The Florida Heartland Regional Trail

(Collier to Polk Regionally Significant Trail – 453914-1)

Program Guidance – Key Questions

Version Date: 9/29/2026

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This guidance is intended to provide support to the consultant teams developing the feasibility studies for the Florida Heartland Regional Trail (FHRT). The guidance consists of a set of questions that may be asked by agencies, stakeholders, and the public during project development. This information is intended to assist the Study Consultants in responding to inquiries. Some questions include a specific note to the Study Consultants. This guidance also incorporates a brief set of questions at the end which are specific to project administration.

This will be an evolving document to include additional questions as they arise. When new questions are added, the version date will be updated.

1. What is the background of the Florida Heartland Regional Trail?

The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), District One, developed the Collier to Polk Trail Master Plan (Master Plan) for a *regionally significant trail system* from Collier County to Polk County in response to the following:

- ***Completion of District One's Active Transportation Plan (2022)*** which identified trails as a preferred bicycle facility type by regional residents.
- ***Passage of Senate Bill 106 (2023) [Ch. 2023-20 Laws of Florida]*** which emphasized that state trail priorities include Regionally Significant Trails.
- ***Completion of a State of Practice Scan (2023) by FDOT*** that suggested the potential economic and other benefits a connected long-distance regional trail could provide.
- ***Designation of a continuous SUN Trail Network corridor from Collier to Polk (2023)*** through the partnership effort of FDOT, the Collier MPO, Heartland TPO, Polk TPO, and approval of the Florida Greenways and Trails Council.

2. What is the Master Plan and what is its purpose?

The Master Plan, developed from October 2023 to July 2024, provides a vision and preliminary evaluation for establishing a regionally significant trail system from Collier County to Polk County. The Master Plan development process consisted of the following steps:

- Conduct high-level evaluation of existing conditions
- Review current trail planning and programming
- Define the expected trail experience
- Identify communities, destinations, and attractions the trail could connect
- Engage the public and stakeholders for meaningful input
- Develop high-level concepts for preliminary routing alternatives

The Master Plan's purpose is to provide a foundation for project development and set the stage for conducting feasibility studies.

3. What is the vision for the trail?

The vision for the trail, as defined in the Master Plan, is to establish a paved, multi-use trail that connects and provides access to small towns, cultural and heritage sites, parks, preserves, wildlife corridors, and working lands.

4. What are the Guiding Principles?

Guiding Principles were developed to provide consistency across the entire regional trail system as it moves forward for project development beyond the Master Plan. The Guiding Principles are:



Future phases of project development will consider and be aligned with these principles, especially as alternatives are being evaluated.

5. Why did the trail's name change from Collier to Polk to Florida Heartland Regional Trail?

During development of the Master Plan, the regional trail was given the interim name of *Collier to Polk* to reflect the extent of the trail from Collier County to Polk County. As the project transitioned to the feasibility study phase, it was deemed an appropriate time to more closely align the trail name with the regional identity. To that end, *Florida Heartland Regional Trail* was selected to recognize the trail's significant potential to expand bicycle and pedestrian connectivity through Florida's Heartland.

6. What is Senate Bill 106 and what does it mean for this project?

Senate Bill (SB) 106 [Chapter 2023-20 Laws of Florida] was passed in 2023 and includes certain provisions that have bearing on this project:

- The Florida Greenways and Trails Council is directed to recommend priorities for **regionally significant trails** within the Florida Greenways and Trails System for inclusion in the SUN Trail Network. The FHRT has been prioritized as a regionally significant trail system. [see next question for more information]
- **SUN Trail funding** was doubled from $25 million annually to $50 million. SUN Trail also received additional non-recurring funds in the amount of $200 million. This additional SUN Trail funding helped to enable the six-county feasibility studies for the FHRT to be funded.
- Language in SUN Trail legislation was expanded to emphasize connections to the **Florida wildlife corridor** and **trail town communities**. Subsequently, the expectation is that the FHRT, as a component of the SUN Trail Network, will maximize connections to these areas to the greatest extent possible.

7. What does it mean to be a regionally significant trail?

As defined in Florida Statutes, a regionally significant trail has the potential to:

- Cross multiple counties
- Attract national and international visitors
- Provide opportunities for economic and ecotourism development
- Showcase the value of wildlife areas, ecology, and natural resources

- Serve as a main corridor for critical links and trail connectedness across this region of Florida
  [Section 260.0142(4)(c), FS]

Regionally significant trails are identified and prioritized by the Florida Greenways and Trails Council. The Collier MPO, the Heartland TPO, the Polk TPO, and FDOT partnered during Master Plan development to promote the importance of the Collier to Polk Regional Trail to the Florida Greenways and Trails Council during its first ever ranking of regionally significant trails (March 2024). Based on that ranking, The Collier to Polk Regional Trail is ranked 5 out of 14 regional systems statewide.

8. What are Trail Towns?

A Florida Trail Town is a community located along, or in proximity to, one or more long-distance, nonmotorized recreational trails. The Trail Town Program was established by the FDEP Office of Greenways and Trails to encourage and create trail hubs. The Florida Greenways and Trails Council approves the state designation of Trail Towns.

Note to Study Consultants: During Master Plan development, there was considerable interest in the Trail Town designation process by communities along the proposed trail corridor. If specific communities inquire about the Trail Town Program or seek further direction on how to become designated, please refer them to Jim Wood, the Owners Representative Project Manager, to facilitate coordination with the FDEP Office of Greenways and Trails.

9. Who will manage the Florida Heartland Regional Trail?

Some local agencies, like Polk County, are already managing trail segments within the alignment of the FHRT. However, a majority of the proposed trail does not have a local manager designated. FDOT provides support for long-term trail maintenance needs such as future repaving, but the agency does not provide day-to-day management of trails. Subsequently, FDOT has committed to coordinate with local agencies to determine the approach to comprehensive trail management and maintenance. This is intended to happen during the feasibility study phase.

Note to Study Consultants: FDOT and the Owners Representative will provide further direction on trail management as the feasibility studies evolve.

Coordination is likely to be multi-pronged combining broader discussion through the Regional Trail Alliance (see Question 11) and direct coordination with local agencies. In the meantime, if specific questions regarding future trail management are raised by local agencies, please notify your Segment Manager so FDOT and the Owners Representative can determine if specific coordination and outreach needs to take place.

10. Will eminent domain be used to acquire property for this trail?

As noted in the SUN Trail Implementation Handbook, it has been a practice of FDOT to not utilize eminent domain to acquire land for trail projects. If right-of-way is necessary for a proposed route and there are no willing sellers, then alternative routes will need to be considered. This will have bearing on final routing. For other trail systems, certain segments have ultimately been located along roadways with available right-of-way instead of an initially preferred route due to a lack of willing sellers.

11. Who is responsible for development of trailheads, trail user facilities, and amenities?

SUN Trail funding is for trail development and does not include amenities such as trailheads, parking areas, and restrooms (a complete list of ineligible items is defined in Question 13 of the SUN Trail FAQ). Additionally, FDOT does not oversee development of these types of facilities, regardless of funding source. Trailheads and amenities are generally the responsibility of local partners.

One of the reasons the Master Plan routing alternatives focused so heavily on pursuing connections to existing parks and recreation areas is because of the role they can play to provide user amenities. Maximizing these connections reduces the need for local agencies to provide new facilities where possible by leveraging existing locations that adjoin trail segments.

Note to Study Consultants: If local agencies inquire about their responsibilities for developing additional facilities, please contact your Segment Manager so FDOT and the Owners Representative can determine if specific outreach and coordination needs to take place.

12. What is the Regional Trail Alliance?

In June of 2024, as the Master Plan was being completed, the FDEP Office of Greenways and Trails coordinated the introductory meeting for the Collier to Polk Regional Trail Alliance. This group was modeled after the alliance for the Florida Coast to Coast Trail (the state's highest ranked regionally significant trail). The Regional Trail Alliance was established to bring together FDEP, FDOT, M/TPOs, local agencies, and other stakeholders through a forum to discuss corridor-wide issues and status.

During feasibility study development, FDOT will coordinate with FDEP to schedule meetings of the Regional Trail Alliance at strategic times to serve as a forum to discuss the broader project and address key issues. Potential topics include regional trail coordination, the role of local partners in providing trailheads and amenities, and trail management.

13. What is the overall schedule for the feasibility studies and other phases, and what is the status of funding?

Based on current schedules, the six county feasibility studies are expected to be completed in 2028. There is no timeline for Design and Construction as these phases are not currently funded. Some Polk County trail projects were already in development before the Master Plan was complete. They are identified in the SUN Trail Fiscal Year (FY) 2026-2031 Work Program under *Collier to Polk Trail*, the project's prior name:

- 440272-1: Fort Fraser Trail over SR 60 (Polk County)
- 440358-2: Teneroc Trail Segment 1 (Polk County)
- 443606-1: Teneroc Trail Segment 2 (Polk County)

14. How long will it take to complete the FHRT?

The projected completion timeframe is not defined because it is contingent upon obtaining funding for future phases. While SUN Trail funding will be pursued to the greatest extent possible, completion of the FHRT is expected to happen through a combination of federal, state, and local funding sources. FDOT will champion the regional trail, partnering with MPOs and local agencies to complete the respective segments of the project.

15. If a significant segment of the FHRT is unable to be developed due to right-of-way limitations or other constraints, will the remainder of the trail still be pursued?

Yes. The overall project is part of the defined SUN Trail Network and even if a potential gap is identified through the feasibility study phase, the other segments will still be advanced through future phases of project development. While completion of the entire corridor will best maximize long-distance connectivity, there are still benefits to be derived from development of individual trail segments to address other factors within the documented purpose and need.

16. What happens in locations where the trail can't be routed through an environmental area or public conservation land?

Connecting to parks, preserves, and wildlife corridors is an important component of the project's purpose. If an alternative includes an environmental area or managed conservation land where the trail cannot be routed, then the evaluation will still consider whether a portion of that alternative, either on its own or combined with another alternative, could still help to achieve the purpose and need for the project. Where, for example, a connection through a managed area is not agreed to by the land manager, it is critical to consider whether a spur connection to provide access to the public entrance of that same managed area is a possibility. The SUN Trail Network includes multiple examples of spur connections that do or will connect to key locations and sites.

Even if a spur corridor is constrained and may not fully accommodate a 12-foot wide paved trail, it is worthwhile to document the possibility of the spur in the study. This is particularly important where the destination is in close proximity to the main alignment and would help advance the regional trail's purpose of connecting to parks, preserves and wildlife corridors. In the study, describe the type of facility that could be developed within the spur corridor and any other factors that might be helpful to support future trail planning, development, and wayfinding coordination. Also note that while a constrained (less than 12 feet wide) facility might not be eligible for future

SUN Trail funding, it can still be pursued as a local project and through other funding sources.

Note to Study Consultants: At the Master Plan stage, state and federal public land managers expressed concern about a paved trail being routed through their managed lands. They typically noted that their management plans do not include a paved trail and such a facility is inconsistent with their management goals. While some routing alternatives were agreed to for further consideration during the feasibility study stage, public land managers may oppose these alternatives moving forward. For further direction regarding this issue, consult with your Segment Manager.

17. How should the feasibility studies document locations where the trail is expected to be less than SUN Trail standard width (12 feet)?

It is recognized that there may be limited areas within certain alignments that are constrained and cannot meet the SUN trail requirement for a 12 foot wide paved path. These are typically due to limited ROW and environmental or engineering constraints. Examples of factors affecting trail width might include existing drainage structures, narrow crossings on bridges, or natural features such as wetlands and sensitive habitats.

For constrained areas, the feasibility studies should address the following:

- Identify the location and length of any constrained area(s) and define the factor(s) leading to the constraint
- State that, preliminarily, these locations are not consistent with the SUN Trail standard since the trail width may need to be less than 12 feet
- Note that these locations will require further evaluation during the Design phase
- State that for any location which remains constrained during Design, then:
    - A trail width less than 12 feet will require approval by the FDOT Chief Planner for the project to be funded for construction through SUN Trail
      OR

- The segment will need to be funded through a different source than SUN Trail

Study Consultant Team – Project Administration

1. What are the steps for invoicing and progress reports?

- Submit draft to Segment Manager and copy D. Turley
- Segment Manager will review and coordinate any necessary revisions with Study Consultant
- D. Turley will provide final review and inform when ready for submission into system

2. What are the steps for deliverable review?

- Submit drafts to Segment Manager via email and copy D. Turley
- Segment Manager will coordinate Owners Rep review of documents
- Segment Manager will send documents to D. Turley who will coordinate FDOT Review
- Segment Manager will forward comments to the Study Consultant

3. What are the target review timeframes?

- 6 Weeks for the following items (Owners Rep 2 weeks + FDOT 4 weeks)
  - Feasibility Report
  - Sociocultural Effects Tech Memo
  - Cultural Resources Desktop Analysis Tech Memo
  - Natural Resources Desktop Analysis Tech Memo
  - Contamination Desktop Analysis Tech Memo

4. How will responses to public comments be handled?

- Comments will go to the respective Segment Manager for each county
- Segment Manager will forward to Study Consultant to develop responses
- Final response will be sent to D. Turley for approval and distribution

5. What is the purpose of the FHRT website relative to the SWFLRoads web pages?

The FHRT website will serve as a central point for corridor-wide information. The website will link to the individual SWFLRoads web pages which provide county-specific feasibility study information. Appropriate public information updates will be duplicated on the FHRT website. For example, as public meetings are scheduled and posted on the SWFLRoads web pages, this information will also be compiled on the FHRT website (Get Involved web page) to provide a current view of what is happening across the six counties.

6. Since the trail is continuous across county lines, should outreach for a given county include adjacent counties?

No. FDOT has directed that each feasibility study should focus its mailouts and outreach within the respective county and does not need to include adjacent counties. There may be very minor exceptions to this where, for example, the 300' buffer for an alternative is along a county line. In a case such as that, adjacent county residents within the buffer should be included in outreach. For discussion of any issues, please contact your Segment Manager.

7. What content should the feasibility studies include?

The feasibility studies will be developed following the approved Feasibility Report Outline. See the most recent outline version on the Owners Representative web page.