



June 18, 2013

Lee County Board of Commissioners
2120 SW Main Street
Fort Myers, FL 33901

Dear Commissioners:

BikeWalkLee is a community coalition raising public awareness and advocating for complete streets and a balanced multi-modal transportation system in Lee County. At the June 24th budget workshop, you will discuss the draft 2013-14 budget, including proposals to cut transit and park services.

Budgets are a statement of the community's priorities and it is important that our elected officials make decisions that reflect the community's values. The budget needs to be developed in a rational and thoughtful way, with a focus on the long term consequences of today's budget decisions. It is critical that these decisions reflect the quality of life investments that are vital to the sustainability and economic viability of our community.

For the past six years, the county's budget has been tightened, staffing has been reduced, staff hasn't received any raises, and services have been cut back. The BoCC has chosen not to raise property taxes, preferring to balance the budget by taking from reserves. BikeWalkLee acknowledges that at some point the Board may have to raise additional revenues and we would support that effort in order to maintain the quality of life for our residents and visitors. Our long term economic viability depends on maintaining and enhancing the quality of life that attracts and retains our residents.

BikeWalkLee wants to highlight several budget suggestions for your consideration:

1. **Proposed Transit Cuts:** For the third year in a row, staff has proposed cuts in transit services, which we have spoken against each year and the Board has rejected. In the very year LeeTran was ranked as one of the fastest growing systems in the country, with each month's ridership numbers increasing at a greater pace and now approaching four million passengers per year, it is surprising that the county would be considering significant reductions in service. The LeeTran system is also recognized for excellence and was named the Florida Transit System of the Year in 2012. Rather than cutting services, the county needs to be exploring ways to expand and improve its transit services in order to meet the long term needs of our community. We urge you to reject the proposal to cut \$3.2 million from the LeeTran budget for the following reasons:

- **Economic and business development.** Cutting transit routes and services has serious implications for riders who depend on the system to get to work, thus the staff proposal to eliminate four LeeTran routes and to eliminate or greatly reduce weekend hours will have

serious ramifications for the county workforce and its employers, especially those in the service industry.

- **Job Loss.** According to LeeTran data, a majority of its riders use it as their means of transportation to work. The proposed transit cuts will result in an unacceptable ridership loss. Without a way to get to work, this cut could translate into job losses for these individuals. This has an exponential impact on Lee County's economy. In addition to the individual job loss, there are also enormous implications for businesses that may be attracted to Lee County. Research shows that businesses relocate to areas with healthy public transit systems. Given the current economic environment, wouldn't Lee County want to expand (not shrink) its opportunities to grow by holding the budget line on public transportation? We are also concerned about the proposed elimination or serious cutback in weekend hours. Many of the jobs of LeeTran riders are not 9-5 five-day-a-week jobs; but rather service jobs that require 7 days a week transportation coverage. Ending weekend service will have serious negative consequences for these workers as well as the businesses that employ them.
- **Educational Access - Lee Tran Route 60.** We are particularly concerned about the proposal to eliminate Route 60, which serves FGCU and San Carlos Park. As members of the MPO Board stated at their March meeting, we need more transit services to FGCU, not less. Instead of ending the route, both the route and the frequency should be re-examined to find ways to make it work better. Lee Tran and FGCU are working together to bring the other area businesses to the table to try to find a solution to the problem and that process should go forward. At a time when education is being promoted as a path forward to economic development, eliminating access to higher education opportunities is a step backward.
- **Livability.** Finally, public transit is one of the most important aspects of building communities, restoring community life, providing accessibility to businesses, improving entrepreneurial opportunities, spurring community identity, building cohesion, increasing safety, and enhancing growth. By reducing transit services and funding, you would be jeopardizing the livability for all residents.

2. **Proposed Parks Cuts:** We were surprised to see the staff proposals to close five county parks, including three of the most popular parks--Manatee Park, Six Mile Cypress Slough, and Caloosahatchee Regional Park. Given the investment made by county residents in acquiring those facilities and their economic value to residents and visitors, it makes little sense to close them for minimal operating cost savings. We know from the EAR public workshops that Lee County residents place a high value on parks as part of the quality of life that attracts them to Lee County; and we know that it also attracts businesses to Lee County, including Hertz Corporate, which cited Lee County's quality of life as one of the reasons they relocated their corporate headquarters here. We also know from the Visitors and Convention Bureau (VCB) surveys that visitors value and frequent our park system while here on vacation. The proposed cuts would threaten our highly valued park system, which would have long term consequences for our ability to attract and retain residents and businesses who are looking at quality of life features, and result in long term economic losses to the county many times greater in magnitude than any small short-term savings from closing the parks.

The squeeze on existing parks appears to be caused by the need to absorb the cost of the County's contract with the Red Sox to pay the annual \$1.6 million operating expenses for JetBlue Park out of the ad valorem tax-supported Parks and Rec budget. Other funds should be sought to cover all costs associated with both stadiums rather than divert taxpayer supported Park and Rec funds needed for operating the existing county parks.

3. Proposed Transportation CIP:

As stated in our May 30th memo to the Board, we continue to be concerned about the staff-proposed CIP. Consistent with previous recommendations we offer the following:

- Estero Boulevard: Estero Boulevard should be considered as the county's top priority project and funds should be reallocated to fully fund the second segment (\$7 M) over the next two years.

- Alico Road: The Alico Road project should not move forward until a comprehensive master plan for the Research Diamond area is completed.
 - The \$1.6 million budgeted for 2012-13 for the design phase as well as the proposed \$8.35 M in the 2015-16 and the \$0.5 M 2016-17 amount be reallocated to the Estero Blvd. project (a total of \$10.6 million).
 - When/if this road is ready for widening, the costs should be paid for by benefiting land owners/developers, not by county residents through gas taxes.

- Homestead Road: The Homestead Road Complete Streets study now underway should be completed (scheduled for June 2014) before making further decisions on the Homestead Road project (Sunrise Blvd. to Alabama Rd).
 - A portion of the \$3 million currently available for ROW purchases should be reallocated to street redesign and the remaining funds for ROW purchases should be expended subsequent to the needs outlined in the redesign.
 - Funds budgeted in 2015-16 should be dedicated to redesign and construction costs (now in 2015-16 for \$12.1 M) should be moved to 2016-17.

- Ortiz Avenue: The Ortiz north of Ballard should be redesigned as a two-lane section with a turn lane/median and other complete street features.
 - A portion of the \$3.1 million currently available for ROW purchases should be reallocated to street redesign and the remaining funds for ROW purchases should be expended subsequent to the needs outlined in the street redesign.
 - The \$10.7 million in CIP budget in the 6-10 year window should be revised to accurately reflect the costs of the redesigned street.

The county's approach to transportation planning and budgeting needs a major overhaul in light of revenue realities. BikeWalkLee recommends that the Board hit the "pause" button, and do what other communities around the country are starting to do -- take all the projects in the pipeline and re-evaluate them, right-size them, focus on improving existing roadways instead of building new capacity, work closely with their communities, and re-prioritize our transportation investments to live within the funds available.

Closing

We understand that the county is faced with a very difficult budget situation and hard choices. We believe that in tight economic times, it makes more sense to invest in activities that keep people employed (or employable) and defer spending on projects that can wait until budgetary times are better. By doing so, you ensure that Lee County will position itself to invest in its future and emerge from the recession in a position of strength. We believe that economic prosperity comes from quality investments in community infrastructure, such as transit, parks, and complete streets.

Thank you for considering our recommendations as you set budget priorities for next year and beyond.

Sincerely,

/s/

Darla Letourneau

on behalf of BikeWalkLee

cc: Doug Meurer, County Manager
Pam Keyes, Assistant County Manager
Glen Saylor, Assistant County Manager
Pete Winton, Assistant County Manager
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