



Dec. 19, 2014

Members of Lee County Legislative Delegation:

BikeWalkLee, a coalition working to complete Lee County's streets, promotes policies that enhance the safety and usability of our roadways. The purpose of this letter is to highlight **important priorities we hope the delegation will support in the upcoming legislative session:**

- 1) **Efforts to strengthen laws that make it safer for pedestrians and cyclists;**
- 2) **Focused strategies that enhance economic development through bike tourism;**
- 3) **State support for a robust public transit system; and**
- 4) **Equitable distribution of transportation dollars to Southwest Florida.**

BikeWalkLee wishes to thank the Lee Legislative Delegation for its support of several of our priority requests last year, which were enacted during last year's Legislative Session. This year's priorities are explained in detail below; and we would be happy to discuss any of them further at your convenience.

1. Stronger laws for bike/ped safety

Our top priority continues to be the need for stronger laws and enforcement tools to make Florida roadways safer for pedestrians and cyclists. For over a decade, Florida has held the dubious distinction of being the most dangerous state in the country for pedestrians and cyclists. (Locally, Lee County ranks in the top quarter of the most dangerous areas in the state.) One of the reasons is it also ranks as the seventh worst state for driver safety laws, as ranked by the Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety. There is clearly a relationship between high bike/ped fatality rates and lax driver safety laws. It is critical that Gov. Scott and the Florida Legislature continue to make roadway safety the top transportation priority, with a goal of greatly reducing bike/ped fatalities.

In 2011, Florida Dept. of Transportation (FDOT) Secretary Prasad launched a statewide bike/ped safety campaign aimed at addressing this problem and brought in FDOT District 1 Secretary Billy Hattaway to head up this campaign. We were especially pleased with the recent issuance of a FDOT statewide complete streets policy. Complete streets are safer streets and, by adopting a complete streets policy, FDOT is signaling that safety requires a culture shift that says roadways are for everyone and we need to design, construct and manage roadways with all users in mind. **It is critical that these positive initiatives started under Secretary Prasad continue with the new FDOT leadership team.**

While FDOT has made bike/ped safety a top priority and Secretary Hattaway is providing strong leadership, it will take time before we see the benefits in terms of fewer bike/ped fatalities and injuries. The issues that have made our state so dangerous are deeply imbedded in road design and land use, and require support through state laws, enforcement, public awareness, and changing people's behavior.

Like successful campaigns to stop drunk driving and to get people to buckle their seatbelts, it takes years of work using all the tools in the toolbox to change people's behavior and get results. Over the past two years, the Legislature has begun to strengthen its weak driver safety laws -- but much remains to be done.

The Legislature is to be commended for enacting the **Aaron Cohen Life Protection Act** (named for the Miami cyclist who was killed by a hit-and-run driver in 2012), which strengthens penalties for leaving the scene of a crash. While the law went into effect July 1, 2014, hit-and-run crashes that injure or kill cyclists or pedestrians are occurring at an alarming rate. It's critical that both law enforcement investigating these crashes and the judicial system that decides whether to prosecute and how to sentence, aggressively implement a "zero tolerance" approach to hit-and-run drivers, charging and prosecuting them to the fullest extent of the law. Without strong enforcement, we will have an epidemic on our hands. While we are not proposing further legislation at this time, **anything that our state legislative leaders can do to encourage law enforcement to aggressively enforce and prosecute the law you passed last year would be appreciated.**

While the Florida Legislature finally adopted a "texting while driving" ban in 2012, it was only a first step and a weak bill. We believe that texting while driving and other distractions is one of the main reasons for the increasing number of pedestrians and cyclists who are killed on our roads, including the increase in the number of hit-and-run crashes. Thus, it is **critically important that the Legislature take action this year to strengthen the texting law so that texting while driving is made a primary offense.** Once that is done, law enforcement will have the tools necessary to implement this important measure.

With our dismal bike/ped safety record, a stronger texting law is critical. Last session several bills were introduced (including SB 322) but none of them made it through either body. Action on this legislation this session will be a critical test of the Legislature's commitment to improved bike/ped safety. **We urge you to support HB 1**, the first bill filed for the 2015 session, which makes texting while driving a primary offense, doubles the fines, and provides enhanced penalties for violations when committed in a school zone or school crossing. **We urge the Lee delegation to not only support this legislation, but to champion it.**

We also support the proposed bike/ped safety bill that the Collier County Legislative Delegation recently endorsed, which will be introduced by Rep. Passidomo.

Finally, it is **important that the Legislature not adopt legislation that will worsen our existing road safety problems, such as the bill to raise speed limits on Florida roads**, which the Governor vetoed last year. We urge our delegation to oppose consideration of a re-introduction of this bill or any other bill that would make matters worse.

2. Focused strategies for economic development through bike tourism

We applaud the Lee Delegation for its support last year of the Coast to Coast Connector Trail (C2C), a 275-mile trail from Cape Canaveral National Seashore to St. Petersburg that will enhance economic development through bike tourism. We are pleased that Gov. Scott supported the funding last year and that FDOT is taking a leadership role in the implementation of this project. We are excited about the long-term plans now getting underway to develop a Southwest Coast Connector Trail that would start in Tampa/St. Pete area (where it would join the C2C trail) and come down to Naples, linking up with the planned River of Grass Greenway Trail that will connect to Miami. The Lee and Collier County MPO bike/ped committees are now working to identify the best route for that trail.

The Florida Greenways & Trails Foundation will be seeking legislative support to accelerate work on these regional connector trails, including a **request for an appropriation of \$10 million to be directed to FDOT and regional MPOs to fund a regional trail alignment study** for each of the three regional trails envisioned, **including the Southwest Coast Connector Trail in Southwest Florida. We urge the Lee Delegation to support this request.**

The \$10 million federal TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) grant which the Lee MPO was awarded last year for its Complete Streets Initiative project, sets the stage for enhanced economic benefits from bike tourism, which is big business both nationally and globally. States and communities across the country are racing to gain a competitive advantage to capture a share of this growing lucrative niche market, especially attractive for international travelers and a younger demographic. With Florida's temperate winters and flat terrain, the potential for destination bike tourism is an economic development strategy for Florida with an enormous potential for high returns on our investment.

Bike tourism is already gaining traction in Lee County with the recent completion of Cape Coral's 90-mile bicycle routes system, thanks to an outstanding partnership between the Cape Coral Bike-Ped group and the City of Cape Coral. Building on these successes, FDOT District 1 just approved the Lee MPO's request for funding to conduct a feasibility study (called PD & E) for a shared use path that will connect the Cape Coral system to Pine Island. While it will be years before this project is constructed, when this 2.3-mile link between these two communities is complete it will open even more bike tourism opportunities for this region.

Having a safe and connected countywide biking and walking network will allow Lee County to promote bike tourism, bringing much needed revenues to small businesses and the tourism industry. Biking is increasingly popular among our visitors, with 18% reporting that they biked while they were here in 2012 (up from 12% in 2011). The Lee County Visitors and Convention Bureau recognizes the untapped potential of bike tourism and, for the first time, participated in the national bike tourism conference in November, along with a representative for Visit Florida.

3. State support for a robust public transit system

LeeTran's success is a vital part of this area's growing reputation as one that is on a clear path to a more sustainable, livable, high-quality of life. However, lack of adequate operating funds for transit services is putting Southwest Florida at great risk of being left behind economically. Investments in transit are not just about mobility connections for residents and workers--they're about the larger economic impact. Companies and their workers want to locate in places with a vibrant public transportation system, and regions without them will be left behind. **We need our leaders at both the state and local levels to focus now on how to not only maintain the transit system we have, but how to grow it into a more robust system.**

We are also concerned that changes by the Florida Legislature to Medicaid in 2011 have created unintended consequences at the local level, creating devastating funding losses for the provision of vital transportation services to the medically-needy. As a result, Lee County's provider of these services, Good Wheels, is unable to meet the demand for transportation services to critical medical treatment, such as dialysis and cancer treatment, for the medically-needy. **We urge the Legislature to support funding for medical transit services and work with local governments and service providers to make permanent changes in the Medicaid program to fix this problem.**

4. Equitable distribution of transportation dollars to Southwest Florida

Finally, our region is being left behind in the big, long-term transportation trends taking place in Florida:

- Long-term rail planning is happening everywhere in Florida except our region;
- The port system planning is everywhere except our region; and
- Florida's State Interstate System (SIS) long term plans pay minimal attention to our region.

These are big regional patterns that will drive economic resiliency and they are coalescing within specific regions of the state; all with the flow of transportation funds.

The recent decline in proportionate share of transportation dollars coming to SWFL takes on far greater significance in this bigger picture patterning. The common factor within all of these big cycle commerce developments is the integrated, future-oriented, transportation networks. Transportation dollars are beginning to solidify and coalesce within other regions in Florida, and our region is being left behind and will fall further and further behind if nothing is done to address the problem now.

The Lee Legislative delegation needs to educate itself on these funding trends and press to be included in these big picture plans for Florida's future to ensure that our region receives equitable transportation funding which is vital to the long term economic vitality of Southwest Florida.

We look forward to continuing to work with you on these issues.

Darla Letourneau
on behalf of BikeWalkLee

cc: Lee County Commissioners