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## INTRODUCTION

# ABOUT THIS FEASIBILITY STUDY

Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) contracted Volkert Inc. to study if it is feasible to build a rail-trail within the Seminole Gulf Railway (SGLR) rail corridor between Alico Road and Bonita Beach Road. The study also evaluated if it is feasible to build a trail next to a road as one of three alternatives.

The three alternatives that were studied include the following:

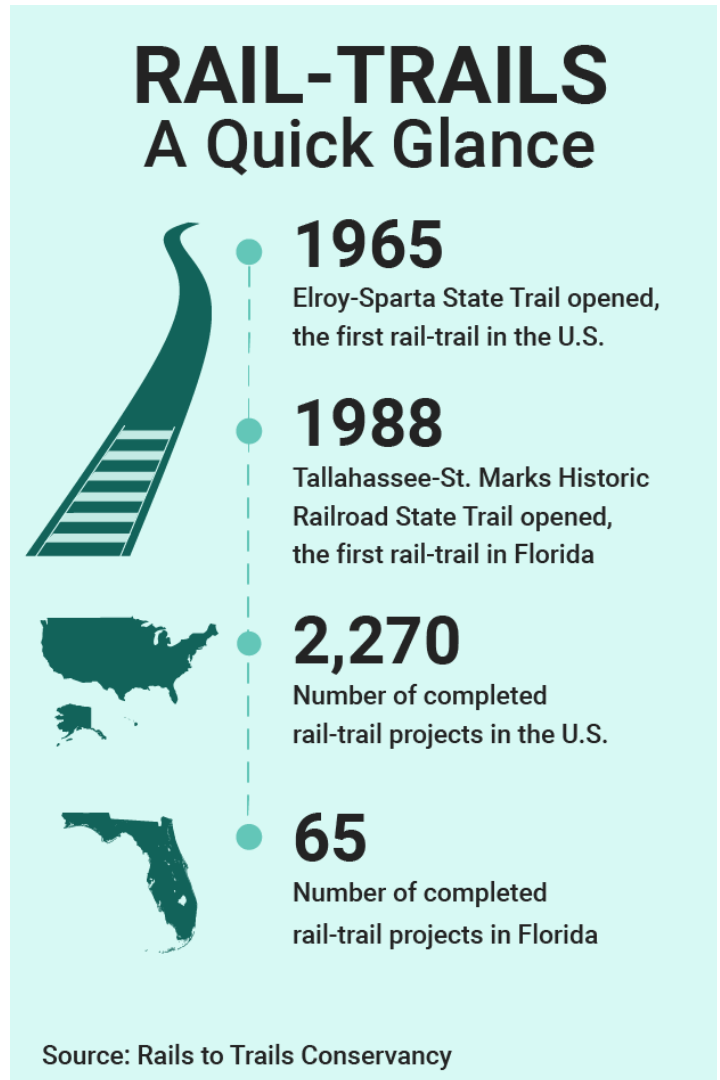
- Alternative 1: A rail-to-trail alignment within the SGL corridor
- Alternative 2: A rail-with-trail alignment within the SGL corridor
- Alternative 3: A trail alignment within the road right-of-way (ROW)

Analysis conducted as part of this study evaluated trail connectivity, project readiness, service, and the user experience. The study also collected data on ROW, planning-level costs, rail-trail crossings, and existing utilities.

The feasibility study found that all three trail alternatives are feasible for implementation.

While each alternative has its share of constraints, the rail to trail alternative scored favorably in service, connectivity, user experience, and project readiness. However, further evaluation will be needed through the PD&E process to determine the preferred alternative to proceed with design.

This study was funded with a grant from FDOT's Shared Use Non Motorized Trail Program with a local match from the City of Bonita Springs and the Village of Estero.



# HISTORY OF THIS STUDY

The Rail-Trail Feasibility Study is the culmination of nearly a decade of planning efforts and public discussions to select a public transportation option for the corridor. This section explains the history that leads up to the current Rail-Trail Feasibility study. It begins with a feasibility study that evaluated multiple public transportation modes for the corridor.

## LEE COUNTY RAIL FEASIBILITY STUDY

In 2013, the Lee MPO had assessed the long-term feasibility of adding public transportation options within the existing Seminole Gulf Railway (SGLR) corridor across all of Lee County. The rail corridor at that time was owned by CSX but under a long-term lease to Seminole Gulf Railway. The study examined several alternatives that could co-exist with freight rail including Light Rail, Commuter Rail, Bus Rapid Transit and a Multi-use Trail. The study stressed the need for coordinated actions by Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) and all local governments along the corridor to keep the feasible public options viable until further steps could be taken.

## RAIL CORRIDOR ACQUISITION IN STATE PLANS

FDOT had also recognized the significance of the SGLR corridor in Southwest Florida by identifying \$40 million in its 2040 Strategic Intermodal System (SIS) Multi-Modal Unfunded Needs Plan to acquire the rail corridor from Arcadia in DeSoto County to Lee County. A SIS 5 Year Adopted Plan had also included a project to preserve the rail Right of Way. However, owing to a change in FDOT's policy direction on rail line acquisitions in Florida, these projects were not sustained in subsequent plans.

## RAIL TO TRAIL

The rail corridor continued to remain a high priority multi use corridor in the Lee County MPO Transportation Plan. Local government comprehensive plans in Lee County calls for preservation of the corridor consistent with the recommendation from the 2013 Feasibility Study. A Priority Land Trail along the rail corridor south of Alico Road is identified in the Florida Greenways and Trail (FGT) Master Plan and FDOT's Shared Use Non-motorized (SUN) Trail Network. SGLR does not currently operate freight services in this segment

and has expressed its willingness to lease or sell the segment. Conversion of this segment to a multi-use trail has popular support in Lee County.

## LOCAL ADVOCACY

### Joint Workshop of Village of Estero and City of Bonita Springs

On March 15, 2017, the City of Bonita Springs and the Village of Estero held a Joint Workshop to explore the possibility of acquiring the rail corridor within their jurisdictions and converting it to a multi-use trail. Council members also listened to a presentation from the Executive Director of the Florida Greenways and Trails Foundation on the SUN Trail Program and examples of Rails to Trail projects in Florida. A presentation was also provided by the Lee County MPO Executive Director on the co-relationship of trails identified in the FGT Master Plan and the SUN Trail Network, Lee MPO SUN Trail Priorities, and successful applications for SUN Trail funds in Lee County. Both Mayor Nick Batos of the Village of Estero and Deputy Mayor Peter O'Flinn with the City of Bonita Springs believed that a trail on the SGLR corridor could become a first class, multimodal use path connecting Estero and Bonita Springs. *They noted that the imprint of SUN Trail in the Estero-Bonita Springs area is on Seminole Gulf Railway tracks, with focus from Estero Parkway to Bonita Beach Road.* There were also discussions by Council members on trail maintenance, recommendations from the 2013 MPO Rail Feasibility Study, and SGL's support for a rail trail. Members from the public also spoke in support of a rails to trail in the SGL corridor.

### Florida Greenways and Trails Council Meeting

Later In the same year (2017), the staff of the Office of Greenways and Trails, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, made a recommendation to remove the rail corridor from the FGT Master Plan during an ongoing update of the Plan. The proposal was met with strong opposition in Lee County. A Lee County MPO delegation comprising of Mayor Nick Batos of the Village of Estero, Deputy Mayor Peter O'Flinn of the City of Bonita Springs, MPO Executive Director Donald Scott, and MPO Transportation Planning Administrator Ron Gogoi, attended the January 2018 Florida Greenways and Trails Council Meeting in Tallahassee, and successfully lobbied to keep the SGL line as an alignment for a Priority Land Trail in the Updated

Plan. The effort also led to an automatic retention of the alignment in the FDOT SUN Trail Network.

### **Dialogue with Trust for Public Lands**

During 2017, the City of Bonita Springs and the Village of Estero also held separate discussions with the Trust for Public Lands, the Rails to Trails Conservancy, and the Conservation Fund to find a way to move forward for multi-use purposing the rail corridor and laying the groundwork for a Rails to Trails facility.

### **SUN TRAIL APPLICATION FOR RAILS TO TRAILS**

To facilitate the Rails to Trails effort by the two jurisdictions, the Lee MPO submitted an application to FDOT in 2018 for SUN Trail Program funds in the amount of \$400,000 for conducting a Rails to Trails Feasibility Study. The City of Bonita Springs and the Village of Estero were co-applicants, with each committing \$25,000 as a local match to fund the study. FDOT awarded the grant and funded the study in Fiscal Year 2020/21.

### **TRANSFER OF RAIL OWNERSHIP**

In November 2018, CSX transferred its interest in the real estate under the rail corridor to its operating lessee, the Seminole Gulf.

### **APPRAISAL OF RAIL CORRIDOR**

In July 2020, the Trust for Public Lands (TPL) retained the real estate firm of Maxwell-Hendry-Simmons to appraise the real property of the SGLR line between Alico Road in South Lee County and the end of the line in North Naples, a distance of about 14.9 miles encompassing 235.40± acres. As of September 2020, the market value was appraised at \$70,465,000. In a letter to TPL, dated February 8, 2021, SGLR rejected the appraisal valuation citing that it was at least 30% under fair market value. SGLR also verbally asked TPL to pause purchase negotiation, and evaluate market conditions in a year and resume the negotiations.

### **COMMENCEMENT OF RAIL TRAIL FEASIBILITY STUDY**

The Rails to Trails Feasibility Study finally commenced in March 2021 after completion of the appraisal and initial purchase negotiations. The new study would evaluate a multi-use trail on the

rail corridor from Alico Road to downtown Bonita Springs, then running along Old US 41 and Bonita Beach Road to connect to a trail network in northern Collier County.



*The off-rail alignment runs within the roadway corridor and the rail-with-trail and rail-to-trail run within the Seminole Gulf Railway corridor between Alico Road and Bonita Beach Road.*