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## Pine Ridge matters: Support for interchange at CR 486 inconsistent

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A recent letter from Mike Perry, President of the Pine Ridge POA, to Kevin Thibault, Secretary of the Florida Department of Transportation explains why the originally unintended but currently proposed County Road 486 interchange should be eliminated before ground is broken.

There are plenty of backup reports and correspondence to support the information in this latest correspondence. The letter, attachments and back up information can be viewed online at: [pineridgeassn.com](http://pineridgeassn.com).



Pete Cuccaro

We recognize the Chronicle has already taken a position on the continuation of the Suncoast through Citrus County based on input from Rep. Ralph Massullo. We understand at least partially why.

In conversations with Ralph late last year, he advised the continuation of the three mile stretch from State Road 44 to C.R. 486 was to ensure the limited funds earmarked for State Road 589 were not reallocated to another state project. According to our State Representative, the interchange was simply an outgrowth of this intent.

On behalf of the Pine Ridge Property Owners Association (PRPOA), I was relaying to Mr. Massullo emerging issues and why there was opposition. The POA had been lulled into believing resident concerns would be eliminated by moving the interchange to Knoll Road (1,500 feet east from the Pine Ridge Boulevard entrance). Nothing could be further from the truth — but this claim and new FDOT renderings did calm protesting residents at a heavily attended special PRPOA meeting. The follow up FDOT action could now be pointed to as tacit approval in favor of the interchange — albeit moved. It should never have been so interpreted. The ruination of Pine Ridge is in the balance.

During the last quarter of 2020, the PRPOA was carefully moving forward with strategic opposition to the interchange. We came to learn the POA and the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) shared the same goal: to have the Suncoast II constructed swiftly and with as little impact as possible through Citrus. This translated into a bridge over C.R. 486 and no interchange.



Director of Citrus County Growth Management Mike Sherman and Transportation Project Manager of Citrus County Walt Eastmond met with the Roads Committee for the Pine Ridge Property Owners Association on June 16. Pictured from left, are: Pete Cuccaro, Mike Perry, Mike Sherman, Jannice Herndon, Walt Eastmond, Ken Dumovich, Bill Hunter, Terry Cooper, Christine Carrington and Jeff Kowal.

Special to the Chronicle

Commissioners shared this position to the state via M-CORES. The PRPOA pivoted to support the BOCC in M-CORES meetings. To move S.R. 589 over C.R. 486 directly to Red Level became a joint quest.

Massullo subsequently moved the BOCC off this position — back to his position of having the interchange. His somewhat tenuous justification was Citrus “didn’t want to look silly” in Tallahassee. Of course there is more to it.

If you remember ninth grade civics, you understand the BOCC couldn’t be at odds with one of their voices in the Capitol. They needed his vote and voice to fund other local projects. Understandable.

This was about the same time Representative Massullo met with the Chronicle Editorial Board to bolster his agenda at the expense of Pine Ridge. Being able to reference a local media opinion provided some leverage shaping public sentiment. But for what you ask? That’s a good

question and maybe a topic for a future guest article.

As we continued on with careful opposition it was Secretary Thibault telling us in our phone call we needed to get the County Commission on board or it could go nowhere. It was a standard statement. The BOCC was with us (and we were with them). And then they weren't.

Let's examine the word "silly" in this case. If silly means our local leaders are adaptive to changing information which supports the 10,000 residents of Pine Ridge — then give us those newly informed silly leaders. It means they are listening and evolving in their representation "of the people." This is laudable, not laughable.

There's a difference between evolution and vacillation. And as I advised Massullo, after experiencing budget engineering for most of my professional life, the money would be there before ground was broken. I wasn't telling him something he didn't already know. And here we are. SB 100 provides the standing our leaders need on behalf of a thriving 50-year community. We should all be glad there is finally a way forward — although it never should have been made this difficult.

As it turns out, Massullo's reasoning became outdated with Gov. DeSantis's signature on SB 100 which reallocates funds to the Suncoast — not the other way around. Our State Rep and Commissioners now have a clearer path forward for the people, the character and the quality of life in Pine Ridge. Their action on behalf of 10,000 people contributing \$700,000,000.00 (yes, that's million) to the Citrus County tax base matters.

Citrus Hills, Black Diamond and Pine Ridge are all unincorporated jewels. They are unique in their contributions to the Citrus economic engine and need to be guarded. Citizens in municipalities look to councils. Citizens in unincorporated areas look to POAs and HOAs who in turn look to their commissions. One location shouldn't be sent into a downward spiral in favor of another.

Managing growth and progress for the benefit of long residing, tax paying citizens should be the priority. Taking care of the present with an eye for the future is just good business. We need our government representatives, no matter the level, to be open and fair minded for the current greater good. They shouldn't be in the business of picking winners and losers. Informed decisions carry the day.

Consider this: A C.R. 486 interchange, in addition to one operating at S.R. 44, would seriously increase the traffic headed toward Crystal River.

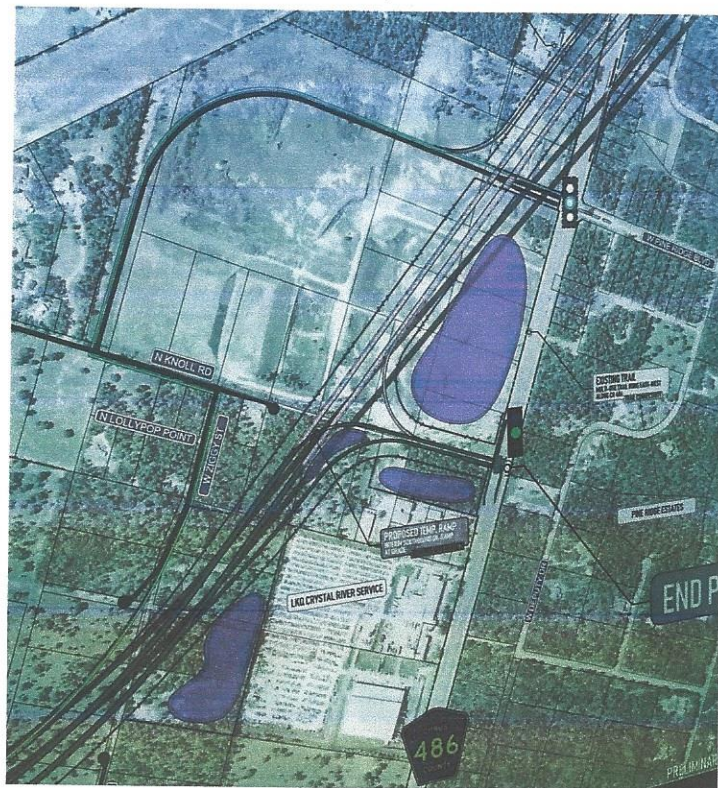
A close exam of any map illustrates westbound traffic from both the S.R. 44 and a C.R. 486 interchange will converge at the intersection of West Norvell Bryant Highway (C.R. 486), Gulf-to-Lake Highway (S.R. 44), and North Dunkenfeld Avenue. It will literally become a cluster.

The City of Crystal River will have some relief with the Turkey Oak Bypass — but Meadowcrest will become sandwiched between the traffic from both. Access to and from this housing will be stressful. Ingress and egress to both Meadowcrest and Crystal River will be impacted forevermore.

A continuation of the Suncoast to points east and north of Crystal River solves the Pine Ridge issue and minimizes the cluster. It's also a significant cost savings. No interchange means more money for points north.

We already know as the Suncoast continues to I-10 it will go around municipalities larger than Crystal River. So why then is the "Crystal River area" targeted for as many as four interchanges?

Intervals south of Citrus are 15, 20 and 30 miles apart. Why would interchanges within Citrus be so close together? If the plan is to eventually have Crystal River overwhelmed with traffic, then so be it.



FDOT parkway proposals put the project's County Road 486 exit east of Pine Ridge Boulevard entrance.

As many know, I have publicly supported the extension of the Suncoast. I think it's vital to Citrus commerce. As the Chair of the Citrus2030 Public Safety Committee, I opined as much in a recent letter/article. Future BOCC budget plans should adequately account for our public

safety professionals and their supporting casts as demands emanating from the expansion of the Suncoast within Citrus will require more service.

Overall, the Suncoast II plan is overdue for so many good reasons, not the least of which is there are more than 1,000 people a day moving to Florida. Career FDOT personnel are always looking to the future recognizing the need for improved transportation models to move people. It's their job and they're good at it. Senator Wilton Simpson and his staff have long recognized this and are well situated to support this transportation improvement. Kudos to all. It's the S.R. 589/C.R. 486 interchange (it being the demise of Pine Ridge) currently in need of elimination. Did I say it has been thriving for 50 years?

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So back to Pine Ridge. A close read of SB 100 illustrates how much latitude exists. This is consistent with providing the Florida Department of Transportation budget and engineering flexibility so as to work within local governments for the next 30 years. But should our current Citrus leaders not take collaborative action to eliminate the C.R. 486 interchange, Pine Ridge roads will funnel traffic from points north to the new entrance.

There are already problems with commuter and commercial traffic cutting through — but should the interchange be realized against the wishes “of the people” the exacerbation is hard to quantify in advance. We can estimate based on traffic already making its way on C.R. 491 and C.R. 486 it could be as much as four times more.

Most certainly the thriving character of the horse community as envisioned by the first major developer in Citrus County will be altered forever. Pine Ridge Estates — home to three generations of equestrians, golfing families and settlers from around the world could be ruined.

It is on this basis, and on behalf of the 10,000 informed residents and owners, we implore our state and county leaders to eliminate the interchange and return to the push for a Red Level terminus. The opposition has been well-founded because those who live there know — Pine Ridge matters.

*Pete Cuccaro chairs the Roads Committee for the Pine Ridge Property Owners Association. He is the former chairman of the Citrus2030 Public Safety Committee. Cuccaro spent 33 years in law enforcement (police chief retired) and established consulting company CIMG, which services to major*

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