June 4, 2020

Governor Ron DeSantis
Executive Office of the Governor
400 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

SUBJECT: Please Veto and Redirect M-CORES Funding and Retain Florida Forever

Dear Governor DeSantis:

The burdens of leadership must weigh heavily on you at this time. The Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) understands the many challenges you face cannot be distilled down to simply deciding where to direct or defer funding when the needs of our state so greatly exceed the financial means to address them. Yet to the extent you can control funding decisions in order to improve our ability to meet the most urgent needs, we believe funding for the Multi-Use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance (M-CORES) qualifies as low-hanging fruit.

FNPS recommended last year that you veto funding for the M-CORES legislation based on: 1) the absence of any vetting through the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) planning process to establish a transportation need for the 330 miles of proposed toll road; 2) the clear potential for immense environmental impacts; 3) the inevitable degradation of rural communities and productive, economically viable agricultural lands within the proposed corridors; and 4) the resulting erosion of our ability to effectively address so many truly pressing needs, e.g., recovery from the destruction of Hurricane Michael, given the enormous expenditures required to fund such a roadbuilding project.

To the latter concern, we can now add the painful human and economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. Alarming declines in expected tax revenues, the highest unemployment levels seen in decades, and the impacts to our health care system from this unforeseen calamity will force painful tradeoffs.

FDOT’s Five Year Work Plan would allocate $117.5 million to M-CORES in 2021. Those funds would come from a combination of General Revenue ($67.5 million) and toll receipts collected by Florida’s Turnpike Enterprise ($50 million). In uncertain times, when long-needed investments in education and other pressing needs have been included in the budget, and when we know so much expected funding will not materialize, it would be obscene to withhold or reduce funding for such needs while allowing a purely discretionary project like M-CORES to...
advance. Reasonable people can debate the merits of M-CORES; however, there can be no denying M-CORES should wait when more urgent needs will certainly go unmet.

FNPS also believes land conservation may be the single most effective approach to protecting Florida’s natural resources. Last week, you and the rest of the Florida Cabinet approved the protection of nearly 32,000 acres of natural and agricultural lands. Those lands will provide permanent protection to water resources and sensitive habitats for native flora and fauna; provide recreational opportunities to Florida residents and visitors; and ensure sustainable agricultural usage of those lands will continue. The budget passed by the legislature in March included $100 million for Florida Forever.

The Florida Forever funds will come from documentary stamp taxes generated by real estate transactions and subsequently deposited into the Land Acquisition Trust Fund. Documentary stamp proceeds, in a welcome contrast to other sources of revenue, have actually exceeded expectations to date. The benefits of land conservation are immediate, perpetual, and are likely to grow in value and importance over time. We ask that you continue your leadership in natural resource protection by approving the Florida Forever allocation.

The denial of M-CORES funding will not impede your efforts to help Florida through a time of urgent need. Conversely, we know investments in Florida Forever pay dividends immediately and perpetually, in myriad ways, and without depriving funding from other needs.

FNPS urges you to veto the $117.5 million directed to M-CORES for 2021, and to support Florida’s proud legacy of natural resource protection through the Florida Forever program by approving the legislature’s allocation of $100 million from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund. Thank you for considering our concerns.

Respectfully,

Susan Carr, Ph.D.
President of the Florida Native Plant Society

Eugene M. Kelly
Chair of Policy and Legislation

cc: Nikki Fried, Commissioner, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
Kevin J. Thibault, Secretary, Florida Department of Transportation
Noah Valenstein, Secretary, Florida Department of Environmental Protection