



May 29, 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

Via Email only: hank.vinson@floridadep.gov

Dear Members of the Acquisition and Restoration Council,

I am writing to express strong support for the inclusion of the Bonita Estero Rail Trail (BERT) project on the Florida Forever Program's Strategic Managed Area Lands List.

BERT represents a rare and timely opportunity to transform an underutilized 11.4-mile rail corridor in Lee and Collier Counties into a vibrant, multi-use public trail. As a designated priority segment in the 2024–2028 Florida Greenways and Trails System Plan, BERT is poised to become a vital connector within the Florida Gulf Coast Trail, a recognized regional trail system.

Adding this corridor to the Florida Forever SMALL project category aligns with the state's conservation and land-use goals, particularly by enhancing the coordination and completion of strategic land acquisitions that support ecosystem services, natural resource protection, and ecological connectivity.

Beyond recreation, BERT's corridor delivers a wide range of public benefits. At 130 feet wide and stretching through rapidly growing urban areas, it offers unique potential to serve as both a wildlife and human corridor. The trail crosses several waterways—including the Estero River, Spring Creek, Imperial River, and Oak Creek—all of which feed into the Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve. It also supports critical habitat linkages between the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed, the Larry Kiker Preserve, and Estero Bay.

In addition, BERT addresses urgent public safety and mobility needs in one of the most dangerous regions in the country for cyclists and pedestrians. The trail will offer a safe, affordable, and accessible transportation route, connecting residents to jobs, schools, parks, and neighborhoods—while encouraging outdoor activity and bolstering local economies.

The Live Wildly Foundation is proud to support this effort. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to raising public awareness about the importance of wildlife corridor conservation, we view the BERT project as a model for balancing smart growth with the need for a connected, resilient landscape. Our mission emphasizes collaboration, innovation, and community-focused conservation. Projects like BERT represent the kind of practical, visionary investments that not only protect Florida's unique ecosystems but also strengthen local economies and improve quality of life.

The BERT project enjoys enthusiastic backing from a wide array of stakeholders, including environmental groups, civic organizations, and business leaders—testament to the diverse and lasting value it promises to deliver.

We respectfully urge the Acquisition and Restoration Council to support the inclusion of the Bonita Estero Rail Trail in the Florida Forever Program's SMALL category and help bring this transformative vision to life.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Meredith Budd". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Meredith" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Budd".

Meredith Budd
Deputy Director
Live Wildly Foundation