

ITEM #70

**ADDITIONAL MATERIAL
REGULAR MEETING**

MARCH 9, 2021

**SUBMITTED AT THE REQUEST OF
COMMISSIONER BEAM FURR**

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NEWS / THE BUZZ ON FLORIDA POLITICS

Florida's toll road projects a 'fiscal cliff,' in serious trouble, lawmakers say

"The state has faced major major problems, and the pandemic has forced us to reevaluate this policy," a top Republican senator said.





Florida's three proposed toll roads are not necessary, argues an environmentalist advocate. [FILE PHOTO]

By **Lawrence Mower**

Published Yesterday

Updated Yesterday

TALLAHASSEE — For the last two years, opponents of a controversial plan to build three new toll roads across Florida have been saying the projects aren't needed and they're too expensive.

On Wednesday, a key Republican senator sided with them.

"This is not tenable to do at this point," said Sen. Gayle Harrell, R-Stuart.

Just 21 months after the plan to build 330 miles of new toll roads was signed into law by Gov. Ron DeSantis, the projects could be in serious trouble. On Wednesday, Harrell's Senate Transportation Committee advanced a bill that would greatly diminish two of the roads, while leaving one stretch intact.

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Chalk it up to the pandemic. Harrell, the sponsor of [Senate Bill 100](#), said the projects were a “fiscal cliff” the state needed to avoid.



[Florida Senate]

“You’re talking about billions of dollars in bonding,” Harrell said. “It’s very, very doubtful that you would have the ability to pay for those bonds with Turnpike monies.”

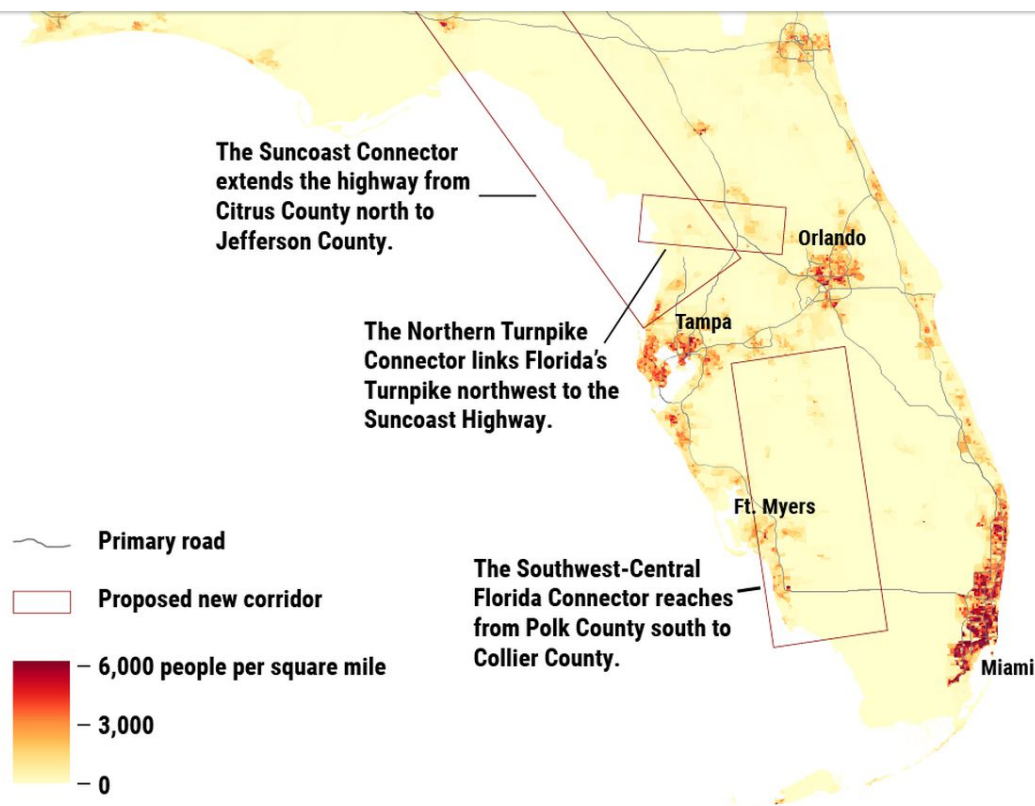


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Harrell’s bill would eliminate the law legislators passed in 2019, which ordered the Florida Department of Transportation to plan and build a new stretch of the Suncoast Parkway to the Georgia border, extend Florida’s Turnpike to the Suncoast and build a third route to link Polk and Collier counties.



Proposed corridors for three new toll road expansions. [LANGSTON TAYLOR | Tampa Bay Times]

Under Harrell's plan, the Suncoast plan would stay intact and extend to Interstate 10. The other two projects might result in simply widening existing rural roads. The bill diverts the hundreds of millions of dollars the state was to spend on the projects toward improving rural roads that are heavily traveled by tractor-trailers.

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The state has already spent more than \$11 million on the roads so far, according to the transportation department, with a plan to spend at least another [\\$730 million in the next five years](#).

Although Harrell said the state's fiscal situation has changed, the roads' cost — and justification — has not.

The 2019 law was a priority of then-Senate President Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton. He said the roads would lead to economic development in some of the most economically depressed areas of the state, mostly rural stretches far removed from urban centers.

Yet despite carrying a price tag that would likely reach into the tens of billions of dollars, the need for them was unclear. The Polk-to-Collier route, known as the Heartland Parkway, had already been discarded by past governors as unfeasible.

Since it passed, opposition to the projects has grown, [except from a special interest that could directly benefit: road builders](#). Local officials [have been skeptical](#), environmentalists have warned the roads [would threaten endangered wildlife](#), and the conservative Florida TaxWatch [called the Suncoast stretch](#) a “risky project” with “little demonstrated transportation need.”

On Wednesday, road builders spoke in support of Harrell's plan, but other groups were skeptical. Paul Owens, president of 1000 Friends of Florida, which advocates for “smart growth,” warned that the bill does not include recommendations that three task forces made to the Department of Transportation that [the roads avoid environmental areas](#), for example.

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“A bill with this potential to impact Florida's environment and communities deserves a very deliberate process of evaluation,” Owens said.

bill, along with protections that the roads don't run through "communities of color," before he could vote in favor of it.

"I have no faith after (the legislative session ends) that those protections will be in place," Jones said.

Harrell's bill still must pass another Senate committee before it could be voted on in the Senate and House. The 2021 legislative session is scheduled to end April 30.

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