



2019 Legislative Priorities

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Citrus County Chamber of Commerce

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Transportation / Road Improvements:

Suncoast Parkway Extension to CR 486 (Norvell Bryant Highway)

- Continue to urge the Legislature and the Florida Department of Transportation to extend the presently-planned terminus point of the Suncoast Parkway II from SR 44 (Gulf to Lake Hwy) to CR 486 (Norvell Bryant Hwy), and to proceed timely to continue expansion north through Citrus County.
 - The majority of land required for the continued right-of-way to CR 486 have already been purchased by the Florida Department of Transportation.
 - CR 486 is a divided 4-lane highway that would be better able to accommodate traffic exiting as well as entering the Parkway. An exit/entrance at CR 486 would also provide easier access for traffic heading both east and west, and eventually to connect to another outlet to US19 North.
 - The engineering for the continued expansion to CR 486 has largely been completed.
 - Once construction begins on the Suncoast Parkway extension from the southern edge of Citrus County, it will never be cheaper than at this point to take the Parkway to CR 486.

Widening of US 41 from SR 44 to SR 200

- Urge the Legislature to allocate construction funding for the widening of US 41 north of Inverness to the town of Hernando in line with the Hernando/Citrus MPO's recent reprioritization of the project to #1 on the MPO list.



- This section of US 41 has been recognized for many years as one of the most dangerous and congested sections of road in Citrus County. As a main artery between the town of Hernando and Inverness, it receives heavy vehicle traffic daily along the narrow 2-lane road. Compounding the danger of the road is the intersection with Middle School Road that serves Inverness Middle School as the primary ingress/egress to the school. Bus and parent traffic to the school in the morning and afternoon cause dangerous backups both north- and southbound on this critical highway.
- The condition of the road, its impassability and difficult site lines have resulted in many businesses closing their doors along with highway, causing the loss of jobs and visual and economic blight along the road. A recent (Aug. 2017) count along the short 2.5 mile stretch from SR 44 to Arlington St. revealed 46 empty buildings and storefronts. Many of these have been empty for years with little prospect for occupancy until the road has been improved.
- As the Suncoast Parkway extension to CR 486 becomes reality, US 41 will be used more heavily as an arterial road to handle traffic to and from the Parkway. Widening US 41 the entire length between SR 44 and SR 200 becomes even more critical.
- Acquisition of right-of-way property by FDOT is largely completed. The next step, according to the MPO, is to acquire construction funds.
- At the Hernando/Citrus MPO meeting on April 18, 2017, the MPO board agreed to reprioritize various road projects on the MPO list to move widening of US 41 from SR44 to East Arlington St. to #1, and US 41 from East Arlington St. to SR 200 to #2. The Chamber is in full concurrence with this revised ranking.

Continue widening of CR 491 (Lecanto Hwy) to CR 486 (Norvell Bryant)

- Urge the Legislature to allocate construction funding for the continued widening of CR 491 between W. Audubon Park Path and Horace Allen Drive toward the intersection with CR 486
 - The roadway section of CR 491 between SR 44 and CR 486 is an area where the County is encouraging growth due to our Comprehensive Plan.. However, this growth has also created extremely congested conditions on that roadway.
 - Presently, a project to widen a one-mile section of the roadway north of SR 44 along with significant intersection improvements at SR 44 / CR 491 is well underway and funded. Additionally, another one-mile of the roadway south of CR 486 was also widened some years ago when a major shopping development was built at the corner of CR 491 and CR 486.



- However, following the completion of the current widening project, a one-and-one-half mile section of CR 491 will remain at 2 lanes, thereby continuing to create bottlenecks in both directions. The County lacks all of the funding to complete the widening of this section.

Multi-use path along Fort Island Trail

- Urge the Legislature to allocate construction funding in the amount of \$2 million for Phase 1 of a 10 – 12-foot-wide multi-use path along Fort Island Trail
 - West Fort Island Trail is a winding 9-mile 2-lane roadway that goes from US Hwy 19 westward along beautiful stretches of salt marsh lands, and over creeks and rivers, culminating at Fort Island Gulf Beach, Citrus County’s only public beach directly on the Gulf of Mexico. It is a popular road for bicyclists, but with only a narrow bike lane along the shoulder of the road, it is also a very dangerous ride, and is even more dangerous for walkers or runners.
 - A recent study by the Citrus County Board of County Commissioners has concluded that because of aging of the present bridges along Fort Island Trail and the sensitive environmental areas leading to the beach, the most feasible method to construct a multi-use path is in a series of stages. This would allow for better coordination between a path and future road improvements.
 - However, the first section from US 19 is an easy initial step that does not also require road improvements. This first section would also pass by and serve significant numbers of bicyclists and walkers from the highly popular Plantation on Crystal River resort past the majority of residential neighborhoods along Fort Island Trail.
 - The County and State are working to connect all the trails in the state (the SUN Trail Program). The last section of 10 miles down Hwy 44 W / Fort Island Trail to the beach would truly make Citrus County a part of the coast-to-coast connector and would become a “legacy project” that will improve Citrus County’s tourism draw.

Parking improvements at Fort Island Gulf Beach

- Urge the Legislature to consider the appropriation of \$200,000 for parking improvements at Fort Island Gulf Beach
 - Citrus County’s boat ramps and particularly its parking lots are at, or exceeding, capacity. However, due to the Federal Manatee Protection Act, the County is unable to site new boat ramps on Outstanding Florida Waterways.



- One of the County's most popular boat ramps is at the end of Fort Island Gulf Beach. This ramp provides the most direct access to the Gulf of Mexico without the necessity of boating along riverways. Accordingly, the parking lots at the ramp quickly fill to capacity and patrons end up parking haphazardly along the roadways. These actions quickly become safety issues.
- Citrus County Commissioner Jeff Kinnard and the BOCC staff have identified an easy solution that can add up to 14 additional boat trailer stalls and 38 additional beach parking spaces that can be accomplished quickly through some simple parking lot reconfigurations. The reconfigurations will not affect the surrounding wetlands and can be done without mitigation. However, the County presently lacks funding to accomplish this logical and much-needed fix.
- A relatively small appropriation through the Legislature for this shovel-ready project will enhance the functions of Fort Island Gulf Beach, increase safety, and lead to better use and enjoyment of this park for tourists and residents alike.

Inverness Airport Business-Industrial Park

- Urge the Legislature to support the request of Citrus County's Economic Development Efforts through the Department of Economic Opportunity's Job Growth Grant Fund Program to enhance public infrastructure for the Inverness Airport Business-Industrial Park.
 - Due to its location and accessibility to I-75, the Inverness Airport has been determined to be a prime location for a Business-Industrial Park that will generate good paying jobs for local citizens, and revenue to the County and Inverness Airport. The Chamber stands in support of the County's request for \$5,061,101 under the DEO's Job Growth Grant Fund program to develop transportation and water quality infrastructure at the industrial park property adjacent to the Inverness Airport. The vision is for the business park to hold over 650,000 square feet of permit ready space that can assist the County's economic development efforts to result in a more diverse and vibrant economy for its citizens.
 - In addition to the County's request, we request the Legislature to consider funding in the amount of \$1,500,000 to complete an access road into the Industrial Park. While the main roadway to the new terminal has been completed, this secondary access entrance to the Business Industrial Park known as Watson Road has yet to be improved.



Environmental Protection / Restoration:

Water quality

- Support the Crystal River / Kings Bay Surface Water Improvement and Management (SWIM) Plan developed by the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) and continue springs funding through SWFWMD to convert septic to sewer.
- Support and provide funding for the continued cleanup and restoration of King's Bay by Save Crystal River (SCR). The initial three years of SCR's work within designated canals in the King's Bay area has demonstrated sustainable success. Their success has since become a model for other communities seeking to clean their waters. Continued funding of SCR will permit its work to progress throughout King's Bay and restore the habitat and water quality to become self-renewing.
- Restore funding for tussock removal and restoration of the Tsala Apopka Lakes region
- Support DEP's annual budget to provide continued funding for water quality projects on a local level, such as the extension of sewer throughout the Old Homosassa area.
- Support and provide funding for expansion of central wastewater collection systems in areas within the first order magnitude spring sheds that are served by reclaimed water treatment facilities
- Support funding from the DEP's springs funds for the cleanup of the Homosassa River

Other:

Business Retention & Expansion (BRE)

- When Florida was faced by the downturn of the economy some years ago, Citrus County was hit particularly hard because of its reliance on the housing market as a major industry. A few years later, Citrus was hit with another economic blow when the Crystal River Nuclear Plant was permanently closed by Duke Energy resulting in the loss of more than 600 high-paying jobs, more than \$7,500,000 decrease in tax revenue, and even a loss in additional skilled workforce as Duke employees moved out of county taking working family members with them. Since that time, Citrus County has consistently lagged behind the rest of the state in economic recovery.
 - In its recently completed Strategic Plan, Citrus County's Office of Economic Development designated the Citrus County Chamber of Commerce as the best-suited entity to focus on the critical area of business retention and expansion within Citrus County. It has been a well-accepted observation that existing businesses are the creators of nearly 70% of new jobs within a community through expansion of their services.



- As an organization of nearly 1,000 members in a community of under 140,000 people, the Chamber has perhaps the broadest reach into the local business community and stays in regular communication with hundreds of area employers. The Chamber also has a staff member who was trained and certified in Business Retention & Expansion through the IEDC. However, in order to resume work in this area and reinvigorate a BRE program, the Chamber requests \$50,000 in grant funding to fully fund this initiative. This would enable the Chamber, as the County's economic partner, to have one FTE dedicated to the program.

Historic Old Hernando Elementary School

- Restore \$396,400 in funding for completion of renovations to the historic Old Hernando Elementary School located at the intersection of US 41 and CR 486
 - The Old Hernando Elementary School is a historic site located at 2435 North Florida Avenue in Hernando, FL. A school has been located at the site since the late 1800s.
 - The Old Hernando Elementary School is a Colonial Revival style building that was designed by noted architect Henry L. Taylor whose Florida design credits include several notable buildings in St. Petersburg constructed during the land boom of the 1920's, including the Vinoy Park Hotel and the Florida Theater. When the Great Depression hit Florida, Taylor found work as designer for buildings funded through the federal relief programs of the Roosevelt administration, such as the WPA and the PWA. The Hernando Elementary School, designed in 1940, was one of Taylor's last Florida designs.
 - Around 2001, the school board planned to demolish the school. It was saved by the grass-roots efforts of a group of citizens, who eventually formed the Hernando Heritage Council of the Citrus County Historical Society. The council persuaded the school board to donate the school and the grounds to the county, keeping it in public ownership. On May 4, 2001, it was added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places, NRIS #00001129. The council is continuing to restore the historic school, which includes a community center and will also include a museum when it is complete.
 - Restoration efforts have been ongoing since 2001 and significant funds have already been spent on this project in a depressed area of county. During the previous two years, the state legislature appropriated \$396,400 toward the efforts, but it was vetoed as part of the final budget. Completing the restoration will create positive return in the area of economic development and the potential for increased jobs.



Audit / Oversight of the Citrus County Hospital Board

- The Citrus County Chamber of Commerce is asking the Legislature to approve an audit of the Citrus County Hospital Board (CCHB) and its expenditures, as well as a review of the legislation that delineates CCHB authority.
 - When the Hospital Corporation of America signed a 50-year lease of Citrus Memorial Hospital, the net proceeds of the lease were to be earmarked to go to the Citrus County Community Charitable Foundation to spend funds on medically—related needs of the citizens and residents of Citrus County.
 - There is concern that prior State legislation is giving the current Citrus County Hospital Board (CCHB) too many broad powers with very little scrutiny as it relates to hospital lease proceeds. A review of CCHB records over the past four years has also raised concerns that an inordinate amount of the lease proceeds is being spent on overhead and legal fees.

Support the Establishment of a Mental Health Crisis Stabilization Unit and Residential Unit (SB 12)

- The Citrus County Chamber recognizes the tremendous negative impact that mental health and illness issues play within our community and our workforce. Senate Bill 12 allows for funding of central receiving units. We support the request of LifeStream for \$1.5 million to help Citrus County establish a 20-bed crisis stabilization unit, and 16-bed residential unit. Many leaders in our community are part of a public/private partnership that are working together to assist in this effort.

Continued Reduction in the Sales Tax on Commercial Rentals (Business Rent Tax)

- The 2017 Legislative session saw a 0.2% reduction in the business rent tax from 6.0% to 5.8%, and in 2018, the Legislature reduced it another 0.1% that will go into effect in January 2019. We believe that this tax should continue to be reduced until it is eventually eliminated. As the only state in the country that charges sales tax on commercial leases, it continues to hinder business growth; hampers the potential growth of small businesses throughout the state; and leaves business owners with less ability to create more jobs by reinvesting in their business, increasing wages and offering better benefits.