



Florida Department of Transportation

September 2024

HIGHLANDS COUNTY FEASIBILITY STUDY

Florida continues to outpace the nation in growth, with Highlands County emerging as an attractive destination due to its affordability and strategic location. Centrally positioned, the county has also become a key freight hub for the State, enhancing its economic significance. The recent surge in residential and business growth has significantly impacted travel in the area, which is described below. Increased traffic from new housing developments, commercial establishments, and industrial activities has put greater demand on the local transportation network. The growth highlights the need to evaluate the transportation system to prioritize safety and support the local community.

Highlands County is centrally located, providing easy access to Tampa, Orlando, and South Florida, where 86 percent of the state’s population lives. As this region continues to grow, it’s crucial to assess the infrastructure to identify necessary improvements proactively to address the issues shown below.



Greater safety and mobility conflicts due to increased truck traffic



Disruptive events highlight the limited travel options today (evacuations, detours)



Competing demand for mobility options that include cars, trucks, and nonmotorized transport

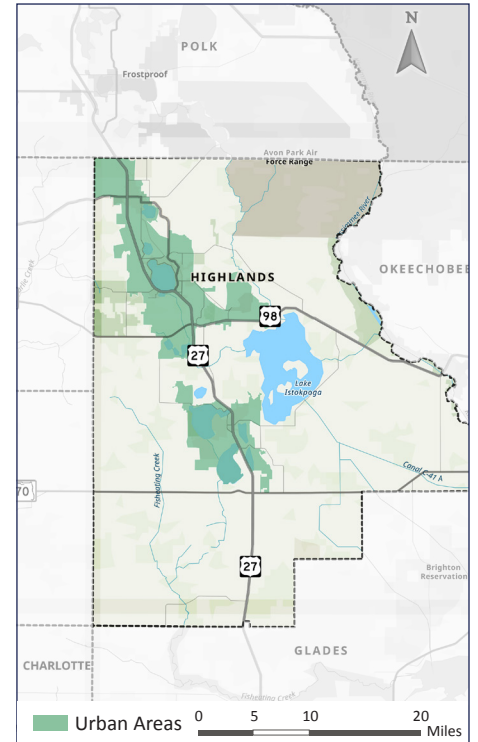
US 27 is a critical roadway serving Highlands County and is significantly impacted by this growth. As a Strategic Intermodal System (SIS) facility for the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) and a federally designated freight corridor, US 27 is a priority for future investment. Upon review of the current conditions along this highway, FDOT identified several challenges, including: safety conflicts between travelers, increased truck usage, the lack of alternative routes, and incompatibility with the adjacent communities’ long term vision for growth. In response, FDOT conducted a feasibility study to determine necessary improvements to address these issues. The improvements aim to maintain the efficient and safe movement of goods and people, support Highlands County’s growth plans, and ensure that US 27 continues to support the region’s development.

Feasibility Study Focus Areas

1. Safety assessment to identify high crash locations
2. Traffic assessment to evaluate lane modifications due to congestion
3. High level evaluation of freight movement
4. Review of existing alternative routes for detours and evacuation
5. Local plan review for compatibility with community and growth vision

The study confirmed the changing character of US 27 and highlights the need for additional analysis to refine improvements that enhance mobility and safety. To address this, the FDOT will conduct a Mobility Analysis along the entire roadway and two Project Development & Environment (PD&E) studies that cover the most populated areas of Highlands County.

Highlands County Feasibility Study Area



**ENHANCED SAFETY IS THE PRIMARY GOAL.
COMMUNITIES DRIVE TRANSPORTATION DECISIONS.**

- Highlands County 2030 Comprehensive Plan



Florida Department of Transportation

REGIONAL APPROACH

US 27 Feasibility Study Results



POPULATION TRENDS

Highlands County is expected to see a 54% increase in population.



SAFETY

12 miles of US 27 have crash rates above the statewide rate.



FREIGHT

US 27 serves as a major freight corridor carrying up to 43% truck traffic.



EVACUATION/DETOURS

Limited parallel facilities exist. Potential 67 minute detour to the nearest alternative route.



TRAFFIC CONGESTION

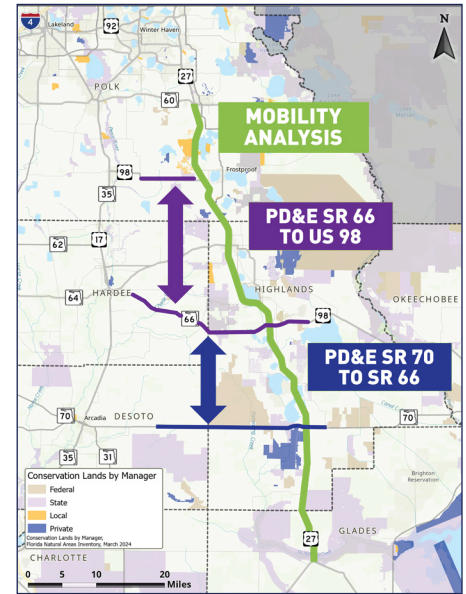
Multiple segments of US 27 have more vehicles (up to 20% more) than can be accommodated.

Mobility Analysis

The Mobility Analysis will include a regional traffic, safety, resiliency, and freight evaluations to determine what specific improvements would address existing and future needs. It will also extend into Polk and Glades Counties to assess how enhancements to US 27 will interact with improvements under evaluation by neighboring studies.

Key Components of the Mobility Analysis:

- » **Operational improvements within limits of the PD&Es**
 - Analyzing regional traffic, safety, system resiliency, and freight movement
- » **Regional project coordination**
 - Coordination with ongoing Central Polk Parkway and SR 70 studies
- » **Consideration for future change in character**
 - Addressing the competing roadway demand between people, cars and trucks
 - Alignment with community visions



PD&E Studies

The 2024 Feasibility Study supports a need for two PD&E studies: One from SR 70 to SR 66 and one from SR 66 to US 98.

A PD&E study is an environmental and engineering process which determines social, economic, natural, and physical environmental effects associated with a proposed transportation improvement project. It requires the combined efforts of professional engineers, planners, and scientists who collect and analyze project-related information to develop the best solution for transportation needs. An important component of the process is public and agency coordination.

The following needs are based on the 2024 Feasibility Study findings, and guide the purpose for evaluating improvements.

1. PD&E from SR 70 to SR 66

- » **Network Resiliency**
 - 56-mile detour if an incident occurs on US 27
 - Travel time increases from 20 minutes to an average of 67 minutes with US 27 closure
- » **Emergency Evacuation**
 - Limited North/South roadway alternatives in the region
- » **Freight Mobility**
 - Regional distribution roadway linking Intermodal Logistic Centers
 - Land use changes that continue to drive growth

2. PD&E from SR 66 to US 98

- » **Land Use Changes**
 - Urbanization competes with increased truck traffic
 - New commercial/residential development
- » **Traffic Congestion**
 - Operating at or near capacity by 2045
 - Does not improve with additional lanes
- » **Safety**
 - The fatal crash percentage is more than twice the national average
 - 31% of pedestrian crashes were fatal compared with 8% statewide