

NEWS SERVICE FLORIDA

FIRST AMENDMENT GROUP OPPOSES WEBINARS ON TOLL ROADS

May 29, 2020

By Jim Turner

TALLAHASSEE --- Open government advocates want the brakes applied to upcoming webinars about controversial toll-road projects, contending that more-inclusive in-person meetings should be held as the state reopens amid the coronavirus pandemic.

While a state Department of Transportation spokeswoman said the webinar plans will continue, the First Amendment Foundation also questioned the legality of six webinars already held by task forces working on the projects, which would stretch from Collier County to the Georgia border.

“The webinars are a poor substitute for the kind of government that is required by Florida’s Sunshine Law, which does apply to the M-CORES task force meetings,” First Amendment Foundation President Pamela Marsh wrote Thursday to Transportation Secretary Kevin Thibault, using an acronym for the projects that the state has dubbed the “Multi-use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance.”

Marsh wrote that the webinars should be “postponed (and preferably canceled)” until everyone interested in attending can be accommodated. Marsh added that state administrative rules require meetings to be halted if technical problems develop with the communications network, which she said occurred during each meeting.

“All portions of the Sunshine Law continue to apply even during this horrible pandemic,” Marsh stated. “No part of the law has been suspended or modified as applied to state agencies. As a result, I respectfully request that FDOT exercise patience, cancel any and all M-CORES task force meetings, and reschedule the meetings only when members of the task force and Florida citizens can fully participate in-person and by all feasible means.”

Marsh said in an email to The News Service of Florida on Friday that the intent isn’t to “make any threats at this time” as she hopes “FDOT will make a change for greater public participation.”

(Disclosure: The News Service is a member of the First Amendment Foundation.)

Lawmakers last year approved a measure that set the stage for the projects, which involve extending Florida’s Turnpike from Wildwood to connect with the Suncoast Parkway; extending the Suncoast Parkway north to the Georgia border; and building a toll road between Polk and Collier counties.

Webinars are planned: Wednesday for the turnpike extension; June 9 for the northern extension of the Suncoast Parkway; and June 11 for the project between Polk and Collier counties.