

Department of Transportation spokeswoman Beth Frady said Thursday the webinars are not a replacement for task-force meetings but “additional opportunities” for task force members to gather input during the pandemic.

“These virtual meetings have made it so anyone from South Florida to North Florida can attend and be heard, and we would expect the First Amendment Foundation to celebrate this additional transparency while we work to keep our fellow citizens safe,” Frady said in an email.

Frady added that the department plans to hold in-person meetings “as soon as it is safe to do so.” But she also referenced state laws, which allow agencies to conduct public meetings by video.

“To date, these webinars have included participation from more than 1,700 attendees, with more than 120 people providing public comment to the task forces during the designated comment period,” Frady wrote. “This is a higher level of participation than we have received during the in-person task force meetings, demonstrating how technology can facilitate participation in a meeting by members of the public who are not able to attend in person.”

The proposed roads, signed into law by Gov. Ron DeSantis in 2019, are a priority of Senate President Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, and have been backed by groups including the Florida Chamber of Commerce, Associated Industries of Florida, the Florida Ports Council and the Florida Trucking Association. Supporters say, in part, that the projects will help prepare for future growth and aid in disaster evacuations.

Environmentalists have vowed to wage “war” against the roads, which they maintain will devastate large rural and natural tracts of land.

Annual funding for the work is expected to reach about \$140 million.

Among bills now before DeSantis are a proposal (HB 969) to set aside up to \$5 million a year for broadband services to accompany the road corridors and a proposal (SB 7018) to direct the Department of Transportation to plan and build staging areas for emergency response along the turnpike system, with a priority in “counties with a population of 200,000 or less in which a multi-use corridor of regional significance is located.” Those bills were passed during this year’s legislative session.

An initial timeline called for the task forces to provide final reports by October, with construction expected to begin before the end of 2022. However, because of COVID-19, the deadline for the task-force reports has been pushed back to Nov. 15.