Florida's Rural Areas

Office of Policy Planning

Florida Department of Transportation

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INTRODUCTION

Transportation planning is a process to consider all aspects of the transportation system through plans and programs and understand how they impact the people served by these plans and programs. While, in general, this planning considers both urban and rural (or metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas), often the focus and priority is on the urban areas, which are those with the greatest population. The term "rural" has many unique definitions at both the federal and state level that rely on a variety of data and geographic variables. These unique definitions can be influenced by the mission or purpose of the agency defining the term "rural." Many of Florida's residents, like those in other states, live in areas that have both rural and urban characteristics making accommodating the needs of these communities challenging.

This document will review definitions of rural areas at the federal and state levels and consider various data points for counties in Florida considered rural. General characteristics of rural areas will be summarized to serve as a preliminary effort to identify commonalities between Florida's rural communities. This document will become a part of a larger study focused on determining how to define, characterize, and plan for Florida's rural areas.

DEFINING RURAL

Federal Rural Definitions

This section will review three definitions of 'rural' at the federal level as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Transportation (U.S. DOT), Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). These entities were reviewed because their definitions are applicable to Florida Department of Transportation planning processes.

U.S. Census Bureau Rural Definition

The U.S. Census defines rural as what is not urban, meaning after defining individual urban areas, rural is what is left. The Census Bureau uses a definition based on population and other measures of development patterns when identifying urban areas. These other measures include density, land use, and distance. Urban areas are classified into two types: urbanized areas and urban clusters. Urbanized areas are areas with 50,000 or more people. Urban clusters are areas with at least 2,500 but fewer than 50,000 people. Rural encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area. With this method of delineation, rural areas across the country look vastly different—ranging from densely settled small towns and subdivisions on the fringe of urban areas to lightly populated and remote areas.

U.S. Department of Transportation's (U.S. DOT) Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Rural Definition

The FHWA's definition differs slightly from the Census Bureau's. In practice, FHWA has two separate definitions for identifying rural areas: one for highway classification and outdoor advertising and one for planning purposes. The rural definition for highway classification and outdoor advertising is anything outside of an area with a population of 5,000. For planning purposes, rural is considered to be any area outside of a metropolitan area with a population of 50,000 or more. This definition for rural transportation planning is further described in three forms as shown below.[1] These 'areas' are a generalization of non-metropolitan areas outside the limits of an incorporated or unincorporated city, town, or village.

- *Basic Rural Area:* Dispersed counties or regions with few or no major population centers of 5,000 or more. These are mainly characterized by agricultural- and natural resource-based economies, stable or declining populations, and "farm-to-market" localized transportation patterns.

- *Developed Rural Area:* Fundamentally dispersed counties or regions with one or more population center(s) of 5,000 or more. Economies in these areas tend to be mixed industrial and service based in the cities, and agricultural and natural resource based in the rural areas. Populations tend to be stable or growing, and transportation choice more diverse.

- *Urban Boundary Rural Area:* Counties or regions that border metropolitan areas and are highly developed. Economic growth, population growth, and transportation are tied to the urban center. Many of these areas have experienced high levels of growth in recent years.

[1] https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/publications/rural_areas_planning/page03.cfm.

U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) Non-metropolitan Rural Definition

The USDA's ERS focuses on a variety of trends and emerging issues in agriculture, food, the environment, and rural areas across the country. While not specific to transportation planning, their approach to understanding rural communities and the capacity of rural economies is related to understanding and planning for the transportation system in these areas. The USDA ERS uses the term 'non-metropolitan (non-metro)' to describe rural areas. They analyze and study conditions in these areas to determine the condition of 'rural' in the United States and track and explain regional population and economic trends that impact transportation planning.

For the purposes of ERS' research, non-metropolitan areas are defined on the basis of counties, the standard building block for disseminating population and economic trends. They define non-metropolitan counties as a combination of 1) open countryside; 2) rural towns (places with fewer than 2,500 people); and 3) urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 that are not part of larger labor market areas. In addition to the basic metro/non-metro delineation, they developed multilevel county classifications, such as the rural-urban continuum codes, to measure rural areas in more detail and to assess the economic and social diversity of non-metropolitan areas.[2] However, sometimes counties are too large to accurately distinguish rural and urban settlement patterns so the USDA ERS also developed subcounty classifications that better explain the different levels of rurality, including rural-urban commuting areas.[3]

State Rural Definitions

This section will review commonly used definitions to distinguish between urban and rural at the state level, including the metropolitan planning organization definition and the rural community definition.

Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) Definition

This designation is for metropolitan areas identified by the U.S. Census Bureau as an urbanized area, meaning they have a population of more than 50,000 individuals. While federally mandated, a metropolitan planning organization (MPO) is managed regionally within each state.[4] MPOs are organizations of elected officials in recognized urban areas that provide a forum for local decision-making on transportation issues of a regional nature. MPOs promote consistency between the local and state processes for transportation, growth management, and economic development.

There are 27 MPOs in the state of Florida that serve metropolitan areas ranging from around 135,000 people to over 2 million people, with some encompassing only part of a county to some encompassing multiple counties. In most cases, the county that the metropolitan area is in is designated as a whole, which includes a significant geographic area outside of the actual urbanized area. The geographic portion of the state that is not within an MPO is often considered non-metropolitan, although this is not an official designation. Another example of MPO boundaries include predominantly rural counties with small pockets of urban clusters (e.g.,. they don't have urbanized areas of 50K+) and in Florida, an example would be the Heartland Regional Transportation Planning Organization (HRTPO), which includes the Sebring urbanized area in Highlands County, plus the rural portion of Highlands and the predominantly rural surrounding counties. Table 1 and Map 1 below identifies Florida counties that are part of a MPO.

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[2] https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/.

[3] https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-commuting-area-codes/.

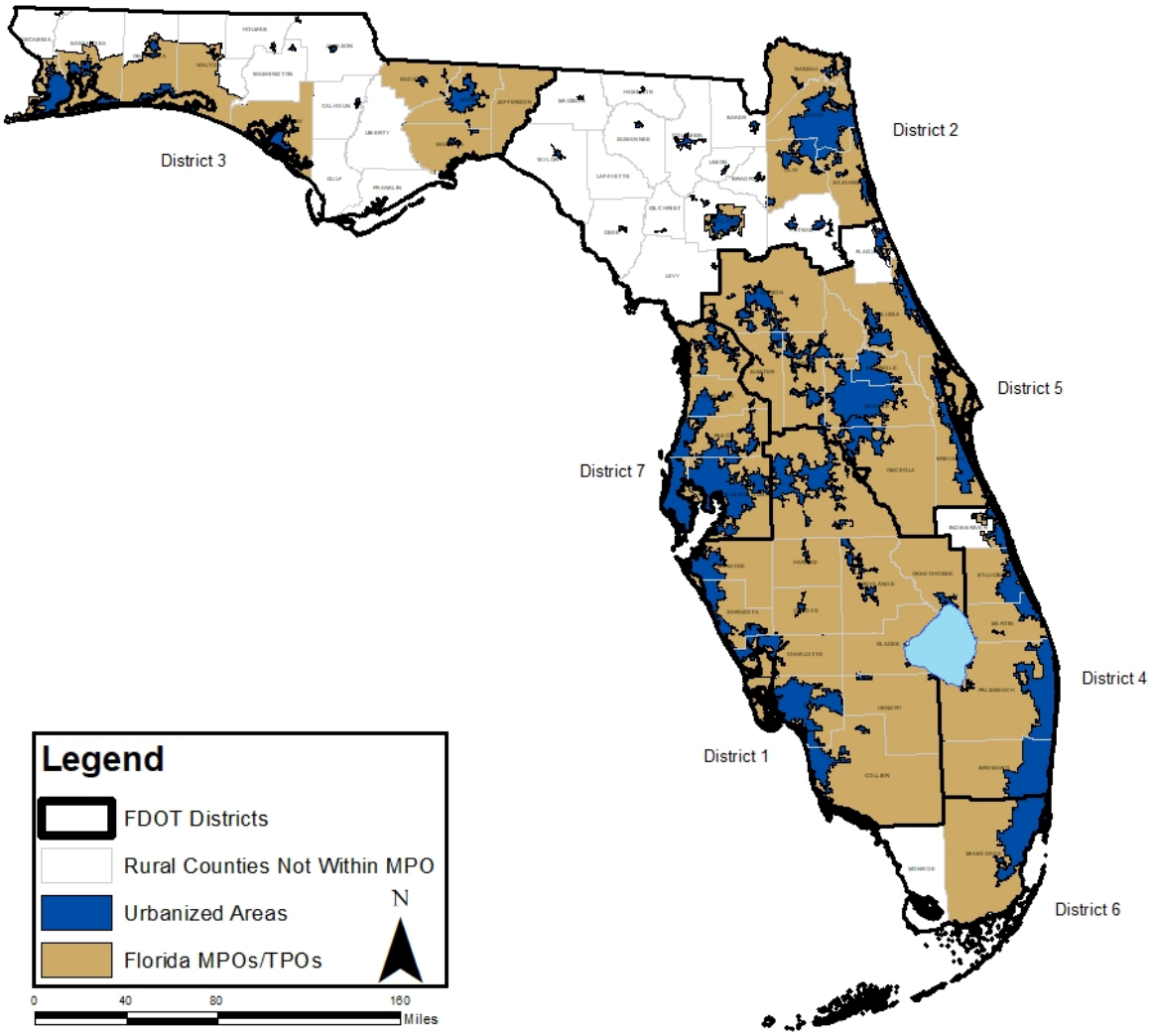
[4] Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) can also be referred to as a Transportation Planning Organization (TPO) or Transportation Planning Agency (TPA), or Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization (MTPO).

Table 1. Florida's Counties Arranged by MPO Planning Area

Entire County In An MPO		Partial County In An MPO	Counties Not In An MPO
Bay	Marion	Alachua	Baker
Brevard	Martin	Escambia	Bradford
Broward	Miami-Dade	Flagler	Calhoun
Charlotte	Nassau	Indian River	Columbia
Citrus	Okeechobee	Okaloosa	Dixie
Clay	Orange	Santa Rosa	Franklin
Collier	Osceola	Walton	Gilchrist
Desoto	Palm Beach		Gulf
Duval	Pasco		Hamilton
Gadsden	Pinellas		Holmes
Glades	Polk		Jackson
Hardee	Sarasota		Lafayette
Hendry	Seminole		Levy
Hernando	St. Johns		Liberty
Highlands	St. Lucie		Madison
Hillsborough	Sumter		Monroe
Jefferson	Volusia		Putnam
Lake	Wakulla		Suwannee
Lee			Taylor
Leon			Union
Manatee			Washington

Source: Florida Metropolitan Planning Organization Advisory Council.

Figure 1. Florida's Counties Arranged by MPO Designation



Rural Community Definition

To specifically recognize the needs of rural communities, the state of Florida established its own statutory definitions. These areas are identified by population and may or may not be part of an MPO. According to Florida Statute, a rural community is defined as:[5]

- A county with a population of 75,000 or fewer.
- A county with a population of 125,000 or fewer which is contiguous to a county with a population of 75,000 or fewer.
- Any municipality within a county as described above.
- An unincorporated federal enterprise community or an incorporated rural city with a population of 25,000 or fewer and an employment base focused on traditional agricultural or resource-based industries, located in a county not defined as rural, which has at least three or more of the economic distress factors identified in Section 288.0656 Paragraph (c), Florida Statutes and verified by the Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO).[6]

Tables 2–4 below show which counties and municipalities/communities meet the state definition.

Table 2. Counties with a Population of 75,000 or Fewer

Baker	Gilchrist	Jefferson[1]	Taylor
Bradford	Glades[1]	Lafayette	Union
Calhoun	Gulf	Levy	Wakulla[1]
Columbia	Hamilton	Liberty	Washington
DeSoto[1]	Hardee[1]	Madison	Walton[1]
Dixie	Hendry[1]	Okeechobee[1]	
Franklin	Holmes	Putnam	
Gadsden[1]	Jackson	Suwannee	

1 *Part of an MPO.*

Table 3. Counties with a Population of 125,000 or Fewer Which is Contiguous to a County with a Population of 75,000 or fewer

Flagler[1]	Highlands[1]	Nassau[1]

1 *Part of an MPO.*

5 Section 288.0656(1)(e), F.S.
6 According to the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity there are no rural communities that qualify for this definition.

Table 4. Incorporated Municipalities within Rural Counties

Baker County
- City of Macclenny
- Town of Glen St. Mary

Bradford County
- City of Hampton
- City of Lawtey
- City of Starke
- Town of Brooker

Calhoun County
- City of Blountstown
- Town of Altha

Columbia County
- City of Lake City
- Town of Fort White

DeSoto County[1]
- City of Arcadia

Dixie County
- City of Cross City
- City of Horseshoe Beach
- City of Old Town

Flagler County[1]
- City of Bunnell
- City of Flagler Beach
- City of Palm Coast
- Town of Marineland
- Town of Beverly Beach

Franklin County
- City of Apalachicola
- City of Carrabelle

Gadsden County[1]
- City of Chattahoochee
- City of Gretna
- City of Midway
- City of Quincy
- Town of Greensboro
- Town of Havana

Gilchrist County
- City of Fanning Springs
- City of Trenton
- Town of Bell

Glades County[1]
- City of Moore Haven

Gulf County
- City of Port St. Joe
- City of Wewahitchka

Hamilton County
- City of Jasper
- Town of White Springs
- Town of Jennings

Hardee County[1]
- City of Bowling Green
- City of Wauchula
- Town of Zolfo Springs

Hendry County[1]
- City of Clewiston
- City of LaBelle

Highlands County[1]
- City of Avon Park
- City of Sebring
- Town of Lake Placid

Holmes County
- City of Bonifay
- City of Ponce De Leon
- City of Westville
- Town of Esto
- Town of Noma

Jackson County
- City of Graceville
- City of Jacob City
- City of Marianna
- Town of Alford
- Town of Bascom
- Town of Cambellton
- Town of Cottondale

Jefferson County[1]
- City of Monticello

Lafayette County
- Town of Mayo

Levy County
- City of Cedar Key
- City of Chiefland
- City of Fanning Springs
- City of Otter Creek
- City of Williston
- City of Yankeetown
- Town of Bronson
- Town of Inglis

Liberty County
- City of Bristol

Madison County
- City of Madison
- Town of Greenville
- Town of Lee

Nassau County[1]
- City of Fernandina Beach
- Town of Callahan
- Town of Hilliard

Okeechobee County[1]
- City of Okeechobee

Putnam County
- City of Crescent City
- City of Palatka
- Town of Interlachen
- Town of Pomona Park
- Town of Welaka

Suwannee County
- City of Live Oak
- Town of Branford

Taylor County
- City of Perry

Union County
- City of Lake Butler
- Town of Raiford
- Town of Worthington Springs

Wakulla County[1]
- City of Sopchoppy
- City of St. Marks

Washington County
- City of Chipley
- City of Vernon
- Town of Caryville
- Town of Ebro
- Town of Wausau

Walton County[1]
- City of DeFuniak Springs
- City of Freeport
- Town of Paxton

[1] *Part of an MPO.*

Additional Rural Communities Not Defined as Rural

For the purpose of this study, the Project Team included in the outreach process municipalities that are within non-rural counties and outside of MPO boundaries as they have similar transportation planning issues as rural municipalities. The following municipalities were included:

- Municipalities within Alachua County outside of the Gainesville MTPO.
  - City of Alachua
  - City of Archer
  - City of Hawthorne
  - City of High Springs
  - Town of La Crosse
  - Town of Micanopy
  - City of Newberry
  - City of Waldo
- Municipalities within Escambia County outside of the Florida-Alabama TPO.
  - Town of Century
- Municipalities within Santa Rosa County outside of Florida-Alabama TPO.
  - Town of Jay
- Municipalities within Okaloosa County outside of Okaloosa-Walton TPO.
  - City of Laurel Hill
- Municipalities within Walton County outside of Okaloosa-Walton TPO.
  - Town of Paxton
- Municipalities within Indian River County outside of Indian River County MPO.
  - Town of Indian River Shores
  - Town of Orchid
  - City of Sebastian
  - City of Vero Beach
- Municipalities within the South Central RAO included in an urban county.
  - City of Belle Glade (Palm Beach County)
  - City of Pahokee (Palm Beach County)
  - City of South Bay (Palm Beach County)
  - City of Immokalee (Collier County)

The project team also included some municipalities with rural characteristics in their outreach process that were within non-rural counties and within MPOs due to their unique transportation planning issues and rural components. For instance, Monroe County does not meet the definition of a rural county or an urban county,

and it was important to determine how transportation needs were being met by FDOT. These municipalities include:

- City of Fellesmere in Indian River County
- City of Key West in Monroe County
- City of Marathon in Monroe County
- City of Key Colony Beach in Monroe County
- City of Layton in Monroe County
- Village of Islamorada in Monroe County

Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI)

To better serve Florida's rural communities, the Florida Legislature created the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) (Section 288.0656, Florida Statutes), which provides a focused and coordinated effort among state and regional agencies that provide programs and services for rural areas. FDOT plays a vital role in this initiative as a member agency of REDI. REDI responds to specific community needs and requests by working with rural communities to improve their rural economies, access to housing, access to healthcare, and access to education. REDI also reviews and evaluates the impact of statutes and rules on rural communities to help minimize any adverse impacts. In addition, REDI has the authority to recommend waivers of match provisions for certain economic development programs on a project-by-project basis.

Under Florida Statute, REDI is:

> "Responsible for coordinating and focusing the efforts and resources of State and regional agencies on the problems which affect the fiscal, economic, and community viability of Florida's economically distressed rural communities, working with local governments, community-based organizations, and private organizations that have an interest in the growth and development of these communities to find ways to balance environmental and growth management issues with local needs.
>
> REDI shall review and evaluate the impact of statutes and rules on rural communities and shall work to minimize any adverse impact and undertake outreach and capacity-building efforts.
>
> REDI shall facilitate better access to State resources by promoting direct access and referrals to appropriate State and regional agencies and statewide organizations. REDI may undertake outreach, capacity-building, and other advocacy efforts to improve conditions in rural communities. These activities may include sponsorship of conferences and achievement awards."

Rural Areas of Opportunity (RAO)

An additional designation included in Section 288.0656 are the Rural Areas of Opportunity (RAOs). These areas are defined as rural communities, or a region composed of rural communities, designated by the Governor, that have been adversely affected by extraordinary economic events, severe or chronic distress, or natural disasters that present a unique economic development opportunity of regional impact. REDI may recommend up to three RAOs to the Governor who may designated them by Executive Order. Counties and communities within a RAO are established as a priority assignment for REDI agencies, which allows the Governor to waive criteria of certain economic development incentives. Florida's three designated RAOs include the Northwest RAO, with support from Opportunity Florida; the South Central RAO, with aid from

Florida's Heartland Region of Opportunity (FHERO); and the North Central RAO with assistance from North Florida Economic Development Partnership.

Catalyst Site Designation

Through REDI's RAO designation, there is a third tier of designation that exists called catalyst sites. Catalyst sites are parcels of land within a RAO that have been prioritized as a geographic site for economic development through partnerships with state, regional, and local organizations. The site must be reviewed by REDI and approved by DEO for the purposes of locating a catalyst project. Catalyst projects include businesses locating or expanding in a RAO to serve as economic generators of regional significance for the growth of a regional target industry cluster. The project must provide capital investment on a scale significant enough to affect the entire region and result in the development of high-wage and high-skill jobs. Section 288.0656, F.S. states that:

> "Each rural area of opportunity may designate catalyst projects, provided that each catalyst project is specifically recommended by REDI, identified as a catalyst project by Enterprise Florida, Inc., and confirmed as a catalyst project by the department (DEO). All state agencies and departments shall use all available tools and resources to the extent permissible by law to promote the creation and development of each catalyst project and the development of catalyst sites."

Table 5 and Figure 2 identify Florida counties arranged by RAO designation.

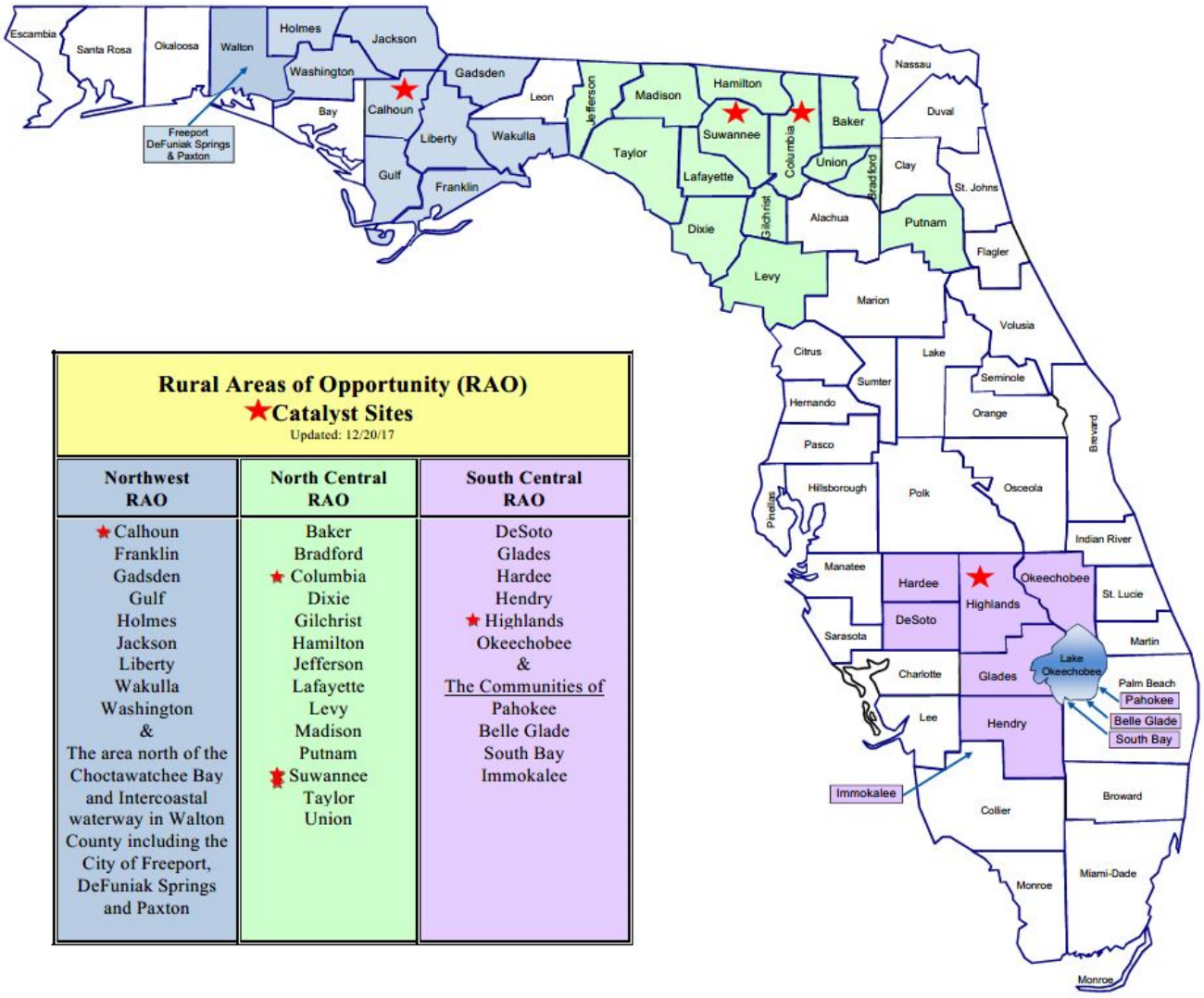
Table 5. Florida Counties Arranged by RAO Designation

Counties Part of a Rural Area of Opportunity			**Cities Designated as RAOs (not in an RAO County)**		
Northwest	**South Central**	**North Central**	**Northwest**	**South Central**	**North Central**
Calhoun	DeSoto	Baker	Freeport (Walton)	Immokalee (Collier)	
Franklin	Glades	Bradford		Pahokee (Palm Beach)	
Gadsden	Hardee	Columbia[1]		Belle Glade (Palm Beach)	
Gulf	Hendry	Dixie		South Bay (Palm Beach)	
Holmes	Highlands[1]	Gilchrist			
Jackson	Okeechobee	Hamilton			
Liberty		Jefferson			
Wakulla		Lafayette			
Washington		Levy			
		Madison			
		Putnam			
		Suwannee[1]			
		Taylor			
		Union			

[1] *Indicates County hosts a catalyst site.*

Source: Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, 2017.

Figure 2. Florida Rural Areas of Opportunity and Catalyst Sites



Rural Areas of Opportunity (RAO)
★Catalyst Sites
Updated: 12/20/17

Northwest RAO	North Central RAO	South Central RAO
★Calhoun	Baker	DeSoto
Franklin	Bradford	Glades
Gadsden	★Columbia	Hardee
Gulf	Dixie	Hendry
Holmes	Gilchrist	★Highlands
Jackson	Hamilton	Okeechobee
Liberty	Jefferson	&
Wakulla	Lafayette	The Communities of
Washington	Levy	Pahokee
&	Madison	Belle Glade
The area north of the Choctawatchee Bay and Intercoastal waterway in Walton County including the City of Freeport, DeFuniak Springs and Paxton	Putnam	South Bay
	★Suwannee	Immokalee
	Taylor	
	Union	

DATA SNAPSHOT OF FLORIDA'S RURAL COUNTIES

This section provides various data points for Florida's rural counties referencing demographics, local economies, and transportation. Rural demographic trends have the potential to affect rural economies significantly, which in turn can impact transportation demand. Therefore, several data points were identified to better understand Florida's rural communities. Improved understanding of commonalities between Florida's rural areas can help identify planning solutions that apply to multiple rural communities in the State of Florida. The rural counties identified for this assessment are those designated as 'rural' by Florida Statute and include 32 of Florida's 67 counties.

Demographics

Table 6 provides population demographic data for Florida's rural counties, including total population, population density, and age cohorts. The data indicate the following:

- **Total population:** The total population of Florida's 32 rural counties is 1,124,190, which is only 5.7 percent of Florida's total population. The largest rural county by population is Flagler County with 100,783 and the smallest rural county by population is Liberty County with 8,295.

- **Density:** Florida's rural counties have a lower average persons per acre than the rest of the state. On average, rural counties average 0.081 persons per acre while the rest of the state averages 0.568 persons per acre.

- **Age cohorts:** Florida's rural counties are generally in sync with the age distribution of the state as a whole. The average population of rural counties in Florida have almost the same proportion of people younger than 18 (20.4 percent) when compared to the statewide average (20.5 percent). They have a slightly larger proportion of people age 18 to 65 (61.6 percent) when compared to the statewide average (60.6 percent), and a slightly smaller proportion of people 65 and older (17.9 percent) compared to the statewide average (18.8 percent).

Table 6. Population Demographics for Florida's Rural Counties

County	2015 Population	Average Persons Per Acre	Age (percent of population)		
			Under 18	18-64	65 and Over
Florida Total/ Average	19,815,183	0.568	20.5%	60.6%	18.8%
Rural County Average	35,131	0.081	20.4%	61.6%	17.9%
Baker	27,135	0.072	24.9%	62.5%	12.5%
Bradford	27,223	0.142	19.8%	63.2%	17.0%
Calhoun	14,615	0.04	21.2%	61.6%	17.2%

County	2015 Population	Average Persons Per Acre	Age (percent of population)		
			Under 18	18-64	65 and Over
Columbia	67,806	0.132	21.9%	61.3%	16.8%
Desoto	34,957	0.085	21.2%	60.0%	18.8%
Dixie	16,091	0.035	18.4%	60.2%	21.4%
Flagler	100,783	0.310	18.6%	53.9%	27.5%
Franklin	11,628	0.033	16.6%	64.3%	19.1%
Gadsden	46,424	0.137	22.4%	62.9%	14.7%
Gilchrist	16,992	0.075	20.7%	60.1%	19.2%
Glades	13,272	0.021	16.9%	58.1%	25.0%
Gulf	15,785	0.043	15.7%	66.6%	17.7%
Hamilton	14,395	0.043	19.0%	66.0%	14.9%
Hardee	27,468	0.067	26.6%	59.4%	14.1%
Hendry	38,363	0.05	27.9%	59.9%	12.3%
Highlands	98,328	0.139	17.9%	48.8%	33.4%
Holmes	19,635	0.063	20.3%	61.2%	18.6%
Jackson	48,900	0.08	18.8%	63.9%	17.3%
Jefferson	14,198	0.036	17.1%	63.6%	19.3%
Lafayette	8,801	0.025	21.5%	65.3%	13.2%
Levy	39,821	0.055	20.2%	27.9%	22.0%
Liberty	8,295	0.015	18.7%	69.5%	11.9%
Madison	18,729	0.041	20.3%	62.4%	17.4%
Nassau	85,880	0.178	20.7%	60.3%	19.0%
Okeechobee	39,255	0.069	23.0%	59.6%	17.4%
Putnam	72,696	0.137	22.0%	57.4%	20.6%

County	2015 Population	Average Persons Per Acre	Age (percent of population)		
			Under 18	18-64	65 and Over
Suwannee	43,595	0.098	21.5%	58.9%	19.6%
Taylor	22,685	0.034	19.1%	53.5%	17.4%
Union	15,191	0.095	19.2%	69.0%	11.8%
Wakulla	31,128	0.079	21.1%	66.5%	12.5%
Walton	59,487	0.087	20.4%	61.2%	18.4%
Washington	24,629	0.062	20.4%	62.8%	16.8%

Source: Florida Department of Transportation Environmental Screening Tool, 2017.

Table 7 provides educational attainment and income demographics for Florida's rural counties. The data indicate the following.

- **Educational attainment:** Florida's rural counties have lower educational attainment than the rest of the state. On average, 55.5 percent of the population in rural counties have attained a high school diploma and 9.3 percent have attained a four-year college degree, compared to the statewide average of 88.9 percent and 28.3 percent, respectively.

- **Household income:** Florida's rural counties have a median household income that is $10,000 less than the statewide median household income. Only two of Florida's rural counties have a median household income greater than the statewide median household income: Nassau County and Wakulla County. Rural counties have a greater share of their population living in poverty with an average of 19.9 percent of their households living below the poverty line compared to a statewide average of 11.7 percent.

Table 7. Education and Income Demographics for Florida's Rural Counties

County	Educational Attainment		Median Household Income	Percentage of Households Below Poverty Line
	High School Graduate or Higher	Bachelor's Degree or Higher		
Florida Average	88.9%	28.3%	$48,900	11.70%
Rural County Average	55.5%	9.3%	$38,806	19.85%

	Educational Attainment			
County	**High School Graduate or Higher**	**Bachelor's Degree or Higher**	**Median Household Income**	**Percentage of Households Below Poverty Line**
Baker	53.5%	7.5%	$44,966	15.92%
Bradford	54.8%	7.8%	$41,606	22.55%
Calhoun	53.2%	7.4%	$34,510	19.69%
Columbia	58.9%	10.4%	$41,926	17.06%
Desoto	48.5%	6.7%	$35,165	22.13%
Dixie	58.7%	5.9%	$36,292	21.20%
Flagler	67.8%	17.1%	$47,866	11.20%
Franklin	60.0%	11.8%	$40,401	18.60%
Gadsden	53.6%	11.7%	$35,567	24.06%
Gilchrist	55.1%	7.6%	$40,623	19.10%
Glades	57.5%	6.3%	$34,877	20.03%
Gulf	61.8%	12.0%	$41,788	15.29%
Hamilton	49.2%	6.6%	$35,048	26.28%
Hardee	44.2%	6.8%	$35,457	22.75%
Hendry	39.3%	6.1%	$36,771	22.77%
Highlands	62.5%	12.6%	$35,093	17.26%
Holmes	53.6%	8.0%	$35,020	26.10%
Jackson	57.2%	9.9%	$35,098	21.26%
Jefferson	61.0%	14.1%	$43,355	15.78%
Lafayette	51.0%	7.9%	$35,864	23.06%
Levy	59.1%	7.9%	$35,782	20.04%
Liberty	53.2%	7.7%	$39,406	19.28%

	Educational Attainment			
County	**High School Graduate or Higher**	**Bachelor's Degree or Higher**	**Median Household Income**	**Percentage of Households Below Poverty Line**
Madison	57.4%	7.9%	$32,164	25.14%
Nassau	56.6%	14.6%	$54,116	11.73%
Okeechobee	47.8%	7.2%	$35,405	22.98%
Putnam	55.2%	8.3%	$31,715	25.55%
Suwannee	54.8%	8.1%	$36,289	22.03%
Taylor	55.3%	6.6%	$36,181	16.61%
Union	53.7%	5.7%	$39,163	19.06%
Wakulla	63.2%	11.4%	$50,340	14.23%
Walton	62.0%	18.8%	$44,966	14.56%
Washington	57.1%	7.9%	$38,970	21.93%

Source: Florida Department of Transportation Environmental Screening Tool, 2017.

Economy

While some traditional agricultural industries remain, rural economies are diversifying. Proximity to metropolitan areas can influence growth and economies through access to labor market, services, and amenities.

The local economies of Florida's rural communities are varied but most are anchored by either government employment or employment in the trade, transportation, and utilities industry. Table 8 shows the percent of the population in each county that works for one of Florida's major industries as defined by the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). The green highlight indicates the top three industries that employ the workforce of that rural county. The data indicates the following:

- **Top three employed industries:** On average, 29.0 percent of the employed workers in Florida's rural counties are government employees compared to only 12.6 percent statewide. The next largest industry is the trade, transportation, and utilities industry at 18.8 percent, only a few points lower than the state average of 20.6 percent. The third largest industry among rural counties is the education and health services industry, with an average of 12.0 percent of the rural employees in this industry.

- **Least employed industry:** The industry with the lowest percent of employment in rural counties is the information industry. This industry accounts for 0.7 percent of rural jobs, which is less than half the

statewide average of 1.6 percent. Only four rural counties have more than one percent of their population employed in this industry (Franklin, Gulf, Holmes, and Jackson).

Table 8. Employment by Industry[1] for Florida's Rural Counties

County	Construction	Education and Health Services	Financial Activities	Government	Information	Leisure and Hospitality	Manufacturing	Natural Resource Mining	Professional and Business Services	Trade, Transportation, and Utilities	Other Services
Florida Total	5.7%	14.8%	6.5%	12.6%	1.6%	14.1%	4.3%	0.9%	15.5%	20.6%	3.3%
Rural County Average	5.3%	12.0%	2.7%	29.0%	0.7%	9.8%	6.6%	7.7%	5.7%	18.8%	2.0%
Baker	4.7%	11.2%	1.7%	35.5%	0.7%	7.1%	1.2%	0.3%	3.3%	32.8%	1.5%
Bradford	3.4%	14.4%	2.8%	30.9%	0.5%	12.4%	3.2%	3.7%	3.8%	23.4%	1.5%
Calhoun	6.0%	20.7%	2.3%	32.7%	–	7.3%	–	5.8%	1.9%	20.0%	1.2%
Columbia	3.7%	14.5%	2.5%	21.9%	0.4%	11.5%	8.3%	0.9%	14.5%	20.0%	1.8%
Desoto	6.1%	9.2%	2.3%	23.8%	–	8.1%	2.6%	12.7%	5.3%	28.3%	1.4%
Dixie	2.5%	5.9%	1.2%	39.0%	–	6.6%	15.0%	5.5%	4.1%	18.2%	2.0%
Flagler	7.3%	12.1%	3.5%	42.5%	0.0%	9.1%	2.6%	1.6%	3.1%	14.6%	3.1%
Franklin	5.7%	9.8%	6.6%	28.1%	1.2%	21.1%	3.6%	–	3.7%	17.8%	2.0%
Gadsden	7.3%	5.6%	1.3%	34.4%	0.8%	5.5%	6.8%	11.1%	8.5%	17.0%	1.7%
Gilchrist	5.5%	18.5%	1.6%	32.3%	0.4%	6.0%	4.6%	13.6%	4.2%	11.5%	1.7%
Glades	7.2%	5.7%	1.7%	31.4%	–	4.0%	5.6%	22.0%	1.5%	18.9%	1.9%
Gulf	7.2%	14.0%	5.9%	31.0%	1.4%	12.0%	1.0%	1.9%	6.6%	17.6%	1.4%
Hamilton	3.3%	6.9%	0.8%	33.8%	–	4.4%	–	15.4%	3.2%	14.7%	1.6%
Hardee	3.8%	12.5%	3.6%	22.6%	–	7.9%	4.7%	24.4%	4.4%	14.7%	1.0%
Hendry	5.0%	6.7%	2.4%	17.8%	0.6%	8.2%	3.6%	33.2%	6.4%	14.4%	1.6%
Highlands	4.5%	21.8%	3.0%	15.3%	0.6%	11.2%	2.6%	8.7%	10.0%	20.1%	2.2%
Holmes	6.2%	12.7%	3.8%	15.9%	2.9%	17.7%	4.8%	0.7%	12.9%	18.8%	3.5%
Jackson	6.2%	10.7%	2.9%	35.7%	1.1%	8.8%	4.2%	1.7%	5.5%	21.5%	1.8%
Jefferson	5.6%	12.1%	4.2%	27.7%	–	7.1%	0.4%	11.1%	5.6%	21.0%	5.4%

County	Construction	Education and Health Services	Financial Activities	Government	Information	Leisure and Hospitality	Manufacturing	Natural Resource Mining	Professional and Business Services	Trade, Transportation, and Utilities	Other Services
Lafayette	2.7%	9.2%	2.5%	44.0%	–	3.8%	4.9%	13.7%	2.8%	15.6%	0.4%
Levy	11.8%	8.6%	3.4%	21.6%	0.3%	10.0%	7.7%	7.9%	4.3%	22.3%	1.9%
Liberty	2.1%	18.5%	–	41.6%	–	3.3%	16.0%	6.2%	0.7%	9.9%	0.6%
Madison	2.1%	16.2%	3.1%	32.6%	0.5%	7.6%	10.0%	5.0%	2.7%	18.5%	1.7%
Nassau	4.7%	11.0%	3.1%	15.5%	0.9%	23.6%	5.7%	2.0%	11.1%	18.5%	3.9%
Okeechobee	5.4%	15.5%	2.4%	18.0%	0.7%	12.3%	4.8%	10.1%	8.9%	19.1%	3.1%
Putnam	4.6%	15.9%	2.8%	22.7%	0.5%	10.0%	9.6%	3.9%	5.3%	22.0%	2.5%
Suwannee	4.3%	12.4%	1.8%	21.6%	0.4%	7.7%	17.4%	6.6%	4.6%	21.3%	1.8%
Taylor	4.1%	10.8%	1.5%	22.7%	0.5%	8.1%	25.0%	3.7%	3.6%	18.3%	1.8%
Union	5.4%	7.1%	0.7%	56.6%	–	1.8%	–	1.6%	–	15.5%	0.7%
Wakulla	6.4%	6.8%	1.8%	32.6%	–	13.0%	–	0.5%	9.3%	17.0%	2.4%
Walton	9.0%	10.1%	5.0%	12.8%	0.5%	26.1%	1.6%	0.1%	8.9%	21.9%	4.0%
Washington	5.5%	16.2%	2.2%	33.3%	–	10.9%	–	2.2%	7.0%	16.2%	1.4%

[1] *Cells highlighted in green indicate the top three industries based on employment in that county. In addition, industries may not add to 100% due to confidentiality and unclassified information.*

Transportation

Transportation is a key component to the success of the economy. A lack of transportation options could significantly impact access to employment, goods and services, health care, government services, and social services. Transportation choices available to rural communities are linked to mobility and accessibility. Some transportation related trends that could be considered include travel time to work, access to public transportation, and condition of the local road system.

- **Travel time to work:** As shown in Table 9, when averaged together, the mean travel time to work for the Florida's rural counties is similar to the statewide average. However, depending on the county, there is a variance of 12.7 minutes between the rural county with the highest average (Wakulla, 33.0 minutes) and the county with the lowest average (Franklin, 20.3 minutes).

Table 9. Travel Time to Work for Florida's Rural Counties

County	Travel Time to Work (minutes)	Travel Time [1]	County	Travel Time to Work (minutes)	Travel Time [1]
Florida Average	26.4		Highlands	20.9	↓
			Holmes	28.9	↑
Baker	29.6	↑	Jackson	22.5	↓
Bradford	31.4	↑	Jefferson	28.8	↑
Calhoun	28.2	↓	Lafayette	22.8	↓
Columbia	24.2	↓	Levy	30.1	↑
Desoto	25.0	↓	Liberty	30.8	↑
Dixie	25.9	↓	Madison	27.7	↑
Flagler	26.2	↓	Nassau	29.0	↑
Franklin	20.3	↓	Okeechobee	24.3	↓
Gadsden	28.5	↑	Putnam	27.3	↑
Gilchrist	29.5	↑	Suwannee	26.0	↓
Glades	27.5	↑	Taylor	20.5	↓
Gulf	23.0	↓	Union	23.0	↓
Hamilton	22.4	↓	Wakulla	33.0	↑
Hardee	24.4	↓	Walton	27.2	↑
Hendry	28.7	↑	Washington	29.3	↑

[1] *Counties with a green down arrow indicate a shorter travel time to work than the statewide average and counties with a red up arrow indicate a longer travel time to work than the statewide average.*

Source: Office of Economic and Demographic Research.

- **Public transportation**. Rural public transportation systems can include traditional fixed-route services, deviated fixed-route services, demand-response services, vanpools, and reimbursement programs. The 31 fixed-route transit systems in Florida are generally located in urban counties. However, some systems located in urban areas extend services to rural areas such as the Palm Beach County's Palm Tran which serves Pahokee and Belle Glade. In addition, demand response options are available through contracted services and generally serve rural areas. Many of Florida's rural residents are considered transportation disadvantaged, meaning they are those persons, including children as defined in s. 411.202 F.S., who because of physical or mental disability, income status, or inability to drive due to age or disability are unable to transport themselves or to purchase transportation and have no other form of transportation available. These persons are, therefore, dependent upon others to obtain access to health care, employment, education, shopping, or medically necessary or life-sustaining activities. Florida's Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged coordinates with transportation service providers to ensure cost-effective provision of transportation by qualified community transportation coordinators or transportation operators for the transportation disadvantaged.

- **Condition of the local road system.** FDOT collects data on the condition of State-owned and maintained roadways in Florida's rural areas for strategic decision-making and statistical uses, but the data does not provide a complete picture of Florida's roadway system. There are gaps in roadway information for local roads especially in rural areas where they are owned and maintained by local or county governments. Evaluating and reporting on the condition of local roads can be an expensive and time consuming task, especially in rural counties where funding is limited. More information on the condition of locally owned and maintained roads in Florida's rural areas could help FDOT make strategic decisions on how to allocate funding for roadway improvements in rural areas.

  To help address the condition of the local road system in Florida's rural counties, FDOT provides multiple funding assistance programs shown and described below:

  - **Small County Outreach Program (SCOP):** The purpose of this program is to assist small county governments in repairing or rehabilitating county bridges, paving unpaved roads, addressing road-related drainage improvements, resurfacing or reconstructing county roads, or constructing capacity or safety improvements to county roads. FDOT funds 75 percent of the cost of projects on county roads funded under the program. More information on SCOP can be found at:

    - http://www.fdot.gov/programmanagement/LP/SCOP/Default.shtm.

  - **Small County Road Assistance Program (SCRAP):** The purpose of the SCRAP program is to assist small county governments in resurfacing and reconstructing county roads. Up to $25 million annually is available to be allocated for the purposes of funding this program. More information on SCRAP can be found at:

    - http://www.fdot.gov/programmanagement/LP/SCRAP/Default.shtm.

  - **County Incentive Grant Program (CIGP):** The purpose of CIGP is to provide grants to counties to improve a transportation facility, including transit, which is located on the State Highway System (SHS) or which relieves traffic congestion on the SHS. The FDOT provides 50 percent of project costs for eligible projects. More information on CIGP can be found at:

    - http://www.fdot.gov/programmanagement/LP/CIGP/Default.shtm

  - **Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP):** The purpose of TAP is to fund a variety of small-scale transportation projects such as pedestrian and bicycle facilities, recreational trails, Safe Routes to School projects, community improvements such as historic preservation and vegetation management, and environmental mitigation related to stormwater and habitat connectivity. More information on TAP can be found at:

    - http://www.fdot.gov/planning/Policy/TransportationAlternatives/default.shtm

  - **Transportation Regional Incentive Program (TRIP):** The purpose of TRIP is to provide support to improve regionally significant transportation facilities. State funds are available throughout Florida to provide incentives for local governments and the private sector to help pay for critically needed projects that benefit regional travel and commerce. FDOT will pay up to 50 percent of the non-federal share of project costs for public transportation facility projects. More information about TRIP can be found at:

    - http://www.fdot.gov/programmanagement/LP/TRIP/Default.shtm

Without the funding assistance of these programs, Florida's rural counties would have a more difficult time making critical infrastructure improvements to their roadways.

Conclusions

Due to the variety of economic and community characteristics in Florida, it is difficult to identify which federal and/or state definitions most accurately capture the nature of Florida's rural areas. Florida has critical mechanisms in place for supporting rural areas, such as REDI, the RAO designation, and catalyst sites within RAOs. A review of demographic data specific to Florida's rural counties shows that the population density of Florida's rural areas is dramatically lower than in Florida's urban areas but age cohorts remain similar in both rural and urban areas. It also indicates that residents of Florida's rural areas have a lower educational attainment than the statewide average, and the median household income is on average $10,000 less than the average statewide median household income. Florida's rural population is primarily employed in either the government sector; trade, transportation, and utilities; or education and health services. Access to public transit is lacking in Florida's rural counties but there are several funding programs such as SCOP, SCRAP, CIGP, TAP, and TRIP that provide a dedicated funding source to support rural transportation improvements. This document is part of the first phase of a larger study that will identify commonalities, notable practices, and challenges associated with rural transportation planning in the State of Florida, and will lead to recommendations for enhancing FDOT's rural transportation planning process.