florida panther:

- 26 • Protect, connect, and enhance environmentally sensitive areas, ecosystems, water resources,
27 and wildlife, including the Florida panther.

28 **Guiding Principle:** Apply the following priority order to protect the federally endangered Florida
29 panther and its habitat:

- 30 1. Avoid negative impacts to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Panther Focus Area;
- 31 2. Restore, connect, and enhance existing and adjacent habitats (or habitats within close
32 proximity to the project); and
- 33 3. Minimize and mitigate negative impacts to panther habitat.

34 **Instructions:**

- 35 • Coordinate with the Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team (PRIT) and the U.S. Fish
36 and Wildlife Service to place a high priority on acquiring lands that protect panther habitats
37 and connect existing conservation lands and wildlife management areas important to the
38 Florida panther.
- 39 • Coordinate with the Florida PRIT to prioritize wildlife corridor connections and implement
40 design features to protect the panther and other critical species.
- 41 • Consult the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding potential impacts within the Panther
42 Focus Area.

1 **8. WILDLIFE AND PLANT HABITATS**

2 The Task Force developed the following guiding principle and instructions to address the below high-
3 level need as it pertains to wildlife and plant habitats:

- 4 • Protect, connect, and enhance environmentally sensitive areas, ecosystems, water resources,
5 and wildlife, including the Florida panther.

6 **Guiding Principle:** Encourage biodiversity by applying the following priority order to habitats for all
7 federally and state protected species, including wildlife and endemic plants:

- 8 1. Avoid negative impacts to these habitats;
9 2. Restore, connect, and enhance these habitats while continuing to avoid negative impacts; and
10 3. Minimize/mitigate negative impacts to these habitats.

11 **Instructions:**

- 12 • Do not place new corridor through National Wildlife Refuges.
13 • Leverage s.338.2278 (3)(c) 6, F.S. acquisition authority and other programs to identify and
14 preserve additional land to achieve multiple purposes including improving wildlife connectivity
15 with the intent of acquiring property near or adjacent to the corridor prior to or parallel to corridor
16 development.
17 • Design transportation corridors to restore and provide wildlife and plant habitat connectivity
18 through adding new design elements such as elevated roadway segments, wildlife crossings,
19 and properly placed wildlife corridors sited based upon the best available data concerning
20 wildlife movement patterns to existing and new facilities.
21 • Enhance existing transportation corridors to address negative impacts of prior projects.
22 • Minimize fragmentation of large contiguous properties that function as wildlife corridors.
23 • Minimize corridor lighting impacts on nearby wildlife habitats and communities.
24 • Place a high priority on avoiding adverse impacts to Wildlife Management Areas and Florida
25 Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission managed lands not covered by other instructions.
26 • Place a high priority on avoiding adverse impacts to Lake Wales Ridge.
27 • Place a high priority on continuing to reduce invasive plant species along the transportation
28 corridor.

29 **9. WATER RESOURCES**

30 The Task Force developed the following guiding principle and instructions to address the below high-
31 level need as it pertains to water resources:

- 32 • Protect, connect, and enhance environmentally sensitive areas, ecosystems, water resources,
33 and wildlife, including the Florida panther.

34 **Guiding Principle:** Apply the following priority order for water resources:

- 35 1. Avoid negative impacts to them;
36 2. Restore, connect, and enhance them while continuing to avoid negative impacts; and
37 3. Minimize and mitigate negative impacts to them.

38 **Instructions:**

- 39 • Do not impact springheads, lakes, and Everglades National Park.
40 • Be consistent with regional water supply plans (s. 373.709, F.S.).

- 1 • Be consistent with the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan Projects, the Kissimmee
2 River Restoration Project, and any other water quality or hydrologic restoration project in the
3 South Florida Water Management District.
- 4 • Leverage s.338.2278 (3)(c) 6, F.S. acquisition authority and other programs to identify and
5 preserve additional land to restore and enhance water quality, quantity, and flow, including
6 through and to the Big Cypress National Preserve, with the intent of acquiring property near or
7 adjacent to the corridor prior to or parallel to corridor development.
- 8 • Design transportation corridors utilizing BMPs to restore and enhance water quality, quantity,
9 and flow including possible design elements such as segments of elevated roadways and
10 longer structures.
- 11 • Design transportation corridors utilizing BMPs to restore watershed integrity and minimize
12 fragmentation of large contiguous properties that function as hydrologic watersheds.
- 13 • Place a high priority on avoiding adverse impacts to freshwater resources, aquifer recharge
14 areas, Outstanding Florida Waters, wetlands, floodplains, existing conservation easements,
15 wetland restoration project areas, and other surface waters.
- 16 • Pursue regional or landscape-scale water resource management approaches.
- 17 • Coordinate with Water Management Districts with a high priority of avoiding adverse impacts
18 to monitoring site locations and water quality and restoration plan projects.
- 19 • Develop efficient water distribution plans that align with expected population locations.

20 **10. FREIGHT MOBILITY AND SAFETY**

21 The Task Force developed the following guiding principle and instructions to address two high-level
22 needs:

- 23 • Improve access and interregional connectivity for residents, freight, and visitors between
24 communities and markets.
- 25 • Improve safety and mobility.

26 **Guiding Principle:** Improve connectivity and safety for major freight flows to support economic
27 development.

28 **Instructions:**

- 29 • Do not place new corridor that would impact airport operations.
- 30 • Improve connectivity to seaports, airports, and rail terminals.
- 31 • Implement solutions to improve safety, relieve congestion, and address shifts in freight
32 movements.

33 **11. TRANSPORTATION MODES**

34 The Task Force developed the following guiding principle and instructions to address the below high-
35 level need:

- 36 • Expand transportation options, such as shared-use nonmotorized trails, freight and passenger
37 rail, and public transit.

38 **Guiding Principle:** Support safe, efficient, and accessible transportation options and/or modes for
39 people and goods.

1 **Instructions:**

- 2 • Enhance transportation corridors by supporting multiple modes including trails, through
3 maximizing co-location within existing and new facilities.
- 4 • Incorporate any trails included in these corridors as a part of SUN Trail system marketing.
- 5 • Coordinate with local governments, metropolitan planning organizations, and freight and
6 transit industry operators on opportunities to expand transportation options.

7 **12. CONNECTIVITY TO REGIONAL AND LOCAL TRANSPORTATION NETWORK**

8 The Task Force developed the following guiding principle and instructions to address three high-level
9 needs:

- 10 • Improve access and interregional connectivity for residents, freight, and visitors between
11 communities and markets.
- 12 • Help rural and underserved areas improve infrastructure for people, freight, and technology.
- 13 • Improve safety and mobility.

14 **Guiding Principle:** Identify opportunities and improve transportation connections between
15 communities and the regional roadway network.

16 **Instructions:**

- 17 • Prioritize interchange locations for regional roads.
- 18 • Work with local and regional governments to identify opportunities to improve or create
19 connections to communities focusing on the regional roadway networks, areas with
20 compatible land uses, and areas targeted for growth in regional and local government
21 comprehensive plans and economic development plans.
- 22 • Develop interchange management plans including appropriate land use and environmental
23 resource protections for areas around proposed interchange locations.

24 **13. RESILIENCE**

25 This guiding principle and associated instructions were developed by the Task Force as a cross-
26 cutting principle to address all high-level needs and support all other guiding principles in this report.

27 **Guiding Principle:** Plan and coordinate community development and infrastructure asset creation
28 and management that improves and maintains resiliency, sustainability, and adaptability.

29 **Instructions:**

- 30 • Do not impact high risk coastal zones (Coastal Barrier Resources System).
- 31 • Build on the vision, goals, and strategies of the Florida Transportation Plan in addressing
32 resilience, including sea-level rise.
- 33 • Develop local and regional plans that address sea-level rise and potential population
34 migration/growth.
- 35 • Consider hazards such as flooding, fire, and sea-level rise when designing corridors.

36 **14. EMERGENCY EVACUATION AND RESPONSE**

37 The Task Force developed the following guiding principle and instructions to address the below high-
38 level need:

- 39 • Strengthen disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

1 **Guiding Principle:** Strengthen local, regional, and statewide emergency management plans and
2 actions.

3 **Instructions:**

- 4 • Do not place new corridor through Cat2 Storm Surge zones.
- 5 • Provide staging areas as part of the program consistent with s.338.236, F.S.
- 6 • Strengthen statewide approach regarding the need to maintain or improve evacuation times.
- 7 • Strengthen statewide, regional, and local plans for sheltering as appropriate.
- 8 • Coordinate with state, regional, and local emergency management agencies including the
9 Statewide Regional Evacuation Study update that is in process.
- 10 • Develop the corridor to lessen congestion through small rural communities during evacuation.
- 11 • Develop the corridor to support efficient and safe delivery of supplies and recovery services.
- 12 • Develop the corridor to maintain or improve access to emergency evacuation shelters.
- 13 • Evaluate effects of innovative approaches, including technological advancements and
14 autonomous vehicle projections on emergency evacuation clearance times.

15 **15. BROADBAND AND OTHER UTILITIES**

16 The Task Force developed the following guiding principle and instructions to address three high-level
17 needs:

- 18 • Help rural and underserved areas improve infrastructure for people, freight, and technology.
- 19 • Enhance access to jobs, workforce training, education, healthcare, and goods and services.
- 20 • Help increase economic activity and economic diversity throughout the region with emphasis
21 on inland and rural areas.

22 **Guiding Principle:** Support expansion of rural utility infrastructure, including broadband, water, and
23 sewer to enhance quality of life; and plan and design enhanced or new corridors to enable co-location
24 of utility and broadband infrastructure in right-of-way.

25 **Instructions:**

- 26 • Enhance and integrate transportation and infrastructure planning processes.
- 27 • Maximize co-location opportunities (e.g. add conduit or “dig once”) while still allowing flexibility
28 for service providers to separately install their own conduit and fiber.
- 29 • Ensure utility provider access to FDOT right-of-way is non-discriminatory and competitively
30 neutral.
- 31 • Leverage partnerships with utility providers.
- 32 • Prioritize connections to community anchor institutions.

33 **16. TECHNOLOGY**

34 This guiding principle and associated instructions were developed by the Task Force as a “cross-
35 cutting” principle to address all high-level needs and support all other guiding principles in this report.

36 **Guiding Principle:** Implement infrastructure that supports current and emerging state-of-the-art
37 vehicles, materials, data, and methodologies.

38 **Instructions:**

- 39 • Design in anticipation of connected and autonomous vehicles, transit, and other modes.
- 40 • Provide access to electric vehicle charging stations.

- 1 • Consider innovative uses of right-of-way for transportation, energy, and community purposes.
- 2 • Employ technologies that enhance infrastructure maintenance and repair efficiencies.
- 3 • Design, construct, and maintain the corridor utilizing resilient and energy efficient materials
- 4 and methods of construction.
- 5 • Evaluate technologies for effective corridor management, such as avoiding wildlife collisions.

6 **ACTION PLAN**

7 In addition to the high-level needs, guiding principles, and instructions, FDOT will commit to the
 8 following actions to move forward with implementation of the recommendations of the Task Force’s
 9 report in developing the M-CORES program in this study area, consistent with
 10 s. 338.2278, F.S.:

11 1. **Evaluate needs.** FDOT will conduct a robust evaluation of corridor needs, building on the
 12 Task Force’s recommendations on high-level needs. This process will evaluate and
 13 distinguish between conventional safety, mobility, and connectivity needs, and broader
 14 regional needs or co-benefits related to transportation, such as economic development
 15 benefits. The needs evaluation will include a detailed technical analysis of current and future
 16 traffic conditions in the study area building on the guidance provided by the Task Force in this
 17 report. This needs analysis will support development of a Purpose and Need statement for
 18 potential corridor improvements.

19 2. **Identify and evaluate alternatives.** FDOT will conduct additional corridor planning activities,
 20 including the Alternative Corridor Evaluation process, and initiate the Project Development
 21 and Environment (PD&E) process to identify and evaluate a range of potential alternatives for
 22 corridor improvements in the study area that could accomplish the Purpose and Need.

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

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

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

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

38 3. **Support consistency review and update of local and regional plans.** FDOT will coordinate
 39 early and often with local governments, metropolitan planning organizations (MPO), and
 40 regional planning councils (RPC) to ensure consistency with applicable local and regional
 41 plans throughout all activities. As required by s. 338.2278(3)(c)10, F.S., FDOT will provide
 42 affected local governments with a copy of the Task Force report and project alignments

1 identified through the PD&E process so each local government with one or more planned
2 interchanges within its jurisdiction can meet the statutory requirement to review the Task
3 Force report and local government comprehensive plan no later than December 31, 2023.
4 Each local government will consider whether the area in and around the interchange contains
5 appropriate land uses and environmental protections and whether its comprehensive plan
6 should be amended to provide appropriate uses and protections. FDOT will coordinate with
7 the local governments, RPCs, and Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) to
8 assist with plan updates, including consideration of technical and financial support needs.

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

17 FDOT also will identify potential funding sources for preferred corridor alternatives identified
18 during PD&E, including a combination of the specific sources allocated to the M-CORES
19 program in s. 338.2278, F.S.; toll revenues and associated revenue bonds; and other
20 applicable state, local, and private revenue sources. FDOT has committed that projects
21 currently in its Five-Year Work Program for Fiscal Years 2021-2025 will not be impacted by
22 M-CORES funding needs. M-CORES program costs that are not covered through the
23 dedicated funding sources identified in statute or through toll revenues and associated
24 revenue bonds would need to be prioritized along with other needs for future Five Year Work
25 Programs, working through the standard process including the applicable MPO transportation
26 improvement programs (TIP) and rural transportation planning processes. All M-CORES
27 projects, regardless of funding source, will be included in applicable MPO TIPs and long-
28 range transportation plans, consistent with federal guidance about projects of regional
29 significance.

- 30 **5. Advance innovative land acquisition concepts.** As provided by s. 338.2278(3)(c) 6, FDOT,
31 in consultation with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Florida Fish and
32 Wildlife Conservation Commission, will address the Task Force's recommendations for
33 combining right-of-way acquisition with the acquisition of lands or easements to facilitate
34 environmental mitigation or ecosystem, wildlife habitat, or water quality protection or
35 restoration. A key focus will be on how M-CORES program decisions can support broader
36 regional or statewide conservation and environmental stewardship goals. This process will
37 identify opportunities to advance specific land acquisition and related recommendations prior
38 to or in parallel with corridor construction.

- 39 **6. Advance multi-use opportunities.** FDOT will coordinate with local governments, RPCs,
40 other state agencies, and industry organizations to help advance multi-use opportunities for
41 the corridor as provided for in statute. An early emphasis will be on broadband and other
42 utility co-location opportunities, including coordination with DEO on the development of the
43 statewide broadband strategic plan.

1 7. **Continue robust partner and public engagement.** FDOT will continue robust coordination
2 with local, regional, state, and federal agencies and environmental, community, economic
3 development, and other interest groups, with an intent of exceeding the requirements of the
4 PD&E process. FDOT will use the Efficient Transportation Decision Making process to
5 facilitate early and ongoing coordination with resource agencies. FDOT will create a **corridor**
6 **advisory group** to enable the range of organizations involved in the Task Force to
7 periodically meet to receive updates on and provide guidance for corridor planning and
8 development activities. FDOT also will create multiple ongoing opportunities for members of
9 the public to be aware of and provide input to this process, with emphasis on direct
10 engagement of the public in local communities.

11 8. **Commit to transparency and process improvement.** Because of the scale and scope of
12 the M-CORES program, FDOT will continue to place public engagement as a priority and will
13 continue to engage all stakeholders during M-CORES planning, project development, and
14 implementation, including key decision points. FDOT also will report on how decisions are
15 made, including a periodic report on the status of the specific guiding principles and
16 instructions committed to in this document. An annual M-CORES budget update will be made
17 publicly available as part of FDOT's annual work program presentation to the Legislature and
18 the Florida Transportation Commission.

19 FDOT also recognizes the need for continued improvements to its planning, project
20 development, and related processes to fully implement the M-CORES purpose and objective
21 as identified in statute and the guiding principle and instructions as recommended by the Task
22 Force.