

May 21, 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 Acquisition and Restoration Councilmembers:

I 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 a 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. Acquisition and management of the corridor as a public trail furthers Florida's statutory and programmatic goals of enhancing the coordination and completion of land acquisition projects contributing toward the enhancement of essential natural resources, ecosystem service parcels, and connecting linkage corridors.

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. The rail corridor itself is a wildlife corridor crossing the Estero River, Spring Creek, Imperial River and Oak Creek - all of which flow into the Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve - and an extensive network of wetlands connecting the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed and the Larry Kiker Preserve to Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve. 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.

The project enjoys broad and diverse support from environmental, business and civic organizations reflecting the multitude of public benefits it offers. We hope the Acquisition and Restoration Council will look favorable upon and include this project into the SMALL category of the Florida Forever Program.

Sincerely,

Michelle Avola-Brown
Executive Director
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