

TRANSPORTATION ELEMENT

of the

PINELLAS COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN



Prepared By:

The Pinellas County Planning Department

as staff to the

LOCAL PLANNING AGENCY

for

**THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
OF PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA**

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Introduction

The contents of this Transportation Element are in accordance with the Florida Department of Community Affairs (DCA) State Rule 9J-5, F.A.C., and Chapter 163, F.S. This Transportation Element replaced the Traffic Circulation, Mass Transit and Ports and Aviation Elements that were adopted as part of the Comprehensive Plan in 1989.

The requirement of a consolidated Transportation Element came about as a result of a 1993 amendment to Chapter 163, F.S., which was prompted by the findings of the Governor-appointed Environmental Land Management Study (ELMS) Committee. The ELMS Committee concluded that transportation elements were needed in order to facilitate plans for multi-modal transportation systems where transit, bicycling, walking, air traffic and other alternative travel modes would be balanced against traditional planning for automobile traffic.

Preceding the ELMS amendments to Chapter 163, F.S., was the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) which was signed into Law by President Bush in 1991. This Act set the stage for the multi-modal theme of the ELMS amendments. In addition, ISTEA sought to initiate quality of life enhancements in local communities through transportation planning. Through ISTEA, an Enhancement Program was established, which dedicated 10 percent of Federal transportation funds to bicycle and pedestrian facilities, highway beautification efforts, and historic preservation projects. The Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funding program was included with the ISTEA legislation. Funding through CMAQ provided for transportation projects, services and programs that were designed to reduce air pollutants generated from vehicle emissions. These included projects such as bicycle trails, intersection improvements intended to reduce vehicle idling times, commuter assistance programs (e.g., ride-sharing, vanpooling) and the implementation of alternative fuels (e.g., compressed natural gas, electric) technology. The ISTEA legislation was replaced by the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, which was passed in 1998.

In 2005, the successor to TEA 21, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) was signed into law. Totalling \$244.1 billion, SAFETEA-LU represented the largest investment in surface transportation in history while continuing the investment in projects promoting alternative travel modes (e.g., bicycling, walking and transit) brought about by the two landmark acts that preceded it.

Pinellas County also began to shift the emphasis of its transportation improvement efforts toward multi-modal facilities (e.g., roads with bicycle lanes, bicycle/pedestrian trails) following the adoption of the Comprehensive Plan in 1989. The cornerstone of these efforts was the Pinellas Trail project which took root in 1990 behind an infusion of funding support provided through the Penny for Pinellas sales tax approved through voter referendum the previous year. More than 700 thousand people from all walks of life currently use the Trail on an annual basis for walking, bicycling and rollerblading. The enthusiasm generated by the Pinellas Trail has spread to other initiatives to increase opportunities for these activities. These include the incorporation of bicycle-friendly design standards in road improvement projects as adopted by the Board of County Commissioners in 1995 and the expansion of plans for bicycle and pedestrian networks throughout the County. A major milestone in these efforts was reached in 1999 with the opening of the Friendship Trail (a.k.a. the Old Gandy Bridge), which was slated

for demolition after the construction of the new Gandy Bridge facility in 1996. The Friendship Trail is the first recreational trail of its kind, spanning approximately three miles across Tampa Bay, connecting Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties while providing unique opportunities for bicyclists, walkers, runners and fishing enthusiasts. The Friendship Trail was utilized by over 530 thousand people in 2006.

That the demand for bicycle and pedestrian opportunities will continue to gain momentum in the future is reflected in the trend toward a younger population in Pinellas County. The median age in Pinellas County fell from 46 in 1980 to 43 in 2000. In the City of St. Petersburg, the trend has been more dramatic with a decrease in the median age from 54 in 1975 to 39 in 2000.

As with bicycling and walking, public demand is also growing for transit service. The Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA), the County's primary provider of public transportation, is experiencing significant growth in ridership, reaching a record high in 2006 with over 11 million riders. In recent years, this growth in ridership has been attributable to a combination of factors, including the introduction of new routes and more commuter services with reduced headways, which has increased PSTA's customer base.

The St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport represents another important element in Pinellas County's transportation system. The Airport continues to serve as an economic engine for Pinellas County, pumping more than 783 million into the local economy as reported in the 2004 update of the Airport Master Plan. However, passenger growth continues to be adversely affected by the tentative nature of the airline industry. The Airport served approximately 390 passengers in 2006, down from 596,510 in 2005 and 1.3 million in 2004. In contrast, cargo shipments continue to increase annually. In 2006, 24,079 tons of cargo was shipped to and from the Airport. This was an increase of 21.7 percent over 2000 (19,773 tons).

Although alternative travel modes such as bicycling, walking and transit use have received more attention in recent years, the main focus of the County's transportation improvement efforts has continued to be its road building program, as established in the Capital Improvement Program (CIP) and the Capital Improvements Element (CIE). With the passage of the Penny for Pinellas infrastructure sales tax in 1989, and its renewal in 1997, Pinellas County has embarked on an aggressive road building campaign that has had far-reaching effects on alleviating roadway congestion throughout the County. Improvements on the McMullen-Booth Road/49th Street Corridor (County Road 611), County Road 296, County Road 1, Belcher Road and Tampa Road are some examples of projects that have provided major enhancements to the County's transportation system.

Of the original Penny revenue, \$458 million was expended on transportation projects between 1991 and 2000. Road improvement projects accounted for \$358 million (78 percent) of that figure. Another \$14 million (3 percent) was allocated for trail and sidewalk improvements. With the Penny Extension approved by the voters in 1997, over \$350 million (46 percent) was allocated for transportation improvements from 2001 to 2010. Road improvements accounted for \$283.6 million (81 percent) of this amount with trail and sidewalk projects being allocated \$21 million (6 percent). In March 2007, a second Penny extension was approved by the voters. This latest extension covers the period from 2011 to 2020. It commits \$388.1 million to transportation improvement projects.

As Pinellas County continues to create more jobs and bolster its tourism industry, traffic demand continues to increase, particularly as it relates to motorists traveling to Pinellas from other counties. This is most noticeably illustrated on sections of some inter-county facilities such as East Lake Road and Gulf-To-Bay Boulevard where major capacity projects were implemented following the establishment of the Penny for Pinellas sales tax. Although the improvements served to alleviate the deficient level of service conditions, within a few years after the roads were expanded, traffic demand rose to a point where it exceeded the road's capacity. Another factor increasing traffic on inter-county corridors in Pinellas County is a housing market that has become unaffordable for most working people. Pinellas workers are often forced to make the decision to move to a neighboring county and endure longer commute times in order to find affordable housing.

In an urbanized densely populated county such as Pinellas, expanding the road network to meet its travel demand also faces significant constraints in the form of escalating right-of-way and material costs (concrete, steel), concerns over neighborhood intrusion and environmental impacts. Consequently, it is important that the County's transportation planning efforts shift focus to strategies that do not involve road building. Improving the operational efficiency of the major road network through small scale physical improvements (e.g., intersection and median modifications) and intelligent transportation system (ITS) solutions and implementing strategies to reduce the demand for single-occupant vehicle travel (e.g., ride sharing, transit use, bicycling and walking) are necessary to not only improve the County's transportation system, but also to improve its quality of life.

The idea of enhancing quality of life experiences for residents and visitors is central to the livable communities concept, which has become the theme behind a significant shift in transportation and land use planning on a national and statewide level as well as in Pinellas County. Planning for "livable communities" focuses on land development, building and street design elements that create environments where people want to work and live. From a transportation perspective, these environments offer mobility choices such as transit, bicycling and walking as attractive alternatives to driving.

Examples of livable streets are ones where people feel safe riding their bicycles or walking alongside the street or crossing it. Bicycle lanes, sidewalks, pedestrian controlled crosswalks and traffic calming techniques are all examples of the type of features found within livable communities. Development projects incorporating the livable communities concept would, for example, have buildings oriented toward the front of the property with parking and secondary entrances in the rear or side with landscaped walkways through parking areas, sidewalks connecting building entrances with the surrounding sidewalk network and proximate transit stops, bicycle parking areas and attractive building facades. With the 2007 Evaluation and Appraisal Report amendments to the Transportation and Future Land Use Elements (the latter renamed the "Quality Communities" Element), a policy framework for the implementation of livable community land development codes with supporting data and analysis is being introduced to the Comprehensive Plan. These policies will further the objectives of the Planning To Stay Element which is aimed at creating and sustaining communities intended to encourage people to work and live in Pinellas County.