

Community associations support Ridge Road extension

By B.C. Manion

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The Pasco Alliance of Community Associations has weighed in on the proposed Ridge Road extension, throwing the weight of the thousands of people it represents behind the project.

Members of the organization overwhelmingly supported the submission of a letter signaling their support of the project to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The alliance represents more than 70 homeowner and community associations across Pasco County.

Members of the group support the extension of a limited access Ridge Road, to connect where it now ends in New Port Richey and extend it over to US 41 in Land O' Lakes.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has denied the permit for the extension, citing environmental issues.

But the agency is accepting additional public comment on the project through Dec. 28.

That's why Jim Flateau, president of the

Pasco Alliance of Community Associations (PACA), wanted to bring the issue to members of the organization at its December monthly meeting in Land O' Lakes.

Flateau said environmentalists oppose the project because a portion of the align-

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— Donna Cardellino

ment goes through about 60 acres that had previously been set aside to mitigate wetlands that were affected by the Suncoast Parkway project.

"Our county's population increased by 119,932 residents, or 35 percent, between the 2000 and 2010 census, severely increasing the pressure on our traffic patterns, including those in west and central Pasco,"

Flateau states in a Dec. 9 letter addressed to Tracy Hurst, a project manager with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Flateau notes that the proposed extension would affect 59 acres within the 6,000-acre Serenova Preserve, an area set aside to offset wetland acres that were taken for the construction of the Suncoast Parkway.

Although the county wants to take those acres, it is setting aside about 1,100 acres to make up for that, Flateau said.

"As long as the county is setting aside acreage, is looking at the changes that it's making, being honest about always setting aside far more than the taking, I think that protects the environment and that it's ecologically responsible."

The improvement is needed, Flateau told the group.

In addition to improving traffic flow, the road would improve public safety, he said.

"We live in a county that only has two roads that transverse the width of the county, [SR] 52 and [SR] 54. We also know that

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we live in an area that could be hit by a hurricane or a tropical storm.

"Where do the people from Route [US] 19 and that area get out of the coast and move east? This extension would provide a third area," he said.

Donna Cardellino, a West Pasco resident who supports the road extension, said she wrote her first letter supporting the project back in 2007 when she saw a neighbor's home catch on fire and she watched the flames grow larger and larger.

"It seemed like, of course, forever before the fire trucks got all of the way back to the subdivision," she said.

She is frustrated by the lack of progress and the corps' resistance.

"They're not being smart about this," Cardellino said. "Human safety should be at the top of the list."

Pasco County Commissioner Pat Mulieri said she also supports the road's extension.

She said it is a much-needed evacuation route and that it would spur the economy and create jobs.

State Sen. Mike Fasano is also a staunch advocate for the project. "I fully support the extension of Ridge Road. I have since Day 1.

"The important reason is for evacuation," Fasano said. But the road also would allow people easier access to the Suncoast Parkway.

Fasano said the road should have been constructed years ago.

At the very least, the corps should make a determination, so the county will know where it stands and can proceed to appeal the decision, if they choose to do so, Fasano said.

Tracy Hurst, project manager for the corps of engineers, could not be reached for comment.

Public comment on the project can be submitted to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 10117 Princess Palm Ave., Suite 120, Tampa, 33610.