

*One key theme of the Regional Growth Vision called for regional transportation corridors. This article from the Orlando Sentinel's regular In-Depth Series looks at corridors as an important tool not just for transporting people, but also for ensuring wildlife connectivity across Central Florida.*

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## **Local In-Depth**

### **Corridors carve out road to refuge for Florida wildlife**

#### **Planners seek creative solutions to protect state's wildlife from perils of traffic, development**

*By Robert Perez, Sentinel Staff Writer*

Despite the recent downturn in the state's torrid development pace, plenty of homes and roads are planned that threaten to slice into critical wildlife habitat.

As roads and residents work their way into Florida's shrinking wilderness areas, more wildlife will undoubtedly be killed by increasing traffic.

There is a solution, however. Preserving wildlife corridors and modifying man-made barriers are key to making roads both animal-friendly and safe. From simple devices such as wildlife tunnels under roads to lush land bridges that take critters safely over busy interstate highways, planners are finding creative ways to minimize human and animal interaction.

This also allows animals to use the corridors -- their own super-highways -- to roam over a wide range of habitat.

But challenges remain. There are relatively few wildlife-friendly roads around the state, and the cost of retrofitting existing roads makes adding protections difficult. The best approach may be to focus on new developments and new roads where wildlife protections can be built in ahead of time.

Environmentalists say there is growing hope for that. Major decisions about growth and transportation are starting to include discussions about land preservation and wildlife corridors.

"We know that Florida will continue to grow," said Keith Schue, coordinator of The Nature Conservancy's Ocala-Wekiva Conservation Project. "As we plan for transportation, we need to look at final build-out, not just roadways. We need to look at growth and conservation at the same time."

### ***Leader in corridor preservation***

Florida already is home to corridor crossings that have proved highly effective. In the 1990s, new tunnels and bridges across Alligator Alley in South Florida made the state a leader in corridor preservation.

Barrier walls along a section of U.S. Highway 441 in Alachua County, which guide smaller animals into culverts that cross under the road, cut roadkill by 93 percent, according to a 2004 study.

Similarly, fencing along State Road 46 that funnels wildlife to underpasses has cut the number of black bears killed on roads in Seminole County.

Two of only six land bridges in North America, which direct wildlife over roads, are found in Florida. One bridge, on the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway, crosses Interstate 75 south of Ocala. Another spans I-95 north of Palm Coast.

Plans are on the books for a third land bridge -- across I-4 in Volusia County. That bridge would connect portions of Tiger Bay State Forest just west of Daytona Beach. The land bridge is part of the planned widening of I-4 from DeLand to Daytona Beach, which also will include two wildlife crossings under the interstate.

The most ambitious corridor-preservation effort to date is the planned \$2 billion Wekiva Parkway/State Road 429 extension. Plans for the 25-mile road through the Wekiva River basin include elevated bridges that allow for the natural flow of wildlife under the spans and limited access in environmentally sensitive areas to discourage development.

While methods exist to protect wildlife from traffic on roads, the cost of retrofitting existing roads with underpasses or pricey land bridges threatens to limit how much can be done.

For example, the planned 212-foot land bridge across I-4 carried a \$3 million price tag in 2003. The cost for the steel-reinforced concrete structure likely has gone up since then, and the widening project isn't expected to start before 2012.

### ***Thinking ahead***

The upside is that there are signs that policymakers and stakeholders in areas likely to be the new battlegrounds for corridor preservation are starting to think differently.

Major decisions about growth and transportation are starting to include discussions about land preservation and wildlife corridors.

For example, a holistic approach to growth was promoted locally by myregion.org, and the landmark Wekiva Parkway Task Force was appointed by former Gov. Jeb Bush.

In Osceola County, where more than a dozen massive planned developments threaten to drastically change the county's largely rural landscape, officials have hired a full-time planner just to oversee long-term planning with an eye toward protecting natural spaces.

A half-dozen conservation groups have asked Gov. Charlie Crist to form a task force to study the Kissimmee River watershed before more homes, roads and buildings are constructed in the area.

In Volusia, County Council members continue to resist Deltona's aggressive annexation and development efforts in what the council chairman called "the rural heart" of the county.

And regionwide discussions about growth are now more likely to include land preservation as a major component.

But one important aspect of making new roads safer for animals to cross is under threat, even as proponents see a reason for hope. Key to making tunnels, culverts and bridges functional is having protected lands on both ends, and funding for such land preservation may be drying up.

### ***Slowed by cash crunch***

State and local leaders recognized in the 1970s that land preservation was crucial to maintaining the state's biodiversity and protecting its major threatened species, including the Florida black bear and Florida panther.

Land conservation began in earnest in 1990 with Preservation 2000. State leaders pledged \$3 billion to protect environmentally significant land, eventually buying nearly 1.8 million acres in a decade.

Preservation 2000 was followed by Florida Forever, a second 10-year program that is set to conclude in 2010. That program had purchased an additional 535,643 acres through December 2006. Since 1990, the state's preservation programs have cost \$4.8 billion.

Beyond simple land conservation, Florida Forever's land buys have been aimed at protecting specific habitats and ecological greenways. Nearly all of its purchases have served to protect some wildlife corridor.

But cash is running short. The state Legislature set up a system in 2000 to provide the program \$105 million annually for 10 years. But some estimates are that as little as \$30 million remains uncommitted through the end of the program in 2010.

The timing couldn't be worse. Just as real-estate values are dropping -- making it the ideal time to buy land -- the program is cash-poor. Last year, the state Legislature rejected Crist's efforts to add \$100 million to the program.

With little money, the state had to back away from efforts to buy the 1,800-acre Lenholt property in Lake County, a key parcel in the Wekiva-Ocala Greenway, a planned continuous wildlife corridor linking Wekiwa Springs State Park with Ocala National Forest. A spokesman for the St. Johns water district said they still are in talks with the property owners about a possible deal.

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