



August 28, 2015

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

Dear Commissioners:

BikeWalkLee, a coalition working to complete Lee County's streets, works for a balanced multi-modal transportation system that values transportation choice, connectivity, economic opportunity, livable communities, community character, safety, and quality growth. As the Board prepares to take public input in September about its proposed 2015-16 budget, BikeWalkLee would like to share its comments for your consideration.

Here are the **highlights of our recommendations:**

1. Transit--Adopt the proposed modest increases to the LeeTran budget, and commit to addressing the larger need for a more robust transit system in the coming year.
2. Bike/Ped Facilities--Fully fund the BPAC request for \$2 million a year for retrofit projects by adding another \$3.9 million to the 5-year CIP for this line item.
3. Transportation CIP--Delay the Alico Rd. widening project and shift those funds into the Board's #1 priority project-- Estero Blvd. Improvement project--so that it can be constructed in a shorter timeframe (currently planned to take 10 years).
4. "Growth Increment Funding"--Announce your plans for the use of these funds and the process by which those decisions will be made prior to the September public budget hearings.
5. Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Settlement Funds--Announce your plans for the process and timeframe for deciding how to allocate the \$5.24 million, and consider allocating these funds for bike/ped projects.

#### Transit

BikeWalkLee has long advocated for a robust transit system as part of a balanced multi-modal transportation system. We are pleased to see that the proposed budget continues the restoration of services that had been cut in the FY 2014 budget, maintains the three bus route improvements that began in January (with revenues from the increased fares), and provides an additional \$600 K for improved ADA transit and transportation disadvantaged service. We were also pleased to see the improvements to Route 60, serving FGCU and San Carlos Park, implemented beginning last month. We also urge you to ensure that the Fort Myers Beach "Park and Ride" service continues without disruption while the county develops a new parking facility. BikeWalkLee's concern has been that the 2014 cuts to transit services resulted in ridership losses that are difficult to rebuild. The dependability and convenience of transit must be addressed. The County can do this by further improving headways throughout the system, enhancing the rider experience, and aggressively marketing the benefits of transit.

While we support the County's transit budget proposals, they only tinker at the edges of what is needed to meet the long term needs of our community. The county should be proactively preparing to meet the future demand of a population projected to grow to over 1 million by 2040. As the Bonita Springs' Chamber of Commerce President Christine Ross' recent article, ***Our Region's Transportation Conundrum, Let's Tackle Transit***, stated, it's past time for the county to provide public transportation options for the growing workforce. Having a robust transit system--one that has frequent and reliable service--that attracts "choice" riders, not just a transit system viewed as a "social service"--is critical to Lee County's economic competitiveness. In the coming year, we urge the Board to partner with the Lee MPO and other communities and businesses throughout SWFL to seriously commit to a reliable and convenient transit system.

### **Bike/Ped Facilities**

As we stated in our March 9, 2015 letter to you, we wholeheartedly support the BPAC request for \$2 million a year for stand-alone bike/ped retrofit projects to attack the extensive backlog of 85 approved and prioritized projects (totaling \$68 million). While your proposed budget for this line item represents an increase over last year's plan, it still falls \$3.9 million short of what is needed to fully fund BPAC's request, and only funds 5% of the needed projects (4 of 81 projects funded). The next project on the BPAC prioritized list is for a shared use path on Estero Parkway, which is urgently needed for the safety of pedestrians and cyclists with the growth and development that is occurring along this county road.

We were pleased to see the Palomino Lane Shared Use Path project, which was approved by the Board in 2014, be fully funded in this year's budget. Another important bike/ped facilities project off Daniels Parkway--the Fiddlesticks Rd. Shared Use Path--was approved in 2012 and was to start construction in 2014. We hope that construction on this project, which has been delayed by permitting issues, will begin shortly. With the new shared use path soon to be constructed on the Fiddlesticks side of Daniels Parkway as part of the MPO's \$10 million TIGER Complete Streets Initiative grant, it will be important for both of these two side road shared use path projects to be completed and connect up with the Daniels pathway system. This will allow many local residents to walk and bike to shops, schools, parks, and other destinations in the area without having to drive their cars on this increasingly congested roadway.

As BikeWalkLee stated in its January 29, 2015 letter to you, we are pleased that the impact fee ordinance (adopted March 3, 2015) includes language broadening the definition of what road impact fee funds can be used for, making it a more multi-modal transportation approach. We encourage you to use this new tool to ensure that bike/ped/transit facilities are incorporated into transportation projects designed to meet the infrastructure needs created by growth. This will provide our citizens with more transportation choices and save the taxpayers money by building these needed facilities from the start vs. later expensive retrofit projects.

### **Transportation CIP**

It is also important that all road projects in the CIP be designed with a complete streets approach in an effort to improve the safety of all road users. We also encourage the County to give a higher priority to maintaining and improving the current roadway network vs. expanding road capacity, taking a "fix it first" approach to prioritizing the scarce resources.

Over the past three years, the Board has given priority to four road projects: Alico/Ben Hill widening; Estero Blvd. Improvement project; Burnt Store Rd. widening; and Homestead Rd. widening.

BikeWalkLee has consistently stated that funding for the Alico Rd. widening project is not justified at this time, especially in light of other much higher priority needs in terms of traffic demand. The Estero Blvd. Improvement project is a much higher priority and should proceed at a much faster pace in order to minimize the economic disruptions that the planned 10-year construction timeframe will cause. With Estero Blvd. being the only road through Fort Myers Beach--one of the county's tourist hot spots--the economic costs of delay in terms of lost tourism dollars, not to mention the disruption to Fort Myers Beach residents, from such a long time horizon for this project merits delaying other projects so that this one can be completed as quickly as possible.

More glaringly, we continue to be concerned that the County has an approved transportation CIP that has set in motion the expenditure of funds on a long list of projects for which there is a MAJOR shortfall in revenues projected to be available. The County should be scaling back its plans to meet the available future revenues. By moving forward with grossly unrealistic funding assumptions in the form of the proposed CIP, the County is pushing off the hard choice of prioritizing projects. This "head in the sand" approach will cost taxpayers a great deal of money for purchase of right-of-way and design studies for projects for which there are no funds to construct. As has been made clear at all levels of government over the past 4 years, transportation revenues will continue to decline from all sources at all levels of government for the foreseeable future. You, as our elected leaders, should be facing the fiscal reality and making tough choices, rather than hoping for a future solution.

As we have communicated with you on numerous occasions over the past 4 years, we believe that the county should be collecting 100% of the impact fees due so that the full cost of the infrastructure necessitated by development is paid for by those creating the growth rather than current residents. Even with full impact fee collections, the county would be short revenues needed to meet the transportation infrastructure needs of the county, but it would significantly reduce the "hole" that is growing increasingly deeper.

#### "Growth Increment Funding (GIF)"

In our May 29, 2015 letter, we outlined our comments on the County's policy decision to earmark an estimated \$7.9 million of general funds (already collected from property taxes) for infrastructure projects. This proposal simply fills the hole created by the loss of impact fee revenues due to the Board's decision to continue significant reductions in impact fee collection rates (now a 55% reduction). Since that policy was adopted, County Administration has notified the Board that construction costs are up 20%, meaning that the gap has widened even further.

To date, the County has not indicated how they plan to spend the GIF fund and what process it will use to make those decisions. Will the funds be used for transportation projects, parks, county buildings, utility projects and/or jails? Will the funds be added to the CIP budget and made part of the annual CIP review and decision-making process? Or, does the County intend to create a separate/new process for projects to be considered? If so, when and how will this be determined? Will the public have an opportunity to comment in advance on this approach? Given that infrastructure projects are usually multi-year investments, how will these funds be committed for the outyears, if not through the normal CIP process? We urge the Board to announce the plans for the use of these funds and the process by which those decisions will be made before the beginning of the September public budget hearings.

As we stated in our May 29, 2015 letter, we urge you to dedicate a significant portion of these GIF funds to bike/ped retrofit projects and transit funding.

### Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Settlement Funds

In mid-July, the Board accepted \$5.24 million as part of the national \$18.5 billion BP settlement for the 2010 disaster. These funds, which are due to be distributed by the end of this year, can be spent on anything, according to the County's spokesperson. Although the Board is not including these funds in its decisions on the 2015-16 budget, the allocation of these funds is clearly a budget decision that should be subject to public input. We hope that you will announce shortly the plan, process, and timeframe for deciding how to allocate these funds.

In the meantime, BikeWalkLee would like to offer its suggestion that these funds be allocated for bike/ped projects. As mentioned before, the backlog of retrofit projects is extensive. Use of these funds for small one-time capital expenditures is a good fit for a one-time revenue "windfall", since it won't require ongoing expenditures in the outyears. If the County wishes to take a tourism approach to the use of these funds, there are two quick projects with great tourism benefits to consider--creating the long discussed trailhead for the 10 Mile Linear Trail, so that visitors and residents have a place to park and then bike the trail; and investing in wayfinding signs along the network of share use paths and bike lanes throughout the county, i.e., expanding the County's Tour de Parks and University Loop successful wayfinding signs to the whole system, thereby encouraging more people to bike for transportation and recreation. We look forward to discussing these ideas with you further once you have announced your process for deciding how to spend the \$5.24 million.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

Darla Letourneau  
on behalf of BikeWalkLee

### **Related BWL letters to BoCC on various budget topics:**

#### Transit:

June 18, 2013 BWL Letter: Comments on County's 2014 budget proposed transit cuts

April 4, 2014 BWL Letter: Support for restoring LeeTran cuts to Baseline Budget

April 10, 2014 BWL Letter (comments on 4/15 BoCC Agenda Items 4 and 10): LeeTran Park and Ride Facility for Fort Myers Beach Trolley

Aug. 14, 2014 BWL Letter: Support for proposed LeeTran fare increase

#### Bike/Ped Facilities:

March 9, 2015 BWL Letter: Support for BPAC request for \$2 M/year for stand-alone bike/ped retrofit projects.

Dec. 8, 2014: BWL Report to BPAC: "Report on Lee County Funding Trends for Bike/Ped Projects"

April 15, 2014 BWL letter (comments on 4/15 BoCC Agenda items 4 and 10): Palomino Lane Shared Use Path CIP Project Proposal

#### CIP/Impact Fees

Jan. 29, 2015 BWL Letter: Opposition to suspension or reduction in impact fees

May 29, 2015 BWL Letter: Comments on County's proposed Growth Increment Funding proposal

Aug. 18, 2014 Letter (Margaret Banyan): Comments on 2015 budget items (CIP, impact fees, transit, Conservation 20/20)