



2021 Florida M-CORES Legislative Reforms Recommended by 1000 Friends of Florida

January 11, 2021

This legislative session, 1000 Friends of Florida is calling for reform to 2019's M-CORES legislation (SB 7068) which authorizes three connected toll road corridors through rural and agricultural lands extending 330 miles from the Florida Panhandle south to Collier County.

The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) has allocated approximately \$760 million for M-CORES over the first five years of the program from the State Transportation Trust Fund (STTF) and Florida Turnpike revenue. The M-CORES legislation included a provision diverting tens of millions of dollars a year from general tax revenue to the STTF to help finance the toll roads. But with the advent of COVID-19, state economists have projected a general revenue shortfall of more than \$3 billion over the next two fiscal years, and a \$1.5 billion shortfall over five years in the STTF. Also, the total cost for the M-CORES system is unknown, but based on per-mile planning, design and construction costs for the 25-mile Wekiva Parkway around Orlando, for which planning began in earnest in 2002 and construction is expected to be completed in 2023, the total cost for M-CORES could exceed \$26 billion not adjusting for inflation.

In this time of economic uncertainty, it is fiscally irresponsible to commit billions of dollars for a road system for which there has been no need or financial feasibility demonstrated. Instead, 1000 Friends supports measures to suspend or significantly curtail M-CORES funding while maintaining key initiatives to support local economies along these corridors.

1000 Friends is recommending legislative reform to:

I. Be fiscally responsible with taxpayer dollars

Use state taxpayer dollars to address Florida's most pressing needs. During this unprecedented time, state dollars should be used to address Florida's more pressing needs, including health care, education, workforce housing, land conservation to protect water quality and threatened habitat, repairs to existing deteriorating infrastructure, and other priorities. This is not the time to be spending billions of dollars to build hundreds of miles of new road infrastructure for future generations to maintain when there is a significant backlog of existing roads in serious need of repair. The automatic allocation of funding for M-CORES (with neither legislative nor FDOT oversight) should be halted.

Show there is transportation need for proposed road segments and that they are financially feasible. Previous analyses on several major segments of M-CORES showed neither transportation need nor financial feasibility. To ensure wise use of taxpayer dollars, the Legislature should require that

transportation need and financial feasibility be established in at least a preliminary analysis before proceeding to the Project Development & Environment (PD & E) process for planning for segments of roads along the corridor needing investment. Additionally, legislation should include provisions to ensure more accurate projections of future traffic volumes, toll road revenues, population, employment, and project costs.

II. Take M-CORES off the fast track

Ensure M-CORES goes through normal review for statewide designations. Under current legislation, M-CORES roads automatically become part of the Florida Turnpike System, are automatically integrated into the State's Strategic Intermodal System, and are automatically included in FDOT's Five-Year Work Program. As noted by Florida TaxWatch, "These projects were not in FDOT work programs or under study, and there is no requirement, or even a designated opportunity, for the Legislature to approve the projects after they are approved and developed by FDOT." M-CORES projects should not be on autopilot. Instead of being fast-tracked political projects they should be treated as professionally planned capital transportation projects required by legislation to go through the same review and analysis to receive major statewide planning designation as other proposed road projects in Florida.

Slow down the planning process to ensure accountability. The M-CORES legislation includes requirements that the roads be under construction by the end of 2022, go through local government comprehensive plan review in 2023, and be open to traffic by the end of 2030. But as history has shown, the planning and construction process for the Wekiva Parkway is expected to take 21 years for a much shorter 25-mile system. While by no means advocating that the M-CORES process take this long, the mandatory start and completion dates for M-CORES should be removed to ensure that any projects demonstrated to be needed and feasible are properly planned and vetted and not rushed to meet artificial deadlines. The legislation should also be amended to give local governments sufficient time to review the consistency of proposed roads with local government comprehensive plans.

III. Avoid draining funds from other critical transportation projects across Florida

Make sure existing Florida Turnpike needs are addressed. Currently, Florida's Turnpike system encompasses 498 miles with M-CORES adding as many as 330 miles, increasing the system by a whopping two-thirds. Revenue from existing Florida Turnpike tolls is already being diverted to fund M-CORES costs, and beginning in fiscal year 2022-23, at least \$35 million a year will be allocated from Turnpike funds to support M-CORES. If future M-CORES revenue from tolls is not sufficient to cover costs (and earlier studies of key segments shows it will fall short), for decades to come M-CORES will continue to siphon off millions of dollars otherwise available to maintain and operate existing Turnpike segments in other parts of Florida, including highly congested segments in Central and South Florida with a high level of need for improvement. The legislation should be amended to protect maintenance and operating funds for existing Turnpike segments.

Make sure existing MPO and rural transportation planning priorities are addressed. In addition to using Florida Turnpike dollars, M-CORES is draining funding from the STTF and other sources and was automatically included in FDOT’s Five-Year Work Program by the 2019 legislation. Florida TaxWatch notes that for fiscal years 2019-2025, FDOT has earmarked \$645 million for M-CORES from the STTF, exceeding the \$484 million allocated in the M-CORES legislation. This additional \$161 million is coming at the expense of other projects already in the current Five-Year Work Program, according to TaxWatch. While the three M-CORES task force reports include a commitment from FDOT that M-CORES will not impact any other projects in the current Five-Year Work Program, there is no specific funding identified for the additional \$161 million that FDOT has allocated to the program. Nor do the reports address the impacts of the \$1.5 billion shortfall in the STTF projected for the next five years — how much will be taken from M-CORES and how much from other transportation priorities? Additionally, for future Five-Year Work Programs, M-CORES projects not covered by dedicated revenue would compete with other priorities locally and across Florida. Legislation is needed to guarantee that funding for essential and highly ranked transportation projects in both urban and rural areas is not diverted to M-CORES, and to provide greater transparency on how other state transportation priorities are being impacted by the project.

IV. Support local and regional rural economies within the corridor

Maintain funding and planning for broadband — independent of road construction — to support local economies within the corridor. The residents and businesses of rural areas of Florida will continue to fall behind in economic, education and other indices if broadband connectivity is not significantly enhanced soon. Successful and sustainable 21st century rural economic development is not contingent on building roads to attract new rooftops or manufacturing plants. Instead, the provision of broadband allows residents who want to choose a rural lifestyle to participate in the global economy. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that broadband can play an important role — and in some cases is essential — in the provision of employment, health care, education and other essential services in both urban and rural areas. Broadband access will also help move Florida’s rural counties squarely into the 21st century so they may also take full advantage of its associated economic opportunities. Tying the provision of broadband to road construction as called for under the M-CORES legislation is likely to delay its availability considerably as it will take years for the roads to move from the planning to construction phase. Planning for broadband in these counties should move forward but be de-linked from road construction.

Maintain funding for key rural economic development programs. Funding for the Small County Road Assistance Program, Small County Outreach Program, Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund, and Workforce Development Program are included within M-CORES funding and should be maintained. Currently, these funds revert to M-CORES if they are not spent within a year. The legislation should be amended to prevent the automatic reversion of funds.

Avoid damage to local budgets and economies. Jefferson County passed a resolution on December 17, 2020, opposing location of any part of the toll road within the county and noting the lack of funds to pay for “supporting infrastructure, additional law enforcement, emergency and other essential services.” It also noted M-CORES would “increase undesirable development pressure including loss of agricultural lands, and changes to the overall character of the area.” Similarly, Levy County voted to support a “No Build” resolution on April 7, 2020, noting the value of environmental assets in the county — including its

many springs, rivers and preserves — and agricultural assets essential to the local economy and the foundation of the county’s culture and heritage. Many of the counties in the M-CORES corridor face similar economic challenges and depend on agriculture and local natural and heritage resources as the foundation of their economies. M-CORES would undermine these local economies and forever change the quality of life so valuable to many residents.

Maintain funding for critical road segments within the corridors. While there is no evidence that M-CORES is needed, there are select road segments within the corridor in legitimate need of repair and improvement. In cooperation with local and regional planners, identify those segments and move forward with funding and planning in a manner compatible with and protective of natural resources, habitat, water quality, community heritage and agriculture. Any legislation should ensure funding remains for those needs.

Identify and fund compatible and proven sustainable economic development efforts. M-CORES was a solution in search of a problem. Instead of mandating roads as the panacea to all of the region’s problems, explore and fund economic strategies based on these communities’ rural lifestyle, culture and heritage that build local economies that are sustainable over the long haul. Such initiatives include supporting the Florida Department of State’s Main Street program to assist small communities with sustainable economic development strategies, nature-based ecotourism initiatives, programs to support agriculture, and similar efforts.

V. Conclusion

Suspending or curtailing funding for M-CORES does not have to mean suspending or curtailing the annual funding provided in the law for transportation programs benefiting small counties. While we do not see the need to build three new toll roads through western rural Florida, we recognize the urgent transportation needs in other parts of Florida, including small counties. Those counties will have more of their needs met if limited funds are not gobbled up by M-CORES.

Resources:

[The Suncoast Connector: What we still need to know](#) (Florida TaxWatch)

[A Detour Around Accountability](#) (1000 Friends of Florida and Sierra Club Florida Chapter)

[Broadband, Economic Development and M-CORES](#) (1000 Friends of Florida)

[M-CORES Task Force Final Reports](#) (Florida Department of Transportation)

[1000 Friends of Florida M-CORES webpages](#)