

## CORRIDOR VISION

### VISION STATEMENT I - The Martin Grade Time Machine: *The Land Remembers.*

If a time machine could bring the first Americans who settled near Lake Okeechobee's north-eastern shore in the 1890's back to the Martin Grade area in 2030, they'd feel right at home on the land.

The high sand Seminole Ridge just east of the lake is still forested with live oaks, slash pines, and cabbage palms, and deer, turkeys, and other game still hide among the palmettos. People are still few and far between, and sunlit pastures dotted with grazing cattle and citrus groves fill the gaps in the woods. Sometimes cool breezes smell like orange blossoms and pine trees, but when the air is still, the dry sandy heat releases a hint of sage.

As the time travelers move a few miles to the east, the land still drops 10 to 15 feet into the Alpatioke Swamp. In the wet season, this portion of the Northern Everglades still cuts a broad swath of slow moving fresh water up to four feet deep between the high Seminole Ridge and the Atlantic Ocean.

The visitors can hardly see where the Swamp has healed the wounds it suffered by being drained in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, because it was reflooded during the Great Northern Everglades Restoration and has regenerated itself. Its new name, the Allapattah Flats, sounds close enough to the original

Seminole word for alligator that they recognize it instantly as the Alpatiokee Swamp they dreaded crossing so fiercely.

The Allapattah Flats are no home to man. Even the Seminoles had built their town high above them at the south end of the western ridge. The wetlands in the Flats teem with alligators and wading birds. Florida panthers stalk deer and hogs on the low ridges and in the shade of oak hammocks that are delicately decorated with bromeliads and wild flowers. Eagles soar above, and the rattling trumpets of sandhill cranes echo across the freshwater wetlands announcing both dawn and dusk.

During the day, our visitors pass undisturbed through woods and wetlands, on horseback or on foot, just as they always did. At the end of the day, they watch a fiery sunset with fellow travelers at a primitive campground and then huddle around campfires and gaze up at a timeless sky.

If the air is soft and warm, water droplets hover and dance in the firelight and a rainbow encircles the moon. If it is cool and dry, the stars twinkle like diamonds and, with no other lights to disturb the eye, the glow of the Milky Way reveals a ghostly path across the night sky. They hear the

sound of the land breathing in the night as they always did.



Figure 34: Sunset on the Allapattah Flats. Photo by Paul Strauss.

The one thing that has changed over the 140 years since these time travelers first arrived on Florida's last frontier is the Martin Grade, itself. It is no longer a narrow, winding path worn by boots and moccasins between Lake Okeechobee and the settlements along the St. Lucie River.

In 2030, the Martin Grade runs straight as an arrow east and west. It is two lanes

wide, and its smooth asphalt surface is a real improvement over the two-rut road that plagued the earliest automobiles that followed these first settlers into the woods not long after they got here.

Yet, the Martin Grade also feels familiar. As it cuts across the western Seminole Ridge, hundred-year-old trees crowd against its edges. Their limbs still join together overhead creating a natural tunnel that protects travelers from the sun and the rain, like the comforting shade of an ancient oak hammock.

To the east, our visitors marvel at the modern bridges and culverts that allow them to cross the Allapattah Flats without having to wade through chest-deep wetlands on the lookout for alligators, panthers, and bears. They smile at the younger trees that line this section of the road, seeing the canopy they will become over the next 100 years in their mind's eye.

Other than the road and the fancy new motor vehicles that use it, little seems to have changed. Even though almost a thousand homesteaders now live along the ridge, they are still private folk with their homes set back out of sight from the road. The land is still used for hunting, farming, or grazing.



Figure 35: Range cow in the morning on the Allapattah Flats. Photo by Tom Claud

Although some of the newcomers have closed off the open range, cattle still roam almost 40 thousand acres of open land protected by the government.

The big surprise comes when our visitors leave the Grade and discover that the rest of Florida has left the land and spirit of the frontier so far behind. At first they would not recognize Lake Okeechobee to the west.

The cypress forests and sandy beaches that used to echo with crashing waves were replaced by a dike in 1939 to tame its raging floods. From the top of the dike, the visitors watch with awe as bass boats fly across the grassy flats to take credit for their record catches. Gone are the steamboats loaded with supplies and people out for Sunday gatherings. They have no way of knowing that the “Big Water” once ran black with pollution because, on that day in 2030, it looks just as bountiful as it did when they first saw it.

To the south, the Seminoles have abandoned their Seminole Town at the south end of the high sand ridge to catch the breezes blowing across the Flats. It has been transformed into the thriving community of Indiantown, with its solid industrial jobs and pleasant family neighborhoods. They are surprised to learn that the Seminoles now run ranches, rodeos and casinos just west of Okeechobee City.

The time travelers are not totally surprised that the community they called Tantie has been renamed and has grown into the world-renowned ranching and fishing community of Okeechobee City, with its stately city squares that were laid out in the open prairie north of the Lake by modern urban planners for Henry Flagler’s railroad which arrived around 1915. They always had ambition for their community and had hoped that Flagler might bring his railroad down to the Lake’s north shore after he completed the Overseas Railroad to Key West. What they do not realize is that it took 100 years for Flagler’s vision for their community to become reality.

To the east, Stuart on the St. Lucie River seems much closer than it used to be, because they no longer have to circumnavigate the Alpatiokee Swamp to get there. Stuart still feels like a small town, however, with its friendly people and familiar general store standing on the banks of the St. Lucie River.

Yet, 20<sup>th</sup> Century bridges tower over the rivers and the pineapple fields that provided

the region's major cash crop have been overcome by the hustle and bustle of 21<sup>st</sup> Century civilization. With an odd sense of reverse nostalgia, they begin to yearn to be back on the Grade – back in the beauty of nature, back in the quiet of their own time.

It is only then that our visitors from 1890 begin to understand why, in 2030, like-minded people from all over the world seek out the serenity and beauty of the Martin Grade. It takes these newcomers back to the Florida frontier our time travelers crossed the wilderness to find – the frontier that felt like it would last forever.

At first, they don't understand why time seems to have stood still on the Martin Grade. But, as they head for home, they stop at the Way Stations along the Grade to read its history. By reading about their future, they begin to grasp how the dreams they brought with them were achieved, but at a cost much greater than they anticipated. They realize how much damage had been done and how deeply the people of Martin County had to love the land, because it took so much effort to protect what was left and to restore so much of what had been lost.

Their last stop is at a picnic area in the shade of the oldest and deepest trees.



Figure 36: Dappled light through Martin Grade Tree Canopy. Photo by Nancy Oliver.

There, the time travelers linger a while with modern-day visitors who gaze with reverence at the light filtering through the canopy as if it were shining through the stained-glass windows of a green cathedral.

After a moment of silence, that light takes them back in time and they are home, knowing that, in 2030, the Florida frontier that they love will survive along the Martin Grade because the people of Martin County care, and through it all, the land remembers.

## VISION STATEMENT II – Goals Achieved:

In 2030, all of the initial goals of the Martin Grade Corridor Advocacy Group have been achieved. The people of Martin County are thrilled that the addition of the Martin Grade to the Florida Scenic Highway program has been such a success.

One of the reasons is that, although the Martin Grade is the best known and most beloved of Florida's Scenic Highways, it is truly a scenic highway with an emphasis on the quiet, rural lifestyle of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. As a result, it is not a high-volume destination for tourists seeking excitement and flashy adventure. Rather, it attracts only visitors who share the values of the residents. They come to view the tree canopy, to hike and camp at primitive campsites in the Allapattah Flats, and to ride the Fox Brown Equestrian trails. These visitors are more like good neighbors than like tourists.

The initial six miles of tree canopy, mostly west of Fox Brown Road, have become the iconographic symbol of Martin County's unique commitment to maintaining the quality of life of its residents. As a result, protection for the Martin Grade's scenic values has phenomenal support from the people of Martin County and is a key part of the Martin County Comprehensive Plan which has been renowned as one of the best in Florida since 1990.

Because Martin County's commitment to protecting the tree canopy has also received the support of citizens groups in other parts of Florida, Martin County has

been able to negotiate inter local agreements with surrounding counties to divert traffic generated by new development off the Grade. As a result, all needs for widening the roadway have been removed from local and regional long-range transportation plans. Additionally, all local governments and the state have agreed that all road improvements will be achieved in the manner that has the least possible negative impact on the tree canopy and the surrounding neighborhoods.

Pursuant to the Corridor Management Plan, arborists and other environmental professionals have evaluated the health of the trees, and the CME has initiated programs to implement their recommendations. This includes programs for environmentally sensitive ditch cleaning and shoulder mowing. Exotic plants have been removed, and a program for keeping them at bay has been implemented. Where appropriate, replacement trees have been planted along with understory. Additionally, the Corridor Management Entity, working with Martin County, and numerous civic groups and individuals, has planted an additional five miles of roadway with new trees that will expand the canopy to most of the Corridor's length when they mature.

The CME has also worked with Martin County and the South Florida Water Management District to acquire all of the land targeted for acquisition to complete the Indian River Lagoon portion of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. It has also assisted in completing the

acquisition programs of other agencies. As a result, over 40,000 acres of land that borders the Martin Grade is in public conservation. The Allapattah Flats have successfully been rehydrated and have regenerated themselves into a functional part of the Northern Everglades. The rest of the Indian River Lagoon Plan is also fully functional, with the result that both Lake Okeechobee and the St. Lucie River are regaining their health.

The CME has worked closely with the government agencies involved to create additional public access to these properties along the Grade. Using these facilities, the CME helped expand the nature-based recreational opportunities along the Grade for its residents and visitors alike, and numerous new Way Stations have been created to tell more of the Martin Grade's Story.

The CME has also enjoyed a very close working relationship with the owners of the Becker Groves Country Store and Rural Service Center that is located at the eastern entrance to the Martin Grade. The Country Store complex was designed to capture the spirit of the Martin Grade, and, in combination with the Way Station located there, it gives visitors a strong sense of history and place. The welcoming, rural atmosphere of its café and other shops give campers, hikers, and other visitors an opportunity to get to know each other and residents of the Grade, who consider it their place.

On the western half of the Grade, the CME's emphasis has been to work closely with private landowners and local, state, and federal agencies to protect and preserve the tree canopy and the rural quality of the scenic vista. The CME has helped land owners who wanted to develop their land, rather than preserve it, design their projects in a way that is consistent with Martin County's Land Development Regulations that protect the Grade's scenic qualities. It has also assisted other land owners place conservation easements over their land so that they can keep it in their families for generations to come.

Because they play such large roles in the Martin Grade's Story and because the Grade offers only nature-based recreation and tourism opportunities, the CME has worked closely with the tourist agencies in Stuart, Indiantown, and Okeechobee City to direct over-night tourists to hospitality facilities in those communities. As a result, the Martin Grade has become an integral part of a regional nature-based tourism industry.

As a result of the successful partnerships the CME has developed with land owners, governments, and major components of the private sector, it has enjoyed and will continue to enjoy steady and reliable funding from a variety of sources. This has made it possible for the CME to maintain a visible and positive presence in the region and to stay actively involved in all aspects of planning and development within a 40-mile radius around the Grade. As a result, the CME has been able to identify issues that

could potentially affect the roadway and to proactively alleviate any potential impacts.

Building on its successes, which are shored up by the commitment of Martin County to maintain the Florida Scenic Highway designation on the Martin Grade, in the future the CME will continue to focus on maintaining and improving the scenic values of the roadway and developing amenities along the Grade that are compatible with the neighborhood and with its Story, while assisting land owners along the Grade to achieve their goals. This will require eternal vigilance and a marketing plan that is carefully crafted to attract the kinds of visitors who will respect and appreciate the results of all their labor.