

May 30 2025

Acquisition and Restoration Council
C/o Hank Vinson Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Office of Environmental Services
3900 Commonwealth Blvd., MS 140
Tallahassee, FL 32399-3000

Dear Acquisition and Restoration Councilmembers:

We, the Board of Directors for Friends of Bonita Estero Rail Trail, write to express support for the inclusion of the Bonita Estero Rail Trail (BERT) project onto the Florida Forever Program's Strategic Managed Area Lands List. BERT is an 11.4-mile underutilized rail corridor in Lee and Collier Counties intended to be converted into public trail as part of the statewide trails and greenway network. The corridor is a designated priority trail segment of the 2024-2028 Florida Greenways and Trails System Plan. The corridor's acquisition will fill a strategic gap within the Florida Gulf Coast Trail (a Florida designated regional trail system) as a multi-use paved path. Its extraordinary length, considerable width at 130', and location within developed areas of Lee and Collier Counties affords multiple additional public benefits.

Friends of BERT is a 501c3, organized for advocacy of this rail to trail project. We are just over 2 years old, and have grown in membership and scope. Friends of BERT has over **3,700 members** from Lee and Collier Counties. **31 HOA's** have formally endorsed BERT (please find their letters of endorsement attached), representing more than **25,000 homes**. We have sponsorships and formal endorsements from an **additional 30 organizations** ranging from businesses along the rail to trail; hospital systems; realtor associations; 5 municipalities/county and non-profits. We work closely with Estero, Bonita Springs and Collier County who have together committed 50% of the appraised value of the rail corridor purchase.

The trail will provide a dedicated, safe and affordable transportation route in one of the most deadly areas of the country for cyclists and pedestrians. And the trail's proximity to where people live, work and play will facilitate people to connect with the outdoors and each other while bolstering local economies. We hope the Acquisition and Restoration Council will look favorably upon and include this project into the SMALL category of the Florida Forever Program.

Sincerely the officers of Friends of BERT;

Deborah I Orton, President
Steve Gunther, Treasurer
Beth Castro, Secretary