

ENVIRONMENTAL OUTRAGE! PROPOSED NEW ROAD IN GOLDEN GATE ESTATES CAUSES CONCERN

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GOLDEN GATE ESTATES _ A proposed route for a new road in rural Collier County is running into a wall of opposition from state and federal environmental agencies.

Collier County staff is studying three potential routes for a new north-south corridor to connect Golden Gate Estates to U.S. 41 East and ease traffic congestion on Collier Boulevard.

One of the routes runs along Miller Boulevard, cutting through an Everglades restoration project in the Picayune Strand State Forest, while two others skirt the western edge of the forest along an extension of Benfield Road.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the South Florida Water Management District and the Florida Division of Forestry have all written letters to the county, warning about cutting off water flows and paving over habitat for endangered Florida panthers.

After a recent meeting with county road planners, representatives of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said they too have serious concerns.

The opposition should send Collier County a strong message, an environmental advocate said.

Stop wasting taxpayer dollars and abandon this effort, Florida Wildlife Federation field representative Nancy Payton said Friday.

That would be premature, county principal project planner Claudine Auclair said.

We definitely understand their concerns, she said Friday. _There_s still a lot of things to evaluate._

A tentative plan to recommend a preferred route to Collier County commissioners later this month has been pushed back at least a month, Auclair said.

Any new north-south road east of Collier Boulevard is years away from getting built, transportation planning director Nick Casalanguida said.

The county staff doesn_t anticipate setting aside any money for the road for the next 15 or 20 years, but

development in the area could accelerate the plans for what now is expected to be a four-lane road, he said.

Having a corridor in its long-range plans, though, would allow the county to work with developers to build parts of the road as new neighborhoods or shopping centers come online, he said.

Most troublesome to state and federal agencies is the route along Miller Boulevard, part of which the Everglades restoration project would make impassable during the wet season to help restore natural water flows to the Ten Thousand Islands.

The federal and state governments have spent \$200 million buying land for the restoration project and plan to spend another \$250 million to build pumps, fill canals and tear out roads for the restoration, according to federal figures.

That is a crown jewel project of Everglades restoration, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service assistant field supervisor Spencer Simon said Friday.

The Fish and Wildlife Service supports none of the new corridors, Simon said, but he added that _a lot could change_ between now and the county_s 15- to 20-year planning horizon.

Simon said the Fish and Wildlife Service is _ready and willing_ to work with the county on a more comprehensive plan for guiding growth in panther country.

Simon and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission panther team leader Darrell Land were among nine state and federal officials who recently met with county road planners about the corridor study.

Land said the Miller Boulevard route faces _insurmountable hurdles_ to get environmental permits.

No one has a reasonable expectation that (Miller Boulevard) would be the preferred alternative, Land said.

Land said the Benfield Road alternatives minimize the effects to public land but still raise questions about protecting panthers and bringing development to the edge of the state forest.

_There_s still going to be some issues,_ Land said.

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Published on Apr. 5 2009

Source: <http://www.naplesnews.com/news/2009/apr/04/proposed-road-eastern-collier-concerns-state-feder/>

The original page is located at

<http://free.naplesplus.us/articles/view.php/44414/environmental-outrage-proposed-new-road-in-golden-gate-estates-causes-concern>