

4/23/07

DT5-011-01

## **SR 40 PD&E Study – Wildlife Crossings Meeting No. 7 Summary**

Mtg. Date: April 23, 2007  
Time: 9:00 am  
Location: Sharpes Ferry Office Conference Room  
Project: SR 40 PD&E Study  
From Silver Springs to US 17 in Marion, Lake and Volusia Counties

### Attendees:

Bill Walsh – FDOT  
Steve Tonjes – FDOT  
Bob Gleason – FDOT  
Vicki Sharpe – FDOT/CEMO  
Alex Hull – Inwood  
Mandy Rankin – Inwood  
Tom Roberts – EMS  
Walt McCown – FWC  
Terry Gilbert – URS/FWC

Carrie Sekerak – USFS  
Brian Scheick – FWC  
Mickey Thomason – DEP Greenways/Trails  
Manu Chacko - FHWA  
Walt Thomson – The Nature Conservancy  
Keith Schue – The Nature Conservancy  
Charles Lee - Audubon  
Greg Slay – Ocala/Marion TPO  
Guy Marwick – Smart Growth Coalition

Bill Walsh, with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), gave some opening statements and then the attendees introduced themselves.

Alex Hull, with Inwood Consulting Engineers, Inc., gave an overview of the agenda, purpose of the meeting and an update from the past meetings.

Tom Roberts, with EMS, stated that he will be meeting with Terry Gilbert of URS to find out where land acquisition is happening.

Next, Alex explained that Keith Schue, with the Nature Conservancy, and Charles Lee, with Audubon, had recently raised concerns to Noranne Downs, District Five Secretary with the FDOT, in regards to the SR 40 Wildlife Crossings Committee. He gave a recap of one of the Project Advisory Group meetings where the statement was made that FDOT and consulting firms had possibly intimidated the members of the SR 40 Wildlife Crossings Committee into making recommendations based on cost constraints rather than on science and the best possible solution. The question was brought to the group to find out whether any of them felt intimidated or pressured into making recommendations for lesser wildlife crossing structures than they had felt were warranted.

Alex then addressed a question to the group asking each committee member if they felt intimidated by FDOT and/or the consulting firms. Bill Walsh encouraged everyone to be open and honest as he thought the process has been thus far.

Walt Thomson, with the Nature Conservancy, expressed his concern for there being a minimalist way of thinking about the crossings.

Charles Lee, with Audubon, stated that the reasoning for his accusation was based on the fact that the wildlife crossing recommendations presented at the PAG were very different from the crossings decided upon during the SR 40 Task Force and that many of the representatives on the Task Force were a part of the new recommendations. Charles expressed his concern for the group's lack of looking at the project in a macro sense in order to do justice for the future of the forest.

Bob Gleason, with FDOT, stated that the group is taking time to make good recommendations and that research is being done and will be conducted in the future to ensure that they come up with something that will work.

Alex redirected the group back to the question of whether or not the FDOT and/or the consulting firms intimidated the group.

Carrie Sekerak, with the United States Forest Service (USFS), stated that she has not been intimidated by the FDOT or the consulting firms. She explained that the group used the Task Force recommendations as a starting point. She mentioned that the recommendations from the Task Force mainly focused on large species. She stated her focus with the crossings is to also provide permeability with the small species. She added that the group has not come up with the final recommendation. She stated that there hope is for the project to take on use of adaptive management to generate further crossings through research and monitoring the success of crossings.

Walt McCown, with the Florida Wildlife Commission (FWC), explained his focus is finding a solution that will work best for the large carnivores. He emphasized the importance of habitat to the bear population. Walt explained that he wants to come up with a good plan to preserve and conserve the habitat. Walt stated that he wants the group to take a diverse approach and consider using funds for land acquisition along with crossing structures. He stated that he never felt intimidated by FDOT or the consulting firms. He mentioned that a lot of the work and research that is being used was done before there were any interactions with the FDOT or consulting firms.

Charles asked if Walt McCown was indicating that if fewer crossings are put in the plan, the funds that would have been used will be traded for land acquisition. He stated that a trade off mechanism would need to be in place for that to work. Walt McCown stated that he had not made his recommendations based on the assumption that a trade off mechanism was in place to trade crossings for lands. He was stating that the purchase of lands is also important.

Guy Marwick, with the Smart Growth Coalition, asked how much reduction of the underpasses has occurred. Alex stated that the question will be addressed later in the

meeting and redirected the group back to the question of intimidation.

Terry Gilbert, with URS, stated that his focus has been to look at a hybrid approach to the plan. He agreed with Walt's statement about taking a diverse approach by acquiring land along with crossing structures in order to create genetic connectivity. He stated that he has never felt intimidated by FDOT or the consulting firms. He added that he would like to see that the plan includes research in order to improve upon the solution.

Brian Scheick, with FWC, stated that he agreed with Walt McCown and Terry's statements. He added that doesn't feel as though anyone feels intimidated.

Mickey Thomason with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) Greenways and Trails explained that he participated in the Task Force. He stated that he is not intimidated by anyone. He indicated that if he felt intimidated he would have informed his higher management about it. Mickey mentioned that nothing the group has talked about has been finalized. He explained that wildlife crossing experts have been brought in to shed some new light on possibilities, fencing research is being funded by FDOT and USFS, burning issues are still being addressed and everything will be reevaluated at each phase of the project. He mentioned that he supports the hybrid plan as mentioned by Walt McCown and Terry that involves acquiring land along with crossing structures.

Alex summarized that from the answers he received from the committee, none of the members feel intimidated by the FDOT or the consulting firms into making recommendations. Walt McCown added that he has never heard FDOT or the consulting firms say that it can't be done because it costs too much.

Walt Thomson commented that he wanted to be sure that the standard of crossings match the public investment of the land rather than the cost of the road.

The group discussed clarification of Walt McCown, Terry and Mickey's statements on acquiring land along with crossings. Charles asked about the implied tradeoff with crossings and land. He asked how the dollars from using fewer crossings transfers into land acquisition. Mickey stated that he did not indicate that he believes less should be done with the crossings with the intention that the money left over will be used for land acquisition, but rather that land acquisition needs to be considered along with the crossing structures.

Carrie stated that it is important to look at population sustainability and instead of using one large crossing, there may be other possibilities. She explained that not all small species will use the same crossing as a larger animal. She added that they are not reducing the crossings for a land exchange.

Keith stated that the forest has a sheet flow of bear movement and asked what is being achieved with the small crossings.

Next, Alex asked the group how they would like to allow people outside of the committee to communicate in the meeting. Carrie suggested that anyone outside of the committee be considered observers and they can speak with committee members outside of the meeting. Walt McCown suggested that there be a scheduled time on the agenda for input. Mickey agreed with Walt and suggested that the time for comments and questions be at the end of the meeting.

Bill reminded the group that a preferred alternative has not been decided upon at this point and that once the impacts of the roadway improvements are quantified everything will be determined more specifically. He asked that the group keep in mind the fact that the research is in flux and the generalized concept that comes out of the PD&E Study will change. He stated that there is a reevaluation at each phase of the project. Terry added that nothing has been finalized and at this point the group is coming up with multiple alternatives to be evaluated for each location.

Alex brought the group's focus back to the question of how do they want the meeting to function with people outside of the committee.

Terry stated that crowd control needs to happen however, there needs to be an opportunity to interact with people outside of the committee who have comments.

Charles stated that he would keep his input at an appropriate level. Alex suggested that based on Charles' commitment that the group proceed with the observers being allowed to participate in the discussion.

Charles again stated that the reason for his accusations at the PAG is because the results from the committee are fundamentally different from the recommendations from the Task Force and that the group's analysis was not available to show the reasons why.

Charles questioned Carrie's earlier comment on the possibility of smaller species not using a larger crossing. Carrie stated that some smaller species can be uncomfortable with open spaces, shadows and predators in larger crossings.

Alex stated that an objective of the committee has always been to use the best scientific research that is available at the time and work cooperatively on a scientific approach.

Walt Thomson expressed concern for the science that is currently available and a fear for the "do more with less mentality".

Carrie stated that they are dealing with two NEPA processes, the PD&E Study and Design. She indicated that adaptive management will be a good way to find a solution.

Keith commented that the group seems overly optimistic. He stated that decisions that seem to be tentative could get locked in.

Bob Gleason, with FDOT, mentioned that a reevaluation is completed at each phase. Bill gave a brief explanation of the reevaluation process.

Manu Chacko, with Federal Highway Administration, stated that the wildlife mitigation is in a premature stage since the impacts have not been quantified yet. She added that there will need to be a lot of data to back up each crossing.

Alex gave some background on the Task Force, the process for which they chose the crossing locations and explained that a range of alternatives will be determined for each location.

Carrie stated that additional research and monitoring will be identified in the plan. She added that she feels comfortable with the adaptive management process because each NEPA document requires a signature from USFS.

Charles stated that there needs to be a relationship to science and structure and indicated that the smaller the structure the more precise the science should be. Walt Thomson added that if decisions are made with the best available science the guess should be high. Keith stated that it will be tough to go back and change something to a larger scale and that the solution is to have more bear sized crossings.

Tom Roberts stated that he is not disagreeing with any of the comments. He asked the group to consider going through the agenda to see where everything is. He stated that nothing has been decided and at this point they are trying to document the alternatives in writing so that they can be reviewed and improved upon.

The group took a 10 minute break.

After the break, Alex directed everyone's attention to the schedule handout. He gave an overview of the schedule highlighting that a draft of the report is due at the end of June and that the recommendations on preferred sites will not be presented at that time.

Carrie asked if there is a mail out to stakeholders. Alex explained that a newsletter announcing the next large public meeting will be sent out to stakeholders as well as anyone on the mailing list. In addition, there will be advertisements and a press release to notify the public.

Next, Alex asked the group to look at the overall project connectivity statement. He asked everyone to take time to read through the handout.

Tom asked if there were any immediate reactions. He asked the group to send feedback and comments to him.

Walt Thomson asked what benchmarks are being used in number four. Tom stated that it is a general goal and that specific objectives will be attached. Keith commented that the numbers need to be changed to bullets. Terry asked that the word managed be added to the sentence in the bottom paragraph to indicate long term management. Charles stated that number three needs to be parallel to numbers one and two. Keith made the suggestion that the phrase "maintain and where possible improve" be added to the top statements. Walt Thomson mentioned that if there is an objective there must be a way to measure. He suggested that the word objectives be changed to goals.

Next, Tom gave a summary of the input received from the wildlife crossings meetings that were held in March. He explained that the three day meeting involved walking through the sites and gaining input from Sandy Jacobson, a wildlife crossings expert from USFS. Tom stated that the group came to the conclusion that they would not throw out any of the locations but rather evaluate all of them in order to come up with a hybrid plan that will accommodate a full suite of species.

Keith commented that the two lane section of the project serves as a barrier for small species. He asked what the benefit of a bear crossing would be in that area. Tom stated that they will address that concern and that they are going to look at a full range of alternatives in order to create a blueprint.

Charles asked about the possibility of imposing creative, traffic slowing devices.

Bill gave an overview of the status report from the FDOT to look at the appropriateness of SR 40 being a SIS road. Carrie stated that the data on animal kills in traffic points more in the direction of volume than to speed. She added that traffic calming can make it difficult for animals to cross.

Charles asked Carrie if the USFS would like SR 40 to be taken off the SIS. Carrie stated that she can't speak for her agency, but personally she would like to see it off. Charles suggested that the head of USFS write a letter to the Governor and to the Secretary of Transportation of Florida.

The group took a lunch break from 12:30 pm to 1:30 pm.

Tom reopened the meeting and led a discussion on the species list for the proposed crossing locations. He explained that the list is made of species that has the potential to occur.

Tom started with location A and gave an explanation of the proposed alternatives. He stated that there are a number of different habitat types. Tom added that he must address all of the species that have potential to occur.

Walt Thomson commented that a list of species that define a good connectivity niche should be shown rather than a large list of animals that have potential or are common. He asked for a list

of species that are relative to the use of the crossing feature.

Tom brought the group back to the discussion of the list of species handout. He stated that the list is part of the NEPA process and must show all species that have potential to occur.

Keith stated that an additional crossing is needed in location A. Carrie asked why another crossing is needed.

Terry stated gopher tortoises and indigo snakes are found in location A.

Keith stated that the bears are going to cross where fencing does not exist and suggested that fencing on both sides may be a good alternative. Tom stated that he would add the suggestion to the range of alternatives. Tom mentioned that they are analyzing large spans, small spans and a combination of crossing structures.

Next the group discussed the possibility of small species using a large crossing. Carrie indicated that it depends on the location.

Keith marked additional crossings on the map in locations A, B and C to be added to the range of alternatives. He requested that there be more frequently spaced, bear sized crossings.

Next the group discussed the possibility of cost savings by extending a bridge trestle rather than ramping up and down. They used the example of the Ocklawaha Bridge.

Next Tom directed the group's focus on the list of species for location D. Charles suggested that in dealing with the road ends and community in that area, tie-back fences should be considered. He added that all structures should be bear size.

Keith commented that D connects a small piece of land to the forest and may not be that valuable. Tom stated that one of the alternatives in that location could involve land acquisition.

Charles asked what the concept was for the blue crosses on the map. Alex indicated that it would be some type of culvert. Charles suggested that the culvert be bigger, 60 inches by 60 inches, to accommodate bears and supplement the center crossing.

Carrie suggested that they look into prefabricated culverts as a cost savings mechanism.

Next the group discussed location E. Guy commented that a landowner near location E is willing to sell a conservation easement over the land. Carrie commented that the location is difficult because of the private land. Walt Thomson commented that there may be land connectors in that area.

Walt McCown stated that the development area around location E is a population sink for bears and that it wouldn't be good for bear mortality to funnel the bears there. Carrie added that she

doesn't think money will be well spent in that area.

Charles suggested a combination of fixes with fencing. Keith suggested that the forest be fenced behind the private lands.

Location F was the next topic of discussion. Tom explained that the alternatives for this location range from spanning the entire length to a combination of different lengths and sizes of structure.

Walt Thomson recommended that the group identify the key land acquisition opportunities.

Carrie discussed the land management and fire and fuel management issues associated with location F. She stated that the shorter crossing structures along with culverts facilitate management much easier than large spans.

Keith asked about the cost differential of parts of the road being bermed up rather than having a crossing structure in some places. Tom stated that the alternative Keith suggested has been discussed. Brian agreed.

Walt Thomson asked who has a copy of the MOU for prescribed burning and to be notified of future meetings.

Next, the group discussed location G1. Tom mentioned that the crossing was added because it is a natural corridor for bears from a land perspective.

There was a group discussion on land acquisition around area G1. It was suggested that other land purchases would have more value than the piece suggested in location G1.

Keith brought up the idea of the USFS doing a land exchange for other pieces of land that are of interest to the project.

Carrie stated it would be beneficial to bring in Kyle Jones, Lands Program Manager with USFS, in order to discuss land acquisition opportunities.

Tom stated that it would be good to identify the parcels that are wanted and the parcels the USFS can give up.

Next, Tom discussed location G2. He explained that it was added because of the sand skink and other small species in the area. Terry suggested that there are indigo and short tailed snakes in the area as well.

Keith asked if the structures in the two lane section are necessary. Tom explained that the group wants to create a blueprint for the entire project. Carrie added that analysis is being done from one end to the other end of the project.

Walt Thomson and Keith expressed concern that the decisions that are made today for the two lane portion of the road would be the only solutions proposed in the future if the road is widened through the forest at some point in the future. Alex stated that it would be looked at again in the future if four laning were ever considered in the future.

Alex reminded the group that the next meeting is proposed for Wednesday, May 30, 2007.

Meeting Adjourned at approximately 3:20 pm.

cc: File, All Attendees (via e-mail)

*Note: The above reflects the writer's understanding of the contents of the meeting. If any misinterpretations or inaccuracies are included, please contact Mandy Rankin at (407) 971-8850 as soon as possible for resolution and revisions if necessary.*