



October 1, 2015

**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. BikeWalkLee wishes to thank the Lee Legislative Delegation for its support of several of our priority requests last year, which were enacted and/or advanced during the last Legislative Session. 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 SWFL.**

**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.) In August, there was yet another report confirming Florida's "worst in country" ranking--this one by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This national report found that Florida had the highest rate of bicycling deaths of any state in the nation--0.57 per 100,000 people, more than double the nationwide rate of 0.23 per 100,000. As the recent *Tampa Tribune* article stated, "Perhaps most disturbing, while other states have found ways to dramatically cut bicycle deaths during two periods measured over the last three decades, Florida has barely made a dent--reducing the number less than 10 percent. Only Wyoming made a poorer showing."

One of the reasons Florida has made so little progress is its lax driver safety laws. Florida 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.

Our top legislative priority last year and again this year is enactment of HB 231, the bike safety bill introduced and championed by Rep. Passidomo and co-sponsored by Rep. Fitzenhagen. It was extremely disappointing to see this bill, which passed both the House and Senate almost unanimously, become a

casualty of the abrupt ending of the Legislative Session last year. We are pleased to see that Rep. Passidomo has already introduced a strengthened version of her bill for the 2016 legislative session. It is gratifying to see the Southwest Florida legislative delegation play a statewide leadership role in improving the safety of our roads for people biking and walking. This effort is strongly supported by our community--the Lee MPO, the Collier County Commission, municipalities in Southwest Florida, the local media, as well as Naples Pathways Coalition and BikeWalkLee. **We urge you to again lead this fight for improved safety for cyclists and make enactment of this bill a top priority for the upcoming session.**

We also appreciate the Delegation's support of Gabby's Law for Student Safety, which was enacted last year. This bill changes the "hazardous walking conditions" criteria and requires both local governments and school districts to work on fixing the hazards within a reasonable timeframe. It is another tool aimed at making it safer for school children to walk or bike to school, and local communities will be working on its implementation this year.

The Florida Dept. of Transportation (FDOT) continues its statewide bike/ped safety campaign, led by FDOT District 1 Secretary Billy Hattaway, aimed at reversing Florida's dubious distinction of being the most dangerous state in the nation for cyclists and pedestrians. This Fall, FDOT will be announcing policy and guidance changes to implement its 2014 complete streets policy, which will provide additional tools for state and local agencies to change the way roads are designed so that they're safer for all users. **Support by the Governor and the Legislature for these positive FDOT initiatives are important to sustain the momentum and focus on improving Florida's dismal bike/ped safety record.**

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. Change requires support from state laws, enforcement, public awareness, and driver behavior. Similar to successful drunk driving and seatbelt campaigns, it takes years of work using many different tools to change people's behavior and get results. Over the past three years, the Legislature has begun to strengthen its driver safety laws, but much remains to be done.

In addition to passing legislation to strengthen the laws, it is important that the new laws be aggressively implemented by both law enforcement agencies and the judicial system. For example, while the Legislature's 2014 enactment of the **Aaron Cohen Life Protection Act** (strengthens penalties for leaving the scene of a crash and was named for the Miami cyclist who was killed by a hit-and-run driver in 2012) was a major step forward, aggressive enforcement and prosecution of this law is critical to stopping the growing number of hit-and-run crashes. The Florida Highway Patrol (FHP) is to be commended for making this a priority, however, hit-and-run crashes in Florida are a growing problem and much more needs to be done by the entire law enforcement community and judicial system. 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 in 2014 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. Distracted driving (including texting while driving) is contributing to the rise in the share of traffic fatalities involving pedestrians and cyclists, including the increase in hit-and-run crashes. 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.** Last year we supported HB 1, which made texting while driving a primary offense, doubled the fines, and provided 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.**

It is also **important that the Legislature not adopt legislation that will worsen our existing road safety problems,** such as bills to raise speed limits on Florida roads any other bill that would make matters worse.

A new urgency to focus on this issue was reflected in the Surgeon General recent national "Call to Action" to make walking a national priority. This campaign focuses on the need to build communities where walking is a safe and convenient option. Not only is this critical to fighting the obesity epidemic, it is important to the economic health of our communities. Over and over, people have shown that they want to live and work in walkable communities. As the most dangerous state in the country for people to walk and bike, Florida is starting off with a serious handicap in providing its citizens with the tools--safe and accessible walking and biking infrastructure--that provides the ability to stay physically active and healthy. There is pent-up demand for walkable communities. Those areas around the country that have created vibrant walkable neighborhoods are reaping the economic benefits from their investment, while Florida lags behind. Much is at stake for Florida's future in making our roadways and streets safer for pedestrians and cyclists. **We urge the Legislature to make walkability and bike/ped safety a higher priority and an integral part of the State's economic development strategy.**

## **2. Focused strategies for economic development through bike tourism**

We applaud the Lee Delegation for its continued support of investments in economic development through bike tourism. The final 2015 budget enacted by the Legislature included a \$25 million appropriation for the statewide network of bike/ped paths, now called SunTrail. This follows on the Legislature's 2014 support 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. FDOT is now taking a leadership role in the implementation of this project and in establishing the new SunTrail program. 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. Over the past year, the Lee and Collier MPOs worked collaboratively to identify the best route for the SWFL portion of the trail, which was jointly approved and submitted to the State for inclusion in the statewide system. By being proactive, we believe that SWFL has positioned itself to be competitive with other regions, such as Jacksonville, for the next segment to be planned. **We ask that the Legislature continue its support for this effort, provide adequate funds, and continue to look for new opportunities for economic development through bike tourism.**

Bike tourism is already gaining traction in Lee County. First, construction has begun on the \$10 million federal TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) grant which the Lee MPO was awarded in 2013 for its Complete Streets Initiative project. We are excited about the planned completion of this project in 2017, setting 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.

Second, last year Cape Coral completed a 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, last year FDOT District 1 approved the Lee MPO's request for funding to conduct a feasibility study for a shared use path that will connect the Cape Coral system to Pine Island. The Lee and Collier MPOs have again recommended that FDOT fund the proposed shared use path connecting Old US 41 to Collier County, a critical link between the two counties on an unsafe roadway that currently has no walking or biking facilities whatsoever. While it will be years before these projects are constructed, when the links between these communities are complete they 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. For the full benefits of bike tourism to be realized, it is critical that Florida rid itself of the label as the most dangerous state in the country for cyclists and pedestrians.

### **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.**

### **4. Equitable distribution of transportation dollars to SWFL**

Finally, as we noted last year, our region is being left behind in the big, long-term transportation trends taking place in Florida, i.e. 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 pattern. 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.

Sincerely,

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Darla Letourneau  
on behalf of BikeWalkLee

cc: County Commissioners