

No Roads to Ruin Coalition forms to fight new Florida toll roads

By JIM TURNER NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA | DEC 05, 2019

TALLAHASSEE — Critics of toll-road projects in rural areas from Collier County to the Georgia state line have combined efforts to try to halt plans for the new pavement.

Members of the No Roads to Ruin Coalition held a news conference Thursday at the Capitol and outlined plans to lobby lawmakers and build opposition to the three multi-use corridors, which are a top priority of Senate President Bill Galvano and are being reviewed by state task forces.

“We’re not saying no to progress, we’re just trying to define progress in a different way that more reflects what the communities on the ground want,” said Ryan Smart, executive director of the Florida Springs Council.

The projects would expand the Suncoast Parkway from the Tampa Bay area to Jefferson County at the northern end of Florida; extend Florida’s Turnpike west to connect with the Suncoast Parkway; and add a new multi-use corridor, including a toll road, from Polk County to Collier County.

The current timeline is for construction to begin by the end of 2022, with the roads open to traffic before Dec. 31, 2030.

The coalition says it has more than 50 organizations and businesses, from the Center for Biological Diversity, Bear Warriors United and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida to the Farmworker Association of Florida, the League of Women Voters of Florida and Physicians for Social Responsibility. It argues the roads will result in sprawling development and environmental degradation and waste billions of tax dollars rather than assisting the state’s rapidly growing population.

Smart said the state should repair existing roads and bridges, along with establishing alternative modes of transportation such as high-speed rail, which would put less stress on the environment and people living in rural communities.

“While the Florida Legislature may think that highway interchanges, fast-food chains and suburban sprawl equals progress, the communities in the path of these roads have different values and must be heard,” Smart said.

Galvano, R-Bradenton made a priority of the projects during the 2019 legislative session and has received backing from groups such as the Florida Chamber of Commerce, Associated Industries of Florida, the Florida Ports Council and the Florida Trucking Association.

Galvano has described the roads as a “new approach” in planning the state’s future, reducing congestion, providing alternate hurricane evacuation routes and offering a way to “revitalize” rural communities through the expansion of broadband, water and sewer infrastructure.

In October, Galvano challenged lawmakers to focus on needed water, sewer and broadband infrastructure as part of the road planning.

“With the numbers that we have here in the state of Florida, the population growth, and the difficulties that we experienced during Hurricane Irma with the evacuations, these corridors need to exist,” he added, referring to a massive 2017 hurricane.