

**POSITION STATEMENT ON THE PROPOSED
NORTHWEST FLORIDA TRANSPORTATION CORRIDOR
IN THE APALACHICOLA RIVER BASIN AND FRANKLIN COUNTY**

The Apalachicola Riverkeeper is opposed to the creation of a new transportation corridor in the Apalachicola basin and in Franklin County because the corridor: 1) will negatively impact sensitive lands, water quality and wildlife habitat; 2) will negatively impact public lands; 3) will degrade community identity; and 4) will not meet the purposes established by the Legislature. We support the No Build option.

First, sensitive wetlands, creeks, rivers and areas with threatened or endangered species will be directly impacted by the construction of a new corridor. Construction of the corridor will degrade water quality through increased sedimentation, dredging and filling, and stormwater runoff. The existence of a new corridor will divide wildlife communities, obstruct local flyways, and make wildlife passage difficult and could increase mortality of threatened species such as the black bear. In addition, noise and traffic on the corridor will drive wildlife out of habitats near the corridor. As HDR One Company has acknowledged, its data regarding black bear habitat are inaccurate. Black bears are routinely seen in Eastpoint, and no doubt in other places east of the Apalachicola River. HDR should correct its maps before proceeding. Similarly, reputable individuals have reported sightings of the Florida panther in Eastpoint. The continued existence and protection of this highly endangered and valuable species and its habitat should be of utmost concern to the Authority, HDR, FDOT and us all.

Second, public lands are a major part of the identity of Franklin County and the Apalachicola basin. The State of Florida and the federal government have spent copious staff time and financial resources acquiring and managing the public lands of Tate's Hell State Forest, the Apalachicola River Environmental and Wildlife Area and the Apalachicola National Forest. A new corridor through any of these public lands will decrease their recreational value. These public lands provide a unique benefit to the people of Florida and the world – a large healthy, intact expanse of forested uplands and wetlands. Hundreds of Floridians and other nature enthusiasts hunt, bird, botanize, hike, bike, fish, watch butterflies, grunt worms, and enjoy these lands. One of the primary qualities that these lands provide is their sheer size – they offer one of the largest expanses of open space for public enjoyment in Florida. In addition, the Florida Division of Forestry, which manages the most southerly of these public lands at Tate's Hell, has stated its official position as follows, "we do not consider Tate's Hell suitable for any new linear facilities." Prescribed fire is one of the FDOF's primary forest management tools. A new corridor will increase traffic accidents occurring as a result of decreased visibility from the smoke of prescribed fires. In the alternative, FDOF could be required to alter its management plan and use less fire – a similarly untenable result.

Third, the people of Franklin County are proud of their community identity. In contrast, at one of HDR One Company's presentations to the Northwest Florida Transportation Corridor Authority, a HDR representative stated that one of the goals of the Northwest Florida Transportation Corridor was to get drivers from the east Wakulla County line to

the Florida-Alabama border in 4 hours. This goal does not match up with the community character of Franklin County. Northwest Florida already contains a transportation corridor, Interstate Highway 10 that serves as a high-speed cross-state facility; State Road 20 augments this service as well. By choice, traffic in Franklin County and the communities of the Apalachicola basin moves slower; the people who live here do not want the high-speed lifestyle of more urban or suburban areas. People here want folks to slow down and enjoy what is truly unique about the area: its natural environment. Further, the corridor will have a negative impact on the Big Bend Scenic Byway as a result of new intersections, diversion of FDOT funds from Byway maintenance to the new corridor, and confusion of message - i.e. the Byway's purpose is to get folks to slow down and see the natural beauty that the Apalachicola basin has to offer - while the corridor will tell folks to speed on through. Finally, a new corridor will stimulate residential and commercial sprawl, which will further degrade sensitive lands, public lands, recreation, wildlife habitat, and aesthetics, all of which compose the character of this community.

Fourth, the proposed project does not comport with the stated purposes of the legislation. The enabling statute states that the purpose of the corridor is to "improve mobility on the U.S. 98 corridor in Northwest Florida to enhance traveler safety, identify and develop hurricane evacuation routes, promote economic development along the corridor, and implement transportation projects to alleviate current or anticipated traffic congestion." Section 343.82, Florida Statutes.

- Mobility is not a problem in Franklin County or the Apalachicola basin. Traffic studies do not rank lack of mobility as a problem or concern in this area. Take a poll of the drivers in the area and see what they think.
- Likewise, traffic safety is not a problem or concern. The roads are safe and accidents relatively few and this has been confirmed by our conversations with members of the Franklin County Sheriff's Department. It is highly likely that traveler safety is a much higher concern in fast-paced, congested locales such as Panama City, Destin, Ft. Walton, and Pensacola.
- One of the greatest deficiencies of the Northwest Florida Transportation Corridor Authority legislation is its failure to look at the big transportation picture of communities, counties and regions. For example, to improve hurricane evacuation in Franklin County it is obvious that the highest priority should be to improve and secure north-south routes, such as State Road 65 and County Road 67. If the Florida Legislature were truly concerned with improving hurricane evacuation routes, it should direct the Authority or FDOT to carefully analyze the entire road system rather than focus on Highway 98, which, in its east-west layout, runs counter to good evacuation.
- Similarly, it is likely that economic growth in eastern Franklin County, where the Authority has focused its proposal for a "relocation" of Highway 98, will actually be hurt more than helped. The economic centers of Lanark Village, Carrabelle,

and Eastpoint are on existing 98, where the traffic moves slow enough to encourage stops for shopping. Rerouting traffic away from existing 98 will cause the existing businesses to suffer, fail or move, none of which a literal reading of the statute anticipates. Promoting economic development along a new corridor, the “relocated” 98 will shift the economic centers of these communities, alter land use patterns and disrupt neighborhoods for no good reason. Our communities need strategies to get visitors to spend more, not less time in them.

- Finally, traffic congestion is not a problem in the Apalachicola basin. Current assessments show Florida’s population growth slowing. In addition, Franklin County does not conform to the growth patterns of other areas of Florida, and that’s the way this community wants it.

In summary, a new transportation corridor is neither needed nor appropriate for Franklin County and the Apalachicola basin. As proposed, the new corridor also fails to meet the stated purposes of the enabling legislation. The Apalachicola Riverkeeper has three more points.

Neither the Authority nor HDR has provided adequate opportunities for community involvement to date. As Commissioner Sanders expressed at the Authority meeting on October 18, 2007, the people of Franklin County want to be involved and want to be able to discuss what is going on. Because this is a small community located in a high quality natural landscape, the potential negative impacts of a new transportation corridor are much more likely. Please slow down long enough to hear, understand and follow the wishes of the community.

It is possible that the creation of a new corridor or the “relocation” of Highway 98 will result in the transfer of maintenance responsibility for existing 98 to Franklin County. At the last meeting of the Authority in Apalachicola, both Russell Crofton, Chair of the Franklin County Commission, and Cheryl Sanders, longtime Franklin County Commissioner and Authority member, unequivocally stated that is not a job the County would accept. In addition, \$34,746,677.70 in taxpayer dollars is currently being spent to permanently repair the sections of Highway 98 in Franklin County that are most vulnerable to storm damage.

The residents and communities of Franklin County would benefit from better transportation infrastructure such as the improvement of the “low” crossings on State Road 65 and County Road 67 so that people would have sufficient north-south evacuation routes before and return-access after storms. It is noteworthy that the Master Plan Phase I data collected for this project does not show County Road 67 in its Level of Service Analysis. This indicates that neither the engineers nor the Authority are taking a comprehensive overview of needs and solutions.

We appreciate the work that the Authority and HDR One Company have done at the behest of the Legislature. We feel certain that other communities in northwest Florida

have or will have serious traffic problems that the Legislature rightfully sought to address. Such is not the case here.

