



FLORIDA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

Po Box 278
Melbourne, FL 32902-0278

Governor Ron DeSantis
Executive Office of the Governor
400 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

SUBJECT: Please Veto Multi-use Corridors Transportation Bill (CS/SB 7068 & HB 7113)

Dear Governor DeSantis:

The Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) was heartened by your early commitment to tackle some of Florida's most pressing environmental issues. Your commitment was made tangible by a proposed budget that included \$625 million annually to support Everglades restoration, the prevention of harmful algal blooms like the ones that have devastated the surface waters and local economies of many south Florida communities, and the rehabilitation of degraded springs. Now, legislation patently inconsistent with those commitments is awaiting your signature. We ask you to veto this poorly conceived legislation.

FNPS and our 5,000 members appreciate the complexity of governing a state like Florida. There are many competing needs and interests that must be accounted for, and a balanced approach is required. However, the declining state of our environment reflects a longstanding imbalance that has favored land development over conservation and environmental protection, and destructive algal blooms and degraded springs are part of the price we now are paying for that imbalance. The balance you seek to restore simply cannot be attained if you approve legislation like CS/SB 7068 and HB 7113, which would enshrine the imbalance for years to come by promoting development across much of peninsular Florida's remaining core of rural and agricultural land.

The range of likely impacts and harmful outcomes is immense. We would like to highlight some issues that should be carefully weighed before you consider signing this legislation into law:

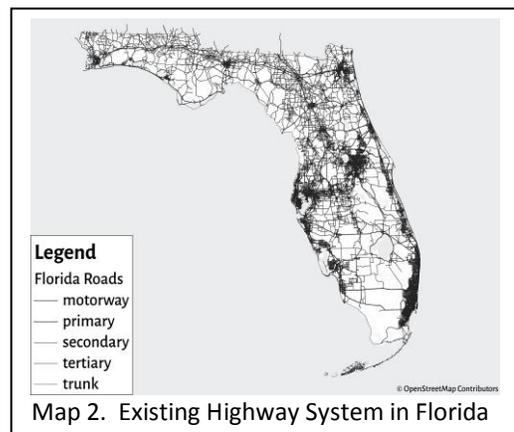
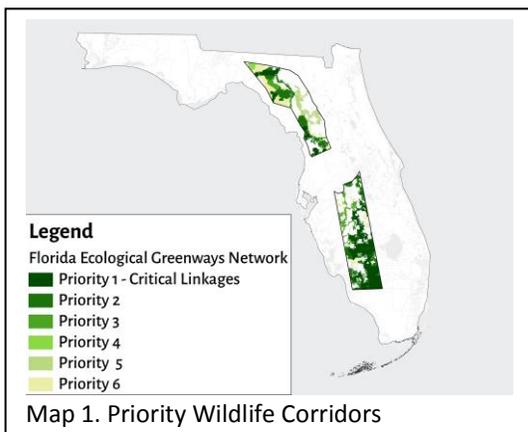
- 1) More than 2.8 million acres of protected conservation land, and 800,000 acres in approved Florida Forever projects, are threatened by the proposed connector projects. These large acreages are a function of both the immense scale of the connector study areas and the tremendous environmental significance of the regions that would be affected. From the rare scrub of the Lake Wales Ridge, home to dozens of imperiled species, to the panther habitat of Corkscrew and the sandhills of the Suwannee River valley, noted for some of the highest groundwater recharge rates in Florida. Map 1 illustrates the priority wildlife corridors that have been delineated within these areas. We should aggressively pursue conservation of these wildlife corridors, rather than development of major transportation corridors and the sprawl they would promote.

Preserving, conserving and restoring the native plants and native plant communities of Florida

- 2) The springsheds of 13 of our 30 Outstanding Florida Springs lie within the proposed Suncoast Connector and Northern Turnpike Connector corridors. At great expense, the Department of Environmental Protection has published Basin Management Action Plans to serve as blueprints for the restoration of most of those spring systems, which have been degraded by nutrient pollution and declining flows. You have identified spring restoration as one of your priorities and want to spend \$50 million annually toward that end. We do not need any new studies to understand that promoting development through this swath of rural Florida would only exacerbate the problems facing those springs and be entirely inconsistent with your stated goals for restoring springs and protecting vulnerable water resources.

- 3) Agriculture's contribution to our economy is second only to tourism. Collectively, the three corridor study areas encompass huge swaths of Florida's agricultural land base, including the commercial forests of the Big Bend region (more than 300,000 acres in Taylor County alone) and the cattle ranches of the Peace River and Kissimmee River valleys. The proposed highways would promote suburban sprawl and compromise the future viability of agriculture in those regions. Why trade valuable agricultural land, and the perpetual economic and national security benefits of viable agriculture, for expensive suburban sprawl? If the rural communities in these study areas need access to high speed internet and other infrastructure – a widely stated justification for the highways – such infrastructure can be provided without spending billions on unneeded toll roads.

- 4) The Florida Department of Transportation's systematic approach to planning for our transportation future has not identified a need for these roads. Through their Strategic Intermodal System and coordination with local Metropolitan Planning Organizations, FDOT works to identify and solve our actual transportation needs in the most effective and cost efficient way possible. Siphoning millions in funding from FDOT's budget to study the need for these toll roads will only delay progress on addressing real transportation needs. It would also keep us mired in the longstanding, disproportionate and outdated focus on roads as the solution to all our transportation needs. As Map 2 illustrates, we already have a network of highways that provides access across the entire state. Enhancing the existing network of roads, and providing alternatives to the use of automobiles, should be the focus of our transportation investments



- 5) Reducing hurricane evacuation times has been used as an additional justification for these roads; however, Florida's Division of Emergency Management has never suggested they are needed, and inducing evacuees to travel long distances by providing such highways would be contrary to DEM guidance, which recommends that evacuees stay as close to home as possible. Many counties are deficient in evacuation shelters. Resolving those deficiencies and devising other strategies that would make it possible for evacuees to remain closer to home would be a more efficient and far less expensive strategy for reducing evacuation times than spending billions on unnecessary highways.

This legislation appears predicated on a vision for Florida's future that does not include completion of the sustainable network of conserved land as conceived by the Florida Forever Five-Year Plan, nor does it include a place for rural communities and large-scale, economically viable agriculture. In the name of promoting economic development, it would simply replace agriculture and natural green space with suburban sprawl and exacerbate our current challenges to protect water resources and conserve nature. Projects of this scale should not be rushed through the legislative process. Why the urgency? Given the absence of an established transportation need for these roads, the many transportation projects that have already been vetted and planned and are awaiting funding, and the many pressing needs we face – like assisting in the Panhandle's recovery from Hurricane Michael – why is the legislature focused so intently on the development of these toll roads?

FNPS urges you to veto this legislation. Please allow the professionals at the FDOT to do their job and plan for Florida's transportation needs. Give them time to determine if there is any justification for future development of any of these roads, and to undertake any planning for them in a more judicious and disciplined manner. Thank you for considering our concerns.

Respectfully,

Susan Carr, Ph.D.
President of the Florida Native Plant Society

cc: Nikki Fried, Florida Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services
Kevin J. Thibault, Secretary, Florida Department of Transportation
Noah Valenstein, Secretary, Florida Department of Environmental Protection