

April 13, 2021

Chairman DeFazio and Ranking Member Graves,

As the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure does the vital work of reauthorizing surface transportation projects, I urge you prioritize the following endeavors.

### **Beach Nourishment Easements**

I am seeking a modification to the Army Corps' easement requirement for Shore Protection Projects. Specifically, I am seeking an exemption to the easement requirement for areas where sand will not be placed for a planned project, or has not been placed since 1996, the year the Corps released guidance on WDRA 1986.

My district is home to the Pinellas County Shore Protection Project that encompasses nearly 13 miles of beaches over three segments and has been a model partnership between the federal, state, and local governments. This public safety project is vital to Florida's economy, environment, and way of life. Pinellas beaches support a thriving tourism industry; promote recreational opportunities; and protect lives, endangered local wildlife, and infrastructure from devastating storm surge.

Despite completing multiple nourishment cycles over several decades, the Army Corps informed Pinellas County that local officials must obtain perpetual easements along the length of the project from 100 percent of property owners in order to be eligible for the next scheduled nourishment in 2024. Together with the Corps' Jacksonville District, the County and local municipalities have been working hard for over two years to obtain these easements.

Unfortunately, due to understandable skepticism from some property owners, the County remains short of meeting this requirement. Notably, a majority of the remaining required easements are located well into the sand dunes where sand won't be placed for the planned project (see below image).



Also of note, Florida is unique among states as the State Legislature in law has designated an Erosion Control Line (ECL) that clearly delineates the public and private segments of our beaches. While I understand the requirement to obtain easements from property owners where sand will be placed on the private side of the state-mandated line, where I disagree with the Army Corps is the need to obtain easements for those segments of the project where sand will only be placed on the public side of the ECL, as is the case here, because public access in these areas is already guaranteed by state law.

Allowing the Pinellas Shore Protection Project to lapse would have far-reaching and significant economic consequences. Pinellas beaches contribute not only to Tampa Bay's regional economy, not only to the state's economy, but to the entire country's economy. In fact, Pinellas beaches are annually ranked as some of the best in the country. Earlier this year, TripAdvisor named St. Pete Beach as the nation's top beach and included Clearwater Beach, Madeira Beach, and Treasure Island on its Top 20 list. Furthermore, in 2020, despite the pandemic, Pinellas County drew 12.5 million visitors, creating an economic impact of \$5.8 billion and supporting over 65,000 jobs within the County. It is clear that Pinellas beaches and the recreational opportunities they provide draw visitors from well beyond Florida, and even beyond the United States.

Even more alarming, the degradation of Pinellas' beaches could result in loss of life and significant property damage from storms and other flooding events. Nourished beaches provide critical protection from the impacts of storm surge. Without a wide, sandy beach to serve as a buffer, lives would be lost, property and infrastructure would be destroyed, and post-disaster costs for the federal government would skyrocket. Not only is this an incredibly dangerous situation for the people who live and work along Pinellas' coast, but this directly contradicts the very purpose of the Army Corps' Shore Protection Program.

It is unacceptable that the Pinellas County Shore Protection Project be placed at risk due to a sudden change in Corps policy, especially after completing multiple successful nourishment cycles prior to instatement of the easement requirement. For this reason, I urge the Committee to examine the Corps' arduous and inconsistent easement policy and provide flexibility to non-federal sponsors as outlined above.

### **Everglades**

I also urge the Committee to include Everglades restoration in an upcoming infrastructure package, allowing for the speedy completion of projects that are critical to a restored and healthy Everglades ecosystem.

The Everglades is central to Florida's environment and economy. It is the source of drinking water for eight million Floridians and serves as both a short- and long-term job creator. Based on Army Corps calculations, between 65,000 and 70,000 jobs would be created over four years if the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration program receives full funding for authorized construction projects that are part of the integrated delivery schedule. In addition, this unique ecosystem attracts millions of visitors every year from around the world. In 2019, the Greater

Everglades National Parks attracted almost 3 million visitors and contributed \$238 million to the economy.

The Everglades also provides important climate benefits to the surrounding communities, including protecting Florida's aquifers from saltwater intrusion and serving as a natural buffer to storm surge. The Everglades is also a biodiversity hotspot, providing habitat for over 180 endangered or threatened species.

Given the emphasis this Committee is placing on sustainable, climate-resilient infrastructure, and the importance of this national treasure to our environment and economy, I firmly believe that the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration program deserves to be included as infrastructure in an upcoming package.

### **Multi-Modal Mobility**

Car-sharing is a new, green, affordable form of modern mobility that allows people to connect multiple forms of efficient transportation and rent cars as they need them. When cars are shared, there don't need to be as many on the road, which means fewer accidents, reduced traffic, lowered emissions, and less space needed for parking. Supporting car-sharing efforts can improve mobility, relieve congestion, help our environment, and make public transit easier to use.

I encourage the Committee to support the establishment of multi-modal mobility hubs, particularly in underserved areas, and consider incentives for the purchase and use of shared vehicles, and the manufacturing or incorporation of connected car sharing technologies.

### **Coast Guard Joint Chiefs of Staff**

Recently, I introduced the bipartisan Commandant of the Coast Guard to Joint Chiefs of Staff Act, H.R. 2136, because it's time the Coast Guard has a seat at the Joint Chiefs table. This an opportunity to promote to Coast Guard Commandant to full voting membership on the Joint Chiefs, the only military service chief currently excluded. The Coast Guard is providing significant operational and strategic capabilities and perspective to keep our domestic and international waterways safe and secure but needs this legislation to provide parity and legitimacy amongst the other Armed Forces. As the committee of jurisdiction, you are well-aware that Coast Guard leadership has growing relevance across not just our maritime transportation system and economy but also in support of our National Defense Strategy and integrated Tri-Service Maritime Strategy, especially against growing strategic competition with China. I encourage the committee to include my bill, H.R.2136 in the upcoming surface transportation reauthorization package.

I thank the Committee for their consideration and their important work on rebuilding our nation's infrastructure during these unprecedented times.

Charlie Crist  
UNITED STATES CONGRESSMAN