Roadways and bridges, public transit, parks, sewers, emergency services and managing the 14 billion gallons of water that annually drenches Collier County—all of these fall under the umbrella of infrastructure. Planning, paying for and maintaining infrastructure is undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges local government faces, an especially critical task in a growing community.

Collier County’s population consistently increases 2 percent each year—expanding by 60,000 in the past 10 years. In this car-centric community, local drivers are feeling the squeeze on the roads, which are at capacity and becoming increasingly more dangerous. Residents west of Collier Boulevard and in the northern parts of the county are most dissatisfied with traffic’s impact on their daily lives, according to the Collier County Community Needs and Assets Assessment, funded by the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation.

The Collier County Community Needs and Assets Assessment analyzes the community’s strengths and weaknesses, with the goal of sharing findings that allow community leaders and residents to develop priorities and strategies to address identified needs. The assessment found that, in general, Collier residents “were generally satisfied with the cleanliness of their community and with the public space management.” Eighty-two percent believe that their communities, and streets and roads, are well-maintained and 83 percent feel that they have access to clean outdoor facilities. Fewer—74 percent—reported being satisfied with public building maintenance.

In addition to frustration over increasingly congested roads, many residents want officials to focus on sustainable growth management—to protect the county’s natural resources and water quality as the county grows—as well as planning for climate change and sea-level rise. Collier and Naples officials are in lock-step with residents on these issues, engineering and designing for upgrades and new projects to address water quality and flooding. For instance, low-lying roads prone to flooding during high tides and storms are being elevated during planned utilities upgrades.

Infrastructure “is all interconnected, and a lot of it is focused on transportation,” said Collier County Deputy Manager Nick Casalanguida. “We’re very cognizant about building for sustainability. We don’t want to sacrifice the environment at the expense of infrastructure. We need to be good stewards. Road restorations are important for getting water movement through the system to the right places and improving water quality.”

Of course, every major project takes time and money. The Vanderbilt Beach Road extension has been a twinkle in the eye of planners for 15 years. Finally, it is being designed and permitted, and funding has come to fruition thanks to the one-cent sales surtax approved by voters in November.

The one-cent tax—collected over a seven-year period—will fund $420 million in capital improvements, new projects and the replacement or rehabilitation of existing ones with a lifespan of more than five years. The monies cannot be spent on operating and maintenance of existing roads and facilities. In general, government runs at least two to three years behind catching up to growth in the private sector, Casalanguida said, because there’s a lag between establishing new property values in the tax rolls and the collecting of ad valorem taxes.

With growth “comes these questions: who pays and when they pay and how they pay,” said Casalanguida.

Do you want to learn more about how infrastructure and transportation in our community are being addressed by local leaders? The public is invited to attend a free community forum hosted by the Schulze Family Foundation to discuss the topic on Tuesday, April 16, 2 p.m., at the Headquarters Library on Orange Blossom Drive in Naples.

By the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation

The recent sales tax increase will speed up much-needed road improvements, but won’t address stormwater issues that lead to flooding and water pollution.
The Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation has been hosting public forums to discuss significant topics raised in the Community Needs and Assets Assessment. Join us to share your ideas and hear from community leaders about how infrastructure and traffic are being addressed for current and future residents.

**Where:**
Collier County Headquarters Library
2385 Orange Blossom Dr.
Naples, FL 34109

**When:**
Tuesday, April 16, 2019
2:00 p.m.

For more information:
239-263-9400

**In partnership with the Collier County Public Library**

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**Community Forum:** Join the Conversation

**Upcoming Community Forums**

**Social Services**
April 23, 2019

**ABOUT THE RICHARD M. SCHULZE FAMILY FOUNDATION**

The Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation was created in 2004 by Best Buy founder, Dick Schulze, to give back to the communities where Dick and his family grew up—in Minnesota, where he built Best Buy to become the world’s largest consumer electronics retailer, and in Florida, where he now maintains a permanent residence. The Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation creates grant partnerships with organizations in the Two Cities seven-county metropolitan area in Minnesota and in Lee and Collier counties that generate transformational results in human and social services, education, and health and medicine.

Find out more about the Foundation and the Collier County Community Needs and Assets Assessment:
SchulzeFamilyFoundation.org

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**Beep, beep**

Growing traffic congestion is no illusion. Collier County Hearing Examiner Mark Strain gave 60 public presentations last year outlining big-picture growth to 250,000 people, and “unilaterally, everyone was complaining about roads.”

Strain is also the chairman of the Collier County Planning Commission, which works hand-in-glove with the Metropolitan Planning Organization to plan for projected development and infrastructure needs decades down the road. “Between those two offices, I see everything that comes through the county,” Strain explained.

During the past five years, traffic accidents increased by about 50 percent, resulting in more injuries and fatalities—and both crashes and fatalities have been increasing at higher rates in Collier County and Southwest Florida than throughout the state, according to the Community Assessment.

The sheer amount of time it takes to study, design, fund and permit a new road—witness Vanderbilt Beach Road—is one reason roads aren’t meeting capacity to keep up with growth. Anecdotally, residents and business owners have noticed that the “high season” that used to be clearly demarcated from November through Easter seems to have become extended. The calendar has blurred: Seasonal residents and visitors are coming earlier and staying longer. Commuters from Lee County and the eastern region of the county are also feeding regular traffic patterns.

Another hitch: Roads are planned for typical use, Strain said, not short spurts of heavy use because the space commitment and dollars don’t add up. “You can’t build for the peak. For example, you don’t build a church parking lot for Easter Sunday,” he explained.

Strain hears all proposals coming before the county, and he’s come to the conclusion that perhaps one of the biggest flaws in creating traffic jams is the fact that traffic projections are based on a standardized Institute for Transportation Engineers (ITE) manual that experts for developers rely upon when seeking project approval. Based on his knowledge of local demographics,
Ridership on Collier Area Transit fixed-route buses declined by 57,543 between 2017 and 2018. Officials are investigating ways to make public transit more efficient and appealing for residents and visitors. Courtesy: Collier County

Almost 4,000 new apartment units are expected to come online within the next year or two, which will increase housing opportunities and price points in the community. Yet, as residents clamor for affordable housing options, such as apartments, other fret about increased traffic.

Collier County is the largest county of Florida’s 67 counties by geographic size at 2,307 square miles, but an estimated 70 to 75 percent of Collier is set aside for preservation by the federal and state government—more than 1.2 million acres out of 5.5 million. Collier County is in fact, considered the 10th most “constrained” county out of 31 in the state, based on Census block calculations, Strain explained. This means that development has two ways to go: rededemtion and infill in the already-populated areas or out east. “Our population is going to have to be more concentrated” in developable areas, Strain said, and infrastructure will eventually connect the population centers.

Incorporate enhanced walking, bicycling, transit and safe streets. Infrastructure is among the agency’s top four priorities, but due to limited funding, specific projects and programs need to be prioritized. One thing seems clear: walkability and bike-ability are crucial.

In 2017, the Collier County Community Needs and Assets Assessment covered 10 domains, from access to cultural amenities to safety to education to infrastructure. In every category, residents and stakeholders of Immokalee and Golden Gate County expressed a different perspective of their community’s strengths and weaknesses compared to what was observed by the surveyors.

According to the 2011 Immokalee Walkable Community Study by the Collier Metropolitan Planning Organization, approximately 60 percent of public roadways had no sidewalks at all. It found that 25 percent of the workers in Collier County get to work via either modes of transit or driving in a car alone. These include carpools, public transit, walking, and biking. Most of these modes, however, require that the user become a pedestrian at some point during their trip.

Collier County is poised at a population of about 380,000 and is projected to grow to 555,000 by 2040, according to county forecasts. Looking south and east, it seems like there’s plenty of room to spread out, right? Not really.

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Looking East

Collier County looks to rural areas to the east, with distinctively agricultural east, with 30-square-mile towns and change in agricultural east, with distinctly different demographics:

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By Michael Dalby, President and CEO of the Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce

Collier County’s population has experienced steady growth over the last ten years, adding nearly 20,000 permanent residents in the past decade. While that growth has put a strain on our transportation network, it has started to pay a strain on our transportation networks.

Traffic congestion is a concern, as is access to public reliable transportation. These issues don’t just affect the quality of life in our community, they also have a wide- sweeping impact on our economy and sense of place.

The county is already taking steps to tackle these issues. Last year, Collier voters approved a seven- cent local option sales surtax to address a variety of infrastructure needs. Of the $490 million, $340 million is estimated to last through the end of 2025 or $391 million—will be used for transportation projects. These funds are to be used for long- extended delay of Vanderbilt Beach Road, which will alleviate traffic congestion on Immokalee Road. The sales tax revenue will also be used to widen Airport-Pulling Road from Vanderbilt Beach Road to Immokalee Road and improve the intersection at Pine Ridge Road and Livingston Road.

These are necessary improvements, and we will go a long way toward alleviating congestion, increasing mobility and improving our transportation networks. But improvements to pavement aren’t the only answer.

The Collier County Community Needs and Assets Assessment found nearly one-third of residents weren’t satisfied with the existing transportation options. This is a vital resource for many of our community’s low-income, senior and disabled residents. The service picks up participants with a reservation scheduled at least 24 hours in advance. To increase this service, Edwards-Arnold said, her department is exploring partnerships with companies such as Lyft and Uber to provide more rides, even same-day requests.

A bright spot for multi-modal planning was the January adoption of a Complete Streets resolution that will encourage incorporation of multi-modal safety features and amenities into future county road projects. The Naples Pathways Coalition worked with the Board of Commissioners to strengthen the policy. The policy advocated nationalized by Smart Growth America “looks at how we can get our streets to serve people, whether they are visitors or a long-term residents.”

The sales tax revenue will also be used to widen Airport-Pulling Road from Vanderbilt Beach Road to Immokalee Road and improve the intersection at Pine Ridge Road and Livingston Road.

“The amount of pressure being put on the roads, it’s definitely something the county has to look at—how to move people on bikes in this community safely,” Connolly-Keeper said, “and we’re just beginning to have that discussion more.” She also suggested that the county can consider funding for facilities, such as bus shelters, through advertising partnerships with local businesses.

Though many of these projects fall under the purview of government, Eileen Connolly-Keeper, President/CEO of the Community Foundation of Collier County, noted that the private and nonprofit sectors can get involved. For instance, the Blair River Greenway, one of the most popular spots in the county, with a loop around the exterior perimeter of the Naples Municipal Airport.

Reducing congestion is a key to future economy and sense of place. According to Edwards-Arnold, director of public transit, said the county’s “vital to Collier’s economy and sense of place.”

By 2030, up from an estimated 380,000 this year. As we look to the future, there will need to ensure that we have a transportation network that will accommodate that growth.

Our mission at the Naples Chamber of Commerce is to ensure that Collier County the best place in America to live, work and visit. In order to achieve that, we think it’s imperative that public, private and nonprofit leaders join together to advocate for innovative solutions to transportation and mobility concerns.

Complete Streets & Alt Modes of Transportation

No matter how much money is available to build roads, it’s not the only solution for easing commutes and congestion. According to the Collier County MPO, “Experience has shown that we cannot eliminate congestion on our transportation network by just adding lanes on our highways. Other measures can be taken to effectively reduce congestion, such as improving traffic signal timing, improving intersections (adding/lengthening turn lanes), modifying medians and investing in transit and pathways for bicyclists and pedestrians.”

It’s “very easy to say, it’s too expensive to do this or that.” However, this policy in place gives us a little bit of a help when we’re reminding powers that be: Remember, we passed this resolution and let’s follow through on this,” Avola said. “Now, it’s more of a challenge not to make the additional investment when there are improvements.”

A prioritized focus, Avola added, will be placed on “environmental justice”—emphasizing convenience and safety “where people are very reliant on non-motorized transportation.”

Complete Street designs are not etched in black and white, they are unique to each community’s context. A “complete street” in a rural area will look quite different from a “complete street” in a highly urban area, but both are designed to ensure safety and convenience for everyone,” according to Smart Growth America.

Transportation improvements are vital to Collier’s future economy
The Naples Pathways Coalition members gather for weekend rides. Courtesy: Naples Pathways Coalition

The next step is the approval of the MPO’s Bicycle & Pedestrian Master Plan, which has undergone public comment and review for two years. With a goal of delivering “mobility, economic, recreational and quality of life benefits for all residents and visitors,” the updated plan is expected to go to the Collier County Board of Commissioners for approval by April.