



## Guest column: Coconut Road interchange vital to FGCU, public

William C. Merwin - President, Florida Gulf Coast University

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As Southwest Florida's public comprehensive university, Florida Gulf Coast University plays a major role in regional economic and workforce development. Citizens now have the opportunity to obtain degrees through FGCU's 42 undergraduate and 20 graduate programs of study, and we want to ensure continued access to not only these academic opportunities but also literally to the campus itself. Improvements to our area's transportation system are necessary to ensure this access.

Last year FGCU hosted a town hall meeting attended by U.S. Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, who chairs the House of Representatives' committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. During this meeting there was a great deal of interest in a proposal that would create an FGCU transportation management center in conjunction with a new Interstate 75 interchange at Coconut Road near the university's campus in Estero. The transportation management center would utilize FGCU scientists and students in a prototype initiative that would implement and evaluate new transportation management, surveillance and simulation technologies for use in roadway construction and emergency operations.

Young was instrumental in securing \$10 million in federal funds to study the need for an interchange at Coconut Road. However, despite support from the city of Bonita Springs and the Technical Advisory Committee to the Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), the MPO declined to include the study in its 2030 Long Range Transportation Plan. I am respectfully urging the MPO to reconsider this decision for the following reasons:

- **Access to campus:** FGCU currently has 7,200 students, and our enrollments have grown in double digits each year since opening in 1997. Of the 7,200 students, only 1,900 live in on-campus student housing, and the rest drive to and from FGCU. We are in the process of updating our Campus Master Plan, and our enrollment projections are a staggering 20,000 to 22,000 students on our Estero main campus within the next 10 to 15 years. Clearly, transportation access will be critical to our ability to meet the educational needs of these students. A connection between an extended County Road 951 and the proposed Coconut Road interchange would significantly improve access to the campus.
- **Hurricane evacuation:** Through support of the Lee County Commission, FGCU's Alico Arena was constructed as a hurricane shelter to provide additional shelter capacity for area residents. The proposed Coconut Road interchange would provide accelerated evacuation times for citizens seeking refuge on our campus during emergencies.
- **Benefits of transportation management center:** FGCU has a responsibility to Southwest Florida and the state to produce research benefits through the work of our faculty and students. We have successfully recruited nationally recognized professors with a wide range of expertise that is recognized each year in the form of federal and state grants to support their scholarly endeavors. As our region and state struggle with the challenges of explosive growth, I can think of no area in greater need of creative, science-based innovations than transportation. The FGCU transportation management center that would be built at the Coconut Road interchange offers unique opportunities for FGCU to develop research-

based transportation solutions such as automated traveler information systems, traffic simulation and modeling, and emergency and evacuation management that will provide significant benefits to our region and beyond.

In closing, we at FGCU are committed to fulfilling our regional mission and role through instruction, research and service. Our ability to meet these responsibilities would be enhanced greatly through further study of the benefits of a Coconut Road interchange and establishment of the transportation management center. I am hopeful that the Lee County MPO will include the study in its 2030 Plan, and take advantage of the designated federal funds available to us for this important purpose.

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