Wetlands, Roads, and Pipelines

Will the Nature Coast be Sacrificed for Urban Sprawl?

by Jody Rosier

The Nature Coast provides an important area for nature lovers to seek solitude from Florida's sprawling cities. A diverse ecosystem of long leaf pines, Gulf coast salt marsh communities, and fresh water springs is shared by the endangered manatee, threatened black bears, and red-cockaded woodpeckers. Attracted to the less congested lifestyle, residents and retirees who have moved to Pasco, Hernando, and Citrus counties now have to face their worst fear, urban sprawl.

The Suncoast Tollroad, a project planned by the Department of Transportation Turnpike District, will facilitate the movement of Tampa's metropolis to the fragile ecosystems of the Nature Coast. Since tollroads are considered part of the statewide transportation plan, they do not have to be consistent with local comprehensive plans. Thus, citizens cannot seek help from growth management agencies.

Nature Coast wetlands and floodplains are once again functioning as flood storage areas. Due to the over-pumping and transfer of water to the Tampa region, a majority of Pasco County wetlands and lakes have been bone dry for several rainy seasons. Before the recent rains, reports to the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) Governing Board focused on how far below the location of the measuring stakes the lake water levels were. Although recent floods may have caught the residents offguard, the wetland vegetation is probably whispering a sigh of relief.

In many areas of Florida, rainwater and stormwater runoff from developed areas contribute water to the wetland and lake systems. However, in Pasco, Hernando and Citrus counties, the rainwater and stormwater runoff drains to the wetland systems and directly to the Floridan Aquifer through sinkholes and percolation in the sandy soils. Many areas in Florida have a clay-confining layer between a shallow aquifer and the Floridan Aquifer. This confining layer helps protect the Floridan Aquifer from pollutants and helps maintain water in the wetland areas. But in Pasco, Hernando, and Citrus County, the confining layer is absent or patchy. Thus, stormwater runoff and pollutants from roads and industrial spills can drain directly into Southwest Florida's drinking water supply.

In 1974, the West Coast Regional Water Supply Authority was created to pipe water from Pasco County to the St. Petersburg and Tampa area, where wellfields could not keep up with population growth. As early as 1985, problems associated with the over-pumping of Pasco's groundwater were evident in the drying of lakes and critical wetland areas. Cattle ranchers and homeowners that live between the wellfields have seen their wetlands and their wells dry up.

The Anclote and Pithlachascotee Rivers drain central Pasco County and provide wildlife corridor for important species such as the Florida black bear. Until recently, these rivers have had extremely low water levels. Due to the recent winter rains, the Anclote River's average water level of 11 feet NGVD (National Geodetic Vertical Datum) skyrocketed to a new stable height of 23 feet NGVD. In the upper reaches of the river where development has not occurred, the floodplain forest must have rejoined when the nourishing water reached its parched root systems. The neighborhoods along the western end of the river probably did not see the value of the rains since they were the focus of flooding headlines on the local news stations.

Threats to River Systems

The Anclote and Pithlachascotee River systems face big losses. The wetland vegetation that finally savored the rising waters will soon be removed by massive bulldozers. These undeveloped river systems in central Pasco County will lose 385 acres of their floodplain habitat to the Suncoast Tollroad. Over 80 acres of lush, mature riverine wetland habitat will be lost permanently to a four-lane highway, a ten-lane toll plaza, and a four-hundred foot right of way. Fenced and grass-lined stormwater retention ponds will replace a total of 162 acres of Mother Nature's diverse wetland systems. Scientists question whether the retention ponds and the septic system associated with the toll plaza will function properly in an area where the groundwater level is less than one foot below the surface.

Funded with bond money and funds generated from South Florida Turnpike tolls, the Suncoast Tollroad 1, a 41.6 mile extension to Tampa's Veteran Expressway, will fragment Pasco and Hernando counties. Suncoast 2, an extension of this project through the core of Citrus County, will terminate at Red Level, a high flood zone area north of Crystal River. Much of the development in these three rural counties has been localized along US 19 on the coast and US 41 in the central region. Since the Suncoast Tollroad will traverse between these two roads, undeveloped parcels of upland scrub and pine communities will now be easily developed.

Many of the upland communities and former agricultural lands adjacent to the new...
high-speed transportation corridor have been recently permitted as sandmines to provide fill for this above-grade road project. Since the ponds created from the sandmines will be a direct connection to the Floridan Aquifer, water loss through evaporation will exaggerate the water supply problems.

Many environmental agencies have recommended that US 41 be widened instead of creating a new development corridor. Unfortunately, the Department of Transportation did not heed this advice. Thus, US 41 will be six laned to Brooksville, all of the major east-west roads will be four laned, and a new east-west road (Ridge Road) in Pasco County will be constructed to accommodate the growth and traffic spurred from this new tollroad project. The Nature Coast will lose its small-town identity and turn into something like everywhere else, complete with industrial warehouses and truck stops.

Is the Mitigation Adequate?

At first, the mitigation for Suncoast Tollroad 1 appears substantial. Ten thousand acres of habitat was accepted by SWFWMD as mitigation for 3,050 acres of habitat that will be converted to the high-speed transportation corridor. Wellfields that pump water to the Tampa and Pasco area share the mitigation site and are also located a short distance south of the mitigation site. Environmental groups question the long-term health of the wetland and upland systems on the site since it is an established fact that wetlands adjacent to wellfields eventually dry up.

Since the mitigation site was a former cattle ranch, the quality of the upland scrub habitats has been maintained through prescribed fire. Suncoast Tollroad 1 will be on the west side of the mitigation site, Gulf Coast winds and smoke blow toward the west, and the new Ridge Road will travel through the middle of the mitigation site. As a result, fire management will be practically impossible. The quality of the 10,000 acre mitigation site will decrease if over-pumping continues. Also, it has been proposed that the site be used as a mitigation bank so that wetlands destruction can supply funds to enhance the wetland systems.

Suncoast Tollroad 2 in Citrus County will hamper the fire management of the Withlacoochee State Forest and the recently purchased CARL project, the Annuetteliga Hammock. Since the tollroad will divide this CARL purchase in half, the habitat and aesthetic value will be greatly diminished. It is almost impossible to find a scenic area in Florida that is safe from the sounds of traffic. If Federal Funds are used to construct roads, the State Department of Transportation (DOT) must consider impacts to the aesthetic value of national or state forests. But, since the Suncoast Tollroad will be built without federal funding, the DOT Turnpike District does not have to consider such impacts.

Also, by not using federal funds, DOT does not have to receive Coastal Zone Management Consistency for the project. Although this road terminates at US 19, north of Crystal River, in a high flood zone area, no agency could direct this project to a more inland and upland location. Ironically, the Suncoast Tollroad has been touted as a future hurricane evacuation route. If the residents from the Tampa region use the tollroad to avoid high storm events in their area, they will collide with the same storm once they reach the terminus north of Crystal River. Shouldn't a massive road project be functional as a hurricane evacuation route?

Growth management agencies and citizens are concerned that the Gulf Hammock salt marsh ecosystems will be affected by future growth generated by the road and the Florida Turnpike's northern extension. Florida's Big Bend and Gulf Hammock regions comprise an intricate mesh of river systems. Yankeetown, only five miles north of the Suncoast Tollroad's northern terminus, had 38.7 inches of rain in one day, triggered by a 1950 September hurricane. Trenton, another Gulf Hammock community, claims the second highest amount of rain, 30 inches spurred by a weak tropical disturbance in October.
1941. It is obvious from the periodic hurricanes and past and recent storm events, that the Nature Coast and Big Bend area should remain as wetlands systems instead of being heavily developed.

Will the Tollroad Move Nature Coast Water to Tampa?
Urban sprawl, inability to manage ecosystems with fire, and an increasing number of bear roadkills are all secondary cumulative impacts of this massive road project. Providing a corridor for a water pipeline may be the greatest secondary impact of the Suncoast Tollroad. The 64-foot grassy median in the center of the tollroad gives ample room for a water pipeline. Although pumping water from northern areas of Citrus County or the Suwannee River has been suggested for several years, the feasibility of permitting such a project through private properties would be a difficult task. With a grassy median will be available – and environmental agencies agree that roads and utilities should be co-located – it will be feasible to move water resources southward.

Due to severe flood problems in West Florida, the Four River Basin Study was authorized in 1969 by the United States Senate. The scope of the study was to address the problems of water supply and flood control. This resulted in designing canal systems and also recommended linear wellfield pipelines to supply water to the growing Tampa region. Looking at the map for Alternative Plans 4 and 5, one quickly realizes the water pipeline corridor mirrors the path of the Suncoast Tollroad. In fact, Alternative 5 terminates at US 98 at the Citrus County line, just like the terminus point for Suncoast Tollroad Phase 1.

What About the People?
Residents and visitors appreciate rural communities and Florida’s remaining natural areas. As Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings said in Cross Creek, “we need a place to escape from the urban confusion.” If all of Florida turns into high-speed roads connecting malls and industrial sites to cookie-cutter residential communities, what will we have left?

At the recent DOT public hearing in Gainesville, I heard wonderful testimony from at least twenty Nature Coast community leaders. They had pulled together a monumental community project and were now asking DOT to allocate funds to build the Nature Coast Bike Trail. These wise leaders are trying to grow responsibly with their fragile ecosystem. They realize their area is a jewel compared to the rest of Florida.

Let’s protect the Nature Coast and keep it from being turned into just another overcrowded, unnatural metropolis. Please write to Governor Chiles and the Cabinet members and ask them not to allow the bond sale that will fund the Suncoast Tollroad Project. If the Turnpike District can’t raise the bond money, they cannot build this “road to nowhere.”

Write to the following address: Governor Lawton Chiles and Cabinet, The Capitol, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0250. Or call the Governor’s office at (850) 488-4441.

Jody Rosier is an active member of the Paynes Prairie Chapter of FNPS. Jody is also the Nature Coast Issue Chair for the Florida Chapter of the Sierra Club and appreciates any way you can help fight the Suncoast Tollroad project. Call Jody at (352) 372-6942 or send e-mail to enviright@aol.com.