

The Ridge Scenic Highway Annual Report



October 1, 2012

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Corridor Information

Road: State Road 17 (Scenic Highway)
Limits: US 27 to US 17/92
Centerline Miles: 38.7
Name: The Ridge Scenic Highway
Location: Polk County
Designation: February 2005

CME Contact Information

Full Name: Mimi Reid-Hardman
Address: Lake Wales Depot Museum & Cultural Center
325 South Scenic Highway
City: Lake Wales
State: Florida
Zip: 33853
Phone: (863) 676-2457 or (863) 676-5160
Fax: (863) 678-4299
E-mail: lakewalesdepot@gmail.com

Corridor Conditions

- 1. Discuss the condition of the intrinsic resources and any changes in the corridor since designation. If necessary, provide photographs or other graphical representation of the resources by emailing them to Floridascenichighways@gmail.com.**
 - ❖ Bok Tower Gardens started construction on a trail extension of the Pine Ridge Trail through recently acquired property to Burns Avenue. (See Appendix A - Figure 1)
 - ❖ The County completed a new park in the Babson Park area called Welling Park. The park is located along the shores of Lake Easy. The park includes an improved boat launch, parking area, and picnic tables.
 - ❖ The Lake Wales Downtown Historic District was refreshed with major streetscape improvements completed at the end of 2011. Funded by a Community Development Block Grant, the \$330,000 project included decorative pavers, sidewalk repairs, new crosswalks and curb ramps, and extensive shade trees and plantings along Park, Stuart and Central Avenues between the SR 17- The Ridge Scenic Highway and First Street. (See Appendix A – Figure 11 -12)
- 2. What, if any, intrinsic resources have been degraded or altered?**

None have been identified at this time.

3. Identify and discuss enhancement projects that have been initiated or completed.

Lake Hamilton –

- ❖ A new water treatment plant replaced an outdated treatment plant from the 1950's and the water tower dating to the 1920's. The new plant includes a 400,000 gallon storage tank, two new wells, advanced hydrogen sulfide removal system, an indoor high service pumping room, security cameras, and other technologies to produce high quality water. The new plant is located on North Church Street. The project was funded by a \$2.4 million loan and \$923,800 grant from the US Department of Agriculture and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection funded 65 percent of the \$836,000 hydrogen sulfide removal system. The Town of Lake Hamilton funded \$240,000.

Dundee –

- ❖ The Town Center was constructed and opened in November 2011. The Town Center includes most town departments, including Code Enforcement, Finance, Utility Billing, Building, Parks and Recreation. It also includes administrative offices for the town manager and town clerk as well as Council Chambers. The cost for this project as well as the library that was constructed in 2009 is estimated at \$1.3 million.
- ❖ Green Horizon Trust and the Dundee Town Commission, came together to open the Barbara B. Pedersen Wildlife Preserve along Lake Annie. The Town of Dundee agreed to donate two picnic tables and two benches for the preserve entrance which will be known as the Town of Dundee Doorway to the Ridge, and to provide regular trail maintenance. The Preserve features more than a mile of cleared hiking trails, picnic areas, educational signs and an abundance of beautiful Florida Landscape.

Florida Department of Transportation –

- ❖ SR 17 has several projects listed in the FDOT Fiscal Years 2011/12 – 2015/16 Work Program:
 - Intersection
 - Dundee Area
 - Lake Marie Drive at SR 17 – Intersection improvements and signalization
 - Construction 2013/14 - \$430,000
 - Lake of the Hills Area
 - Mountain Lake Cutoff Road at SR 17 – Intersection improvements (See Appendix A – Figure 2)
 - Construction 2011/12 - \$1,079,205

- Reconstruction
 - Haines City Area
 - From SR 544 to US 17/92. The project will include five landscaped medians, 8-foot wide sidewalk on the west side of the street, and a 5-foot wide sidewalk on the east side of the street.
 - Construction 2012/13 - \$4,392,032
- Resurfacing
 - Dundee Area
 - From east of 6th Street to East of 4th Street
 - Construction 2011 - \$134,338
 - Lake of the Hills Area
 - From North of Starr Avenue to North of SR 540 (Waverly Road)
 - Construction 2011/12 - \$1,460,849
 - Lake Wales Area
 - From South of Martin Road to South of Mountain Lake Cutoff Road
 - Construction 2011/12-2012/13 - \$6,071,190
 - Babson Park/Highland Park Area
 - From East Cook Road to Townsend Road
 - Construction 2011 - \$1,829,881
- Trails
 - Haines City Area
 - Downtown Urban Trail (Phase 1) (See Appendix A – Figure 3).
 - Construction 2016/17 - \$750,000 (funding provided by the Polk TPO's Regional Trail Enhancement Grant Program)
- Drainage Improvements
 - Lake Wales Area
 - From Seminole Avenue to Osceola Avenue
 - Construction 2011/12 and 2014/15 - \$593,353
- Transit Improvements
 - Hillcrest Heights to Frostproof Areas
 - From CR 630 to Webber International University
 - Construction 2012/13 - \$23,219
- Sidewalk Improvements
 - Lake of the Hills
 - From North of Starr Avenue to North of Chalet Suzanne Road
 - Construction FY 2011/12 - \$106,700

- Lake Wales
 - From Winston Avenue to Kissimmee Avenue
 - Construction FY 2012/13 - \$300,000
- Frostproof Area
 - From F Street to I Street
 - Construction 2012/13 - \$160,763

4. Describe plans for future development in the corridor and how this issue will be addressed.

Polk County – Polk County Board of County Commissioners adopted development regulations for the Ridge Scenic Highway area in February 2012. These regulations established scenic view conservation incentives, enabled planned development densities using density incentives in place of a public hearing, modified the list of permitted and conditional uses, and established unique development regulations.

Haines City – As part of the new Downtown Redevelopment Plan an Urban Bike Trail system is proposed (See Appendix A – Figure 3). The intent of this system is to tie several projects that have been recently approved into a comprehensive system of trails that will eventually interconnect with Haines City and ultimately reach out to other communities.

The Southeast Polk Selected Area Study was initiated in 2009 by Polk County. The study area includes Babson Park south to Frostproof east of Crooked Lake. The County and stakeholder are currently in the process of developing the Vision Plan for the area. The process includes three stages: (1) Existing Conditions Profile (completed), 2) Vision Plan (completed), and 3) Land Use Plan/Policy development and implementation (on-going). To obtain additional information on this study please visit:

http://www.polk-county.net/subpage.aspx?menu_id=286&nav=bus&id=1276#Southeast_SAS.

5. Mention how effective the goals, objectives and strategies have been in accomplishing the Corridor Vision.

The goals, objectives and strategies contained in the CME's 2010 Corridor Management Plan Update were used to guide in the CME's efforts to implement the Action Plan. Many of the Action Plan items have been completed or initiated by the CME.

6. Which goals and objectives have been met thus far and how were they accomplished?

Since designation, the CME has completed and/or started to implement the following goals through their annual action plan.

This year's action plan includes the following (check marks = completed):

Organization:

- ✓ Develop a list of Priorities to be adopted at the Annual Meeting.
 - These Priorities should be consistent with the CME's Adopted
 - Action Plan and Annual Reports.
- ✓ Develop Active Committees to help implement Action Plan Priorities
- ✓ Prepare and submit an Annual Report to the FDOT
- ✓ Maintain Active membership
- Tax Exempt Status
- Seek grants for events/organization/other items

Education/Awareness/Community Participation:

- Develop a Corridor Brochure-Seek Sponsorship
- Speakers Bureau - Local Gov. and Community Group Presentations
- ✓ Media Coverage/Press Releases
- ✓ Website Enhancement
- ✓ Enhance Member and Public Participation
- Start to Plan for a Scenic Highway Event -Citrus, History, Environmental Theme
- ✓ Public Events: trail, bike, triathlon, yard sale
- Create Planners Forum
- Work with travel agencies to promote The Ridge Scenic Highway

Scenic Highway Enhancement/Protection:

- ✓ Support County Focus Group Efforts for County Comp. Plan/LDC Regulations
- ✓ Encourage/Support City Adoption of similar Regulations
- Encourage and support Grants that are consistent with the CME's Action Plan
- Seek and support protection/Enhancement of key resources of the Scenic Highway (Prominent View Points, Windy Hill, Lake Wales Trail & Trailhead Interpretive Center, Chalet Suzanne, Historic Downtowns)
- Participate in Keep Polk County Beautiful
- Participate in Adopt-A-Highway

7. Which goals (unlikely in the first year), objectives and strategies have been or need to be modified in order to attain the Corridor Vision?

We do not have any goals that need to be modified since we updated our Corridor Management Plan in 2010.

8. What new ordinances, policies and/or regulations have been issued as a result of the scenic highway?

See Question 4 under Polk County.

9. Are there proposed ordinances/regulations that may aid goals?

See Question 4 under Polk County.

Public Participation Program

10. Discuss the effectiveness of the Community Participation Program to date.

The CME has been very active in engaging local governments and increasing public awareness. The CME schedules board meetings at a different location every three months and provides opportunity for the public to comment on the CME's plans and programs. The group is well covered by the local newspapers which have published numerous articles about the efforts of the CME. See Appendix C for a few copies of articles.

The CME officially released their website (www.ridgescenichighway.com) on June 13, 2011. The website features the story of the Scenic Highway and the surrounding resources, events calendar, board and committee meeting agendas and notes, photos and videos, local resources and links to surrounding business and places to visit as well as the CME Board contact information. Since the release of the website we had over 10,600 visits.

This year was the fourth annual "Scenic 17 Sprint Triathlon" held at Webber International University. Alta Vista Sports and Webber International University coordinated the event. This event has brought people from all over the state to recreate on the Scenic Highway and has brought notoriety to the efforts to preserve and enhance the recreation and aesthetic amenities of the highway. The Scenic Highway logo was also featured on the t-shirts that were given to the athletes, the awards that were passed out, as well as promotional items. Many of the athletes said this was one of the most beautiful and most difficult courses they have competed in. The event had over 160 competitors. To get more information on the event please visit:

http://www.webberathletics.com/sports/2012/4/2/GEN_0402121534.aspx?tab=scenic17triathlon.

This year was the first "Scenic 17 Sprint Triathlon" for children held at Webber International University. The event had over 20 competitors. To get more information on the event visit:

http://www.webberathletics.com/sports/2012/4/2/GEN_0402121534.aspx?tab=scenic17triathlon.

This year will be the fourth annual "39-Mile Scenic Highway Yard Sale" on November 5, 2011. Last year's event was a great success. The CME estimates about 5,000 people participated in the event last year. (See Appendix A – Figures 6-9 for event photos and See Appendix B for the flyer) The goal is to provide local awareness of the Ridge Scenic Highway as a resource for promoting Economic Tourism in the small unique towns and larger city centers.

The following were the official locations:

Haines City: St. Ann Catholic Church, 1265 Robinson Drive

Dundee: Community Center, 603 E. Main Street

Lake of the Hills: Community Clubhouse, 47 East Starr Avenue (Off of SR. 17)

Lake Wales: CSX Trailhead Center, 450 N. Scenic Highway
Lake Wales Care Center, 201 N. Scenic Highway
Lake Wales Association of Realtors, 318 N. Scenic Highway
Babson Park: Across from Webber Int'l University, 1050 N. Scenic Highway
Ridge Audubon Center, 200 N. Crooked Lake Drive
Frostproof: Downtown, E. Wall Street at SR 17

The CME asked for a monetary contribution from the proceeds of each yard sale. The event was widely attended and visitors had a lot of compliments on how well it was organized and the scenic views along the highway. This year was our first year of selling the 39-Mile Scenic Highway Yard Sale t-shirts. See Appendix B for the picture.

11. Provide a synopsis of major issues discussed at public meetings held in the past year and elaborate on any critical issues that have arisen during these forums and how they were dealt with or will be addressed.

We had four Board meetings this year and while the meetings are open to the public we only had a few members of the "public" attend the meetings.

Funding

12. Describe corridor funding needs, acquisitions and expenditures.

The CME has been able to carry out the administration activities (meeting locations, public notices, meeting materials, copies, postage, etc.) without a budget as these items have been provided free of charge. The group has been able to utilize volunteerism and other in-kind services from its members to its advantage.

In implementing the Action Plan, the CME will continue to research grant opportunities. Grants that require a local match may not be feasible in the short term due to the current fiscal situation in many of the municipalities/jurisdictions that comprise the CME. The CME would appreciate advisement and assistance from the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) in determining appropriate sources for funding enhancements referenced in the Action Plan.

13. Has funding been a problem?

Yes. It seems that most of the grants that are available require local matching funds. Based on the actions taken by the Florida Legislature and Governor earlier this year, the climate is poor for matching local government funds, because they had to cut funding to meet their budget needs. As mentioned earlier, the CME would like to study further some of the items contained in the action plan, but the lack of local funding has hindered their ability to do so.

14. If so, how will the CME attempt to resolve this issue?

Additional guidance is needed from the FDOT. Particularly for funding and grants that do not require a local match. Without a dedicated funding source, the CME and

many of the Action Plan items (particularly construction items) are subject to grant availability and local governments willing to support (contribute funding). The CME will continue to be an advocate for the corridor and promote the projects that support the vision, goals and objectives of the Scenic Highway.

15. Are funding sources being pursued?

Yes. The City of Haines City submitted an application for a Bikes Belong Grant. The grant is for \$10,000.00 and will be used to develop a plan and design based on the Urban Bike Trail as mentioned in number 4 above. Currently at this time Haines City has not received a response whether they have received the grant.

16. If so, when does the CME anticipate receiving them?

The CME did not apply for the grant, the City of Haines City applied for the grant.

17. How will the funding be used?

See question 15.

Measuring Success

18. Please identify any intrinsic resources along your Scenic Highway corridor that have experienced impacts or benefits since your previous Annual Report? (List resource name and impact/benefit)

Historical Resources

- ❖ There have not been any additional historical resources added to the corridor since the 2010 Corridor Management Plan Update.

Cultural Resources

- ❖ There have not been any additional cultural resources added to the corridor since the 2010 Corridor Management Plan Update.

Recreational Resources

- ❖ Green Horizon Trust and the Dundee Town Commission, came together to open the Barbara B. Pedersen Wildlife Preserve along Lake Annie. The Town of Dundee agreed to donate two picnic tables and two benches for the preserve entrance which will be known as the Town of Dundee Doorway to the Ridge, and to provide regular trail maintenance. The Preserve features more than a mile of cleared hiking trails, picnic areas, educational signs and an abundance of beautiful Florida Landscape.

Lake Access:

- ❖ The County completed a new park in the Babson Park area called Welling Park. The park is located along the shores of Lake Easy. The park includes an improved boat launch, parking area, and picnic tables.

Natural Resources

- ❖ The Audubon Center for Birds of Prey located in Babson Park released the 450th Bald Eagle into the wild.

Scenic Resources/Vistas

- ❖ There have not been any additional scenic resources/vistas added to the corridor since the 2010 Corridor Management Plan Update.

19. What Marketing events have taken place since the last annual report?

The Ridge Scenic Highway CME attended Pioneer Days, Polk State Fair, Boktoberfest, Barks and Bikes and passed out save the date cards for the 2011 39 Mile Yard Sale event flyers. The CME also maintains our website at www.ridgescenichighway.com.

20. Lodging Facilities: How many lodging facilities are along your corridor?

- ❖ 10-24

21. What is the most common type of lodging facility (hotel, motel, bed and breakfast, etc...) along your corridor?

- ❖ Hotel, Motel, and Bed and Breakfasts

22. Restaurants: What type (fast food, casual family dining, gourmet, diner, etc) of restaurants are generally found along your corridor? Has designation affected the amount or type of restaurants along the corridor?

We have several restaurants along the corridor. Most are casual family dining, with a few fast food restaurants. At this time, it does not appear the amount or type of restaurants along the corridor has been affected by the designation.

23. Chambers of Commerce: Please list every Chamber of Commerce on your corridor (Name, Address, City, Zip, Contact and Phone)

- ❖ Haines City Northeast Polk County Regional Chamber of Commerce
35610 U.S. 27, Haines City, FL 33845
Edee Feliciano
863.422.3751
- ❖ Dundee Area Chamber of Commerce
310 Main Street, Dundee, FL 33838
Kevin Kitto
863.439.3261
- ❖ Lake Wales Area Chamber of Commerce
340 W. Central Avenue, Lake Wales, FL 33859
Betty Wojcik
863.676.3445
- ❖ Frostproof Chamber of Commerce
15 East Wall Street, Frostproof, FL 33843
Wesley Wise
863.635.9112

24. Private Development: Has scenic highway designation had an effect on private development along your corridor? If so, how?

There has not been an increase in private investment in new development along the corridor. We have seen several businesses put on new paint, install new landscaping, and clean up their properties. We have also seen an increase in the number of new orange groves, peach orchards and pine tree farms being planted along the corridor (See Appendix A – Figure 5).

25. Demographic Changes: Have demographic changes taken place since your last annual report?

There has not been a discernable difference in the areas demographics over the past year.

26. Property Value Changes: Have property values been affected since your last annual report?

Property taxes have not changed much since last year.

27. Tourist: Has there been a change in the number of tourist since your last annual report?

This year we had a large increase in tourist to our Ridge Scenic Highway. The City of Haines City hosted the Florida Ironman 70.3 Triathlon. The Ironman 70.3 event is a half-Ironman triathlon with 1.2 mile swim in Lake Eva, a 56 mile bike course throughout east Polk County as well as the Ridge Scenic Highway and a scenic 13.1 mile run course around Lake Eva and through the Lake Eva Park. The event was moved from Disney World to the City of Haines City because Disney World could no longer accommodate the event. It is expected the event's economic impact on Polk County was between \$5 million and \$5.5 million during the week of the event, which ended on Sunday, May 21, 2012. The event had about 1,000 participants, including Lance Armstrong. The Haines City Police Chief estimated the triathlon drew 6,000 to 8,000 spectators. The event will be returning for the next four years.

The National Multiple Sclerosis Society had their Bike for MS Citrus Tour from April 21-22, 2012. Over 1,300 cyclists participated in the bike ride that started at Bok Tower Gardens in Lake Wales, included an overnight stay at the Caribe Royale Resort in Orlando, Florida, and then finished the race at Bok Tower Gardens.

The corridor continues to be a popular "scenic" alternative to US 27, especially for motorcyclists and bicycle groups (20-50 riders at times). These groups can be found along the corridor every weekend. See Appendix A – Figure 10 for the Everglades Bicycle Group traveling along SR 17- The Ridge Scenic Highway. We would like to believe that our special events attract visitors throughout the year. Babson Park has beautiful fall colors as can be seen in Appendix A – Figure 4.

Local Government Comprehensive Plan Relationship

28. Discuss how effective the integration of the CMP into the Local Government Comprehensive Plan(s) has been.

At this point, not all of the local governments have incorporated the CMP into the comprehensive plans. As mentioned in previous annual reports, the County has standard policies in their comprehensive plan and Land Development Code regarding the Scenic Highway. The policies tie back into the CMP. Most jurisdictions will be adopting policies similar to the County's in the coming years.

29. Discuss any actions that are underway or are needed to maintain consistency with the Local Government Comprehensive Plan(s) and other plans.

See Question 4 under Polk County.

Miscellaneous

30. Describe any problems that have arisen regarding the corridor.

The City of Haines City has expressed concern with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT). The FDOT has begun design work for the reconstruction of SR 17 from US 17/92 to SR 544. While the FDOT has complied with the provisions of the Ridge Scenic Highway Bike and Pedestrian Master Plan by constructing a wider sidewalk (8' to 12') along the west side of the highway, and is now constructing a 5-foot wide sidewalk on the east side, it would have been better if the FDOT could have also included funds in their construction budget for enhanced streetlights and landscaping. These additional items will improve the appearance of the roadway. Given that the City of Haines City donated property to FDOT at no cost for drainage facilities in support of this project, it is appropriate for the City of Haines City to expect that the FDOT could provide additional enhancements, instead of placing the fiscal burden on the City of Haines City to cover the cost of the improvements.

Some of the new FDOT construction projects along the corridor do not seem to be in compliance with the Ridge Scenic Highway Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan created by FDOT and the Ridge Scenic Highway CME.

High speed is still an issue along the corridor. Members of the CME are concerned over the safety of the bicycle, motorcycle, pedestrians, and other type of users of the roadway.

31. Describe present and future actions to resolve these issues.

N/A

32. How has the CME been managed and organized?

The CME has held regular quarterly meetings since last year. In general, participation has been consistent with a few members; however, we have not been able to fill the vacant positions for our At-Large positions (Agriculture, Tourism, and Commercial/Developer). Notice of the meetings goes out one week prior to the meeting. Meeting materials are posted on the website at www.ridgescenichighway.com.

The CME has a committee for the 39-Mile Scenic Highway Yard Sale. The committee comes together in April of each year and meets monthly to discuss the details of the event. The committee has been very successful in getting several official locations and this year getting sponsors. Event flyers are posted on the website at www.ridgescenichighway.com.

33. Describe how partnering and coordination efforts have worked.

There is excellent coordination on the CME. The CME and its members work very closely with the local governments and the FDOT in implementing the Action Plan items. The CME has been able to carry out all of these activities without a budget. The group has been able to utilize volunteerism and other in-kind services from its members to its advantage.

The CME has partnered with the following groups:

- ❖ Polk County Text Change Focus Group – creation of development standards along the corridor
- ❖ Local Chamber of Commerce's and main street directors, and churches – Annual 39-Mile Scenic Highway Yard Sale event

34. Provide discussion of any other issues the CME feels are relevant to the corridor's success.

The CME does very well with working with the communities. The more people come to visit our corridor, the greater success we continue to have.

Appendix A

CORRIDOR PHOTOGRAPHS



Figure 1. Pine Ridge Trail Extension – Bok Tower



Figure 2. SR 17 at Mountain Lake Cutoff Road Intersection Under Construction

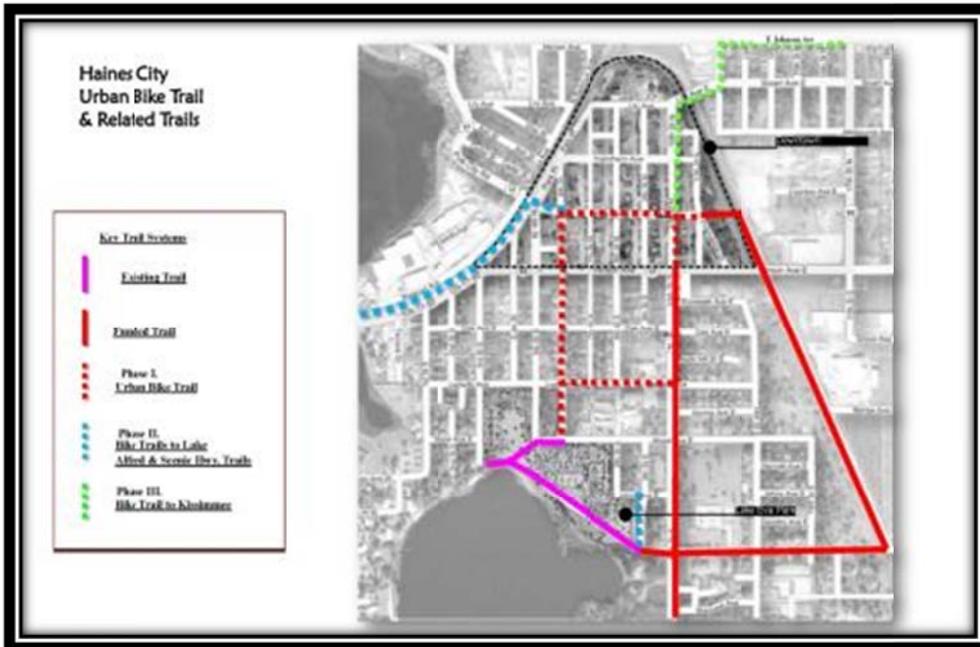


Figure 3. Haines City Urban Bike Trail



Figure 4. Fall Colors – Babson Park



Figure 5. New Grove – Bok Tower



Figure 6. 2011 – 39 Mile Scenic Highway Yard Sale in Haines City



Figure 7. 2011 – 39 Mile Scenic Highway Yard Sale in Lake of the Hills



Figure 8. 2011 – 39 Mile Scenic Highway Yard Sale in Babson Park



Figure 9. 2011 – 39 Mile Scenic Highway Yard Sale in Frostproof



Figure 10. 2011 – Everglades Bicycle Group riding along SR 17



Figure 11. 2011 – Downtown Lake Wales New Pavers and Plantings



Figure 12. 2011 – Downtown Lake Wales New Pavers and Plantings



Figure 13. 2012 – Looking South towards Frostproof



Figure 14. 2012 – Looking North towards Babson Park

Appendix B

39-MILE SCENIC HIGHWAY YARD SALE FLYER AND T-SHIRT

4th Annual

Join us Saturday, November 5
8 AM - 2 PM



See reverse side for location map

Travel State Road 17, the beautiful Ridge Scenic Highway and visit us at nine great locations:

- Haines City:**
St. Ann Catholic Church, 1265 Robinson Drive
- Dundee:**
Community Center, 603 E. Main Street
Janetie Rines, 863.41.9314, janetie@stannondundee.com
- Lake of the Hills:**
Community Clubhouse, 47 East Starr Avenue (Off of SR 17)
Edward Eaves, 863.676.8015, edward@starravenue.com
- Lake Wales:**
CSX Trailhead Center, 450 N. Scenic Highway
Tina Rotwend, 863.676.1721, tina@csxtrailhead.com
- Lake Wales Care Center, 201 N. Scenic Highway
- Lake Wales Association of Realtors, 316 N. Scenic Highway
- Robson Park:**
Across from Webber Int'l University, 1050 N. Scenic Highway
Susan Wilbers, 863.638.7308, susan@webber.edu
- Ridge Audubon Center, 200 N. Crooked Lake Drive
- Frostproof:**
Downtown, E. Wall Street at SR 17
Dana Bush, 863.695.4564, dabush@frostproof.com

39-Mile Yard Sale T-Shirts for sale \$10.00 each sold at all locations.
*Rent Your Space for \$10.00 at selected locations.



Collectables, Antiques and Treasures



Fundraiser Event - Donations Welcome

Sponsored by: The Ridge Scenic Highway Corridor Management Entity, Inc.



www.ridge-scenic-highway.com
Find us on Facebook - "The Ridge Scenic Highway"



Front



GARMENT
GREEN
IMPRINT
W

IMPRINT
6.75"W x

Back



IMPRINT
W

IMPRINT
12"W x'



Appendix C

NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

polk news

IMAGES OF POLK SCENIC HIGHWAY

PHOTO ESSAY BY RICK RUNION | THE LEDGER



State Road 17, also known as Scenic Highway, runs north and south on the Lake Wales ridge in eastern Polk County. The road connects most of the county's eastern towns, from Frostproof to Davenport.

It crosses over the highest hills in the county through orange groves and past motels where tourists stayed years ago on their way to and from South Florida.

The two-lane road between Frostproof and Lake Wales is exceptionally beautiful. The highway swings past lakes, groves, public schools and Webber International University in Babson Park.

People looking for a great Sunday drive can try Scenic Highway and stop to buy fresh fruit and vegetables or boiled peanuts at one of the roadside stands.

Roll down the windows and enjoy the cooler weather while cruising the curves and rolling hills of eastern Polk.

—Rick Runion



Preserving the View

New Rules Would Keep Growth From Spoiling Scenic Highway

By Tom Palmer
THE LEDGER

Published Sunday, February 13, 2011 at 12:40 a.m.

BARTOW | Scenic Highway winds for 39 miles through hills and valleys, past lakes, forests and citrus and a number of communities along the Lake Wales Ridge between Haines City and Frostproof.

But increasing growth has arrived along more stretches of the once-rural corridor, potentially threatening the scenic vistas and small-town atmosphere that has dominated the landscape for decades.

Now, after nearly a decade of discussion, Polk County commissioners are poised to vote Tuesday on a new set of development regulations that will encourage people behind the inevitable development wave coming to the area to preserve as much of Scenic Highway's character as possible.

But Polk officials can't accomplish this alone.

Annexations during the past decade have placed most of the corridor under the control of Haines City, Lake Wales, Frostproof or Dundee.

Those decisions by those cities will be as important as anything county officials decide.

AN IDEA IS BORN

Johanna Buscher recalls the discussion at the Lake of the Hills Garden Club in 2002.

Developers encouraged by Lake Wales' annexations and a coming real estate boom were talking of bulldozing the citrus groves surrounding this quiet residential area around Starr Lake and Lake Mabel, not far from the historic Chalet Suzanne Restaurant and Country Inn.

Buscher and her neighbors wanted to do something to preserve their community, but they weren't sure what to do.

Meanwhile, Susan Welborn and her neighbors in Babson Park were having similar misgivings as Lake Wales expanded from the north and Frostproof from the south.

They worried those annexations and the planned development that accompanied them threatened to overwhelm their quiet residential community and Crooked Lake, one of the few lakes in Florida that has earned the Outstanding Florida Water designation.

Babson Park residents had the same questions as Lake of the Hills residents.

They looked to county planners for advice.

Two ideas emerged.



PAUL CRATE | LEDGER MEDIA GROUP
Susan Welborn, a resident of Babson Park, walks along a section of Scenic Highway between Babson Park and Frostproof overlooking Lake Moody.

One was getting the Florida Department of Transportation to designate the Ridge Scenic Highway as a Florida Scenic Highway. That was approved in February 2005.

That was fairly noncontroversial because it had no regulatory strings attached to it.

The other part of their effort was quite controversial, and that's why it has taken a decade to work things out. It involved reworking Polk County's growth plan and development regulations to set up a system to keep new development from overwhelming the corridor.

But when county planners convened a public meeting in Lake Wales in early 2006 to get public reaction to the proposal, the reaction was not what they expected.

That meeting drew an angry crowd of politically powerful citrus growers and developers who had not participated in the earlier discussions.

They also had not been given the opportunity to rework the plan's wording behind the scenes before its first public hearing.

They demanded county commissioners scrap it.

Commissioners complied.

After the controversy cooled, county officials formed a committee composed of all of the interest groups along the corridor so they could start over on the growth plan change via the formation of a focus group.

Jack Brandon, a Lake Wales lawyer who represented the major landowners, said that approach worked better because everyone was finally involved.

"I think it was one of the most outstanding examples of planning at the local level," he said.

Tom Wodrich, a county planner assigned to work with the citizen group, said some of the grass-roots representatives appeared disappointed that some aspects of the plan, such as making preservation a voluntary incentive program instead of a required one.

"Nevertheless, the plan did put a value on conservation," Wodrich said.

Lake of the Hills' Buscher confirmed that.

"It lacked any enforcement," she said. "It was just guidelines."

Some key features of the Scenic Highway plan and regulations include:

Development restrictions that require landscaping buffers made up of a variety of native trees and shrubs to preserve the natural feel of the corridor.

Restrictions on lighting and signs to reduce visual blight.

Development setbacks from the highway to avoid creating a "tunnel effect"

Prohibitions on intense commercial and industrial land uses, such as junk yards, power plants, car washes or car or mobile home sales lots.

Brandon said the process was frustrating after state planners challenged the initial plan change because they said it didn't protect the area well enough.

State planners issued a report in August 2009 that called the plan "premature" and said it contributed to urban sprawl.

County officials tried to negotiate a settlement but finally repealed the initial plan and restarted the process in hopes of running into fewer problems with the new administration in Tallahassee following the 2010 election, Brandon said.

HOW WILL IT WORK?

The key question that remains is whether the new rules will help.

Buscher and Wellborn said they're optimistic.

"We did not get everything we hoped for, but we're heartened the County Commission is moving ahead with it," Buscher said.

Wellborn agreed.

"I think it's the best achievable plan we could make at this time," she said, explaining the plan is the result of work by a diverse focus group from all of the interest groups along the corridor.

Wellborn said she hopes city officials embrace the idea.

What cities do is important because of the reversal that has occurred.

When the Scenic Highway protection plan was first discussed, 70 percent of the corridor was in unincorporated Polk County, and 30 percent was inside cities.

Now it's the other way around.

Any comprehensive plan for the corridor will involve coordination with city officials, Wodrich said.

He said he's working with city planners to come up with a shared vision. However, he said there are examples along the corridor of recent development that doesn't fit the vision.

That includes a housing development on Lake Mabel and an industrial warehouse development in Frostproof. In both cases, their appearance is visually jarring.

"Those give us examples of what development would look like if we don't implement the plan," Wodrich said.

Brandon said he has volunteered to meet with city officials to explain the county's plan and persuade them to adopt growth plan changes that will complement it.

"It isn't going to be very effective unless the municipalities buy into it," he said.

Brandon, one of Polk's most active land-use lawyers, said now's a good time to start while there's a lull in development pressure so that a good plan will be in place to provide incentives.

City planners along the corridor say they're working to coordinate with the county's plan, but that's not always practical in the more urban areas.

Mark Bennett, Haines City's planning manager, said the city's development regulations include setbacks and visual buffering, especially around the city's main business park, located on a hilltop near Scenic Highway and County Road 544.

"Obviously an urban environment is different from a rural environment," he said, but he said Haines City's plan is intended to be compatible with Polk County's planning efforts.

Margaret Swanson, Lake Wales' planning director, said the city has setbacks for some development and is planning to plant trees, particularly in industrial areas, to make the corridor more attractive.

But Swanson said other opportunities are presenting themselves.

A resurfacing project planned by the Florida Department of Transportation in 2013 from Mountain Lake Cutoff Road to Ray Martin Road will bring with it 7,000 feet of new sidewalk and better defined driveways, which will improve the appearance of the section through much of Lake Wales and make it more walkable.

She said Lake Wales already has established designs for roadside lighting and signs, though she said there has been some resistance to banning internally lighted signs.

Officials in Frostproof haven't discussed the Scenic Highway plan in detail yet, said Jennifer Codo-Salisbury, a planner from the Central Florida Regional Planning Council, which contracts with the city to offer advice on land-use planning.

"There has not been a dialogue," she said. "They will be looking at it in late spring and early summer."

Babson Park's Wellborn said that's why continued monitoring is important.

"I hope the focus group will exercise some oversight and get involved," she said.

Wellborn said the important part of the plan is that it does contain the elements of a vision.

"We put guidelines in place so it won't be a hodgepodge," she said. "It will affect landowners in a positive way because it will increase the value of their land."

Buscher agreed.

"A lot of the property owners will realize it's to their advantage to cooperate," she said.

Wellborn said local businesses should benefit from ecotourism and the maintenance of a scenic area that contrasts with more urban areas.

Wellborn and Buscher said one of the most successful promotions is the 39-mile Yard Sale that was started in 2007 to attract visitors on the first November of every year.

Scenic Highway supporters have also launched their own website at <http://www.ridgescenichighway.com/> that contains a map, historic information, photos and other information about the corridor they love and hope to preserve.

[Tom Palmer can be reached at tom.palmer@theledger.com or 863-802-7535. Read more views on the environment at <http://environment.blogs.theledger.com> and more views on county government at <http://county.blogs.theledger.com/>.]

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POLK COUNTY COMMISSION

Panel OKs rules to preserve Scenic Highway

By TOM PALMER

Ledger Media Group

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BARTOW - The vistas along portions of Scenic Highway now have a better chance of being protected.

Tuesday, the Polk County Commission unanimously approved changes in the county's development regulations that sets up incentives for buffering roadside development, for setting aside scenic overlooks and keeping the 39-mile corridor's appearance from changing drastically.

The regulations rely on incentives to persuade landowners to develop differently rather than compelling them to do things differently.

There are landscaping standards and heavy commercial and industrial uses are generally not allowed.

Tuesday's action caps a 10-year effort that resulted in designating the corridor between Haines City and Prostrpooof as a state scenic highway and amending the growth plan in consultation with major landowners, homeowners and local elected officials.

County Commissioner Bob English asked whether Scenic Highway, which is now a winding, two-lane highway, will be four-laned.

Tom Wodrich, the county planner who worked on the project, said planners examined that issue and concluded that was unlikely in the foreseeable future.

He said part of the plan involves diverting traffic to U.S. 27 to reduce traffic pressure.

Jack Brandon, the Lake Wales lawyer who represented major landowners in the sometimes contentious origins of the effort, urged commissioners to realize the job isn't done. "It's important to take it a step further," he said, explaining the majority of the corridor lies within areas annexed by cities during the past decade.

One of the concerns is to make sure the growth plans and development regulations in the cities match the county's effort as much as possible, especially in the more rural sections.

"You should go to local governments and ask them to consider changing their growth plans," he said, explaining there has been some turnover in local elected bodies and the newer officials may not understand the effort and need to be briefed before they're aware of the county's plan.

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