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Costumed Protestors Warn Against Toll Roads Plan

By Brendan Farrell / Correspondent

Wednesday

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Butterflies and birds happily fluttered about on a hot Gainesville afternoon.

Before getting paved over by corrupt billionaires to construct new toll roads.

That was the picture the Florida Sierra Club and other protesters painted at Bo Diddley Plaza on Wednesday during their protest of SB 7068, which would begin the building or expansion of three toll roads across the state.

The protest — one of three similar protests held around the state Wednesday — featured stuffed animals strewn about in front of the plaza's stage while some protesters dressed up as butterflies, plants and birds. Others portrayed a costumed construction crew that began to "kill" the animals to make room for the new toll roads.

More protesters were dressed like rich businessmen cheering on the new development as others threw money to pay for the tolls and littered to show the effect the toll roads could have on the environment.

The protest ended with protesters holding car-shaped cutouts that spelled out “Keep Toll Roads Out Of The Rural Lane.”

The bill, which awaits a signature from Gov. Ron DeSantis, calls for the Suncoast Parkway to extend from the Tampa Bay area to the Georgia border, connect the Florida Turnpike to the Suncoast Parkway and the creation of a new corridor that includes a toll road from Polk to Collier counties.

It also earmarks \$45 million for the next fiscal year, though the roads won’t be completed for another decade.

Bill proponents say the roads will assist in hurricane evacuation and lead to economic growth in rural areas.

Environmentalists are vehemently opposed, saying these new roads would impact wetlands and protected natural lands.

“The last thing I want to see is a development project such as a road that’s only going to offer more destructive development in our rural areas,” said Merrilee Jipson, one of the protest organizers. “It perpetuates the fossil fuel industry and the one-car, one-usage more or less type of model instead of mass transit that we should be focused on in the state of Florida.”

Sarah Gledhill, another organizer and a Florida field campaigner for the Center for Biological Diversity, which has an office in St. Petersburg, sported a suit, tie and a top hat to symbolize what she called the “crony capitalism” behind the bill.

“Individuals have bought our elected officials’ votes and were able to push this through and it’s all about a small 1% in the state of Florida that will benefit from these projects,” said Gledhill. “We would like to see our existing infrastructure upgraded and retrofitted as well as alternate transportation choices for our communities.”

Bridgitte Smith attended the protest dressed as Darth Vader, saying she felt the character represented the road plan’s malevolent intent.

“It’s invading on our rural properties,” she said. “If we keep allowing roads to go through all of these farm lands, dividing farm lands, we’re losing more and more farmers.”