

Who spoke up for adding 300 miles to Florida's toll roads? Only road builders

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Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill extending toll roads through Central and North Florida. FLORIDA SENATE

To the the answer “only the road builders,” we could add those who will gain money from the new roads. This includes politicians gaining or paying off favors, developers who would tear up the land, pollute the water and kill the wildlife to make a buck.

“Many of us in the proposed affected areas moved to less developed areas intentionally, wanting to be left alone,” Phil Castelucci wrote to the Department of Transportation. “Adding zeros to a billionaire’s bank balance is a pretty bad reason to

destroy the last parts of Old Florida.”

Read the entire article here at [this link to the Miami Herald](#).

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

-A river is like a life: once taken, it cannot be brought back-

Who spoke up for adding 300 miles to Florida's toll roads? Only road builders

BY LAWRENCE MOWER HERALD/TIMES TALLAHASSEE BUREAU

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The controversial idea this year to expand Florida's toll system by 300 miles was first pitched by road builders.

Now, months after [lawmakers signed off](#) on the expansion, it appears road builders are the only members of the public voicing support for the idea.

Out of hundreds of public comments solicited by the Florida Department of Transportation in August about the largest toll system expansion in 60 years, only two dozen came from people in favor of building the three roads.

Of those, nearly all came from road builders, contractors and engineers who sent their endorsements via personal email addresses without disclosing their employers.

About half of the favorable comments came from employees of one of the transportation agency's biggest contractors: HNTB, which has won nearly \$1 billion in engineering and construction work

since 2002 and is likely to win millions more if the roads are built. (Some of HNTB's work included overseeing the hiring of [Conduent State & Local Solutions](#) to overhaul the state's SunPass system six years ago, a job Conduent botched.)

Nearly all of the employees directed their positive reviews to the email address the Department of Transportation created to receive public feedback on the road projects, which were hotly contested this legislative session.

"I am writing in support," wrote Steve Johnson, an associate vice president in the company's Tampa/St. Petersburg office, according to his LinkedIn account. "I believe all three study areas will benefit the residents of Florida and ... protect and enhance our environment, improve connectivity and logistics, deliver critically need (sic) infrastructure to our rural communities ... mitigate congestion, and provide crucially important evacuation routes."

Johnson did not write in from his HNTB account or disclose that he was an HNTB employee, choosing instead to identify himself as the president of a gun store he appears to own.

Nearly every other HNTB employee who wrote in repeated identical talking points, and all sent their comments in within a few hours of each other. Most commented from their personal email addresses, but one identified herself as a University of South Florida student.

Neither they nor HNTB responded to requests for comment.

Their emails to the department underscore the lack of non-corporate grassroots support for a project that was sold by supporters as having wide public support and tangible benefits for the communities where they are proposed to be built.

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Do you know where your toll money goes?

Find out where your money goes every time you pass a toll. BY CHRISTIAN COLÓN

Yet the general public's embrace of the project hasn't materialized. During a series of August meetings in Tampa, commissioners from multiple rural counties where the roads would go said the growth isn't wanted. Several environmental groups that fear the roads will erode ecosystems and habitat have already lodged protests.

The idea to build the roads was rejected by three previous Republican governors until January, when Senate President Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, announced he wanted the state to build an entirely new toll road from Polk to Collier counties, extend the Suncoast Parkway to the Georgia border and extend Florida's Turnpike to meet the Suncoast.

Galvano said he heard about the roads idea during a pitch by the Florida Chamber of Commerce and the Florida Transportation Builders Association. The roads are expected to cost billions of dollars if they're built.

The president of the road builders group is Ananth Prasad, who worked for HNTB before being named by Gov. Rick Scott to be Department of Transportation Secretary in 2011. Prasad left the state job in 2015, then spent two more years with HNTB before leading the road builders association.

But it's the Department of Transportation, not bills passed by lawmakers, that typically chooses where new roads are built, usually after intense studies and needs assessments. The [three](#)

[new toll roads](#) weren't in the department's long-term plans.

So Galvano took the rare step of having the Legislature pass a bill setting the stage for the creation of the roads, although no one possessed studies showing the roads were needed or feasible.

He said the projects would relieve congestion, provide crucial new hurricane evacuation routes and boost the economies in some of the most economically depressed – yet environmentally sensitive – parts of the state.

Technically, the roads are not a done deal. They still must go through environmental and financial reviews, and [three task forces](#), one for each potential road, will spend the next year drafting recommendations on what the roads should look like.

The comments to the transportation department, released late last month, are the latest sign the public isn't on board. More than 200 people wrote to the state in August that they disliked the roads, compared to just 24 people writing in support.

“It's not surprising,” said Tim Martin, conservation chair for Sierra Club Florida. “The public was not asking for these roads before they were announced. This is something that Sen. Galvano and his allies decided to shove down the throats of Florida taxpayers.”

Environmentalists fear the roads would lead to sprawl and threaten the state's springs and endangered wildlife.

“Our number one priority statewide is to repeal the toll roads,” Martin said.

Many of the people opposed to the roads live in the areas Galvano and the Chamber of Commerce say will benefit economically.

“Many of us in the proposed affected areas moved to less developed areas intentionally, wanting to be left alone,” Phil Castelucci wrote to the Department of Transportation. “Adding zeros to a billionaire’s bank balance is a pretty bad reason to destroy the last parts of Old Florida.”

By contrast, the comments by people in support of the roadways stand out. Of the two dozen, two people wrote in anonymously, but four people clearly identified themselves.

Those people included the national director of American Council of Engineering Companies in Florida and Craig Fugate, the former administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Fugate wrote that the roads would could be “lifesaving evacuation routes,” even though state officials encourage sheltering in place for people who don’t live in a mandatory evacuation zone. He said Thursday that his support of the roads was for practical reasons.

“The argument that if you build new roads, more people will evacuate that don’t need to, I’m like, ‘They’re already leaving,’ ” Fugate said. “And two, we’re going to promote development. I’m like, ‘Really? Have we stopped development anywhere in this state?’ ”

Some road builders advocated for the roads for personal reasons, though.

“My commute to work (Tampa to Naples) is taking too long and is starting to make me rethink living in Florida,” wrote Felipe Jaramillo, an engineer at Ajax Paving Industries, from his personal email.

Ajax’s president, Vince Hafeli, told the Times/Herald that Jaramillo wrote in from his personal email address because

employees were prohibited from using their work emails for “political-type reasons.”

No one at the company was told to write in, he said.

“Our employees have not been asked to submit comments on behalf of (the projects),” Hafeli said.

About half of the favorable comments came from employees of one of the transportation agency’s biggest contractors: HNTB, which has won nearly \$1 billion in engineering and construction work since 2002 and is likely to win millions more if the roads are built. (Some of HNTB’s work included overseeing the hiring of [Conduent State & Local Solutions](#) to overhaul the state’s SunPass system six years ago, a job Conduent botched.)