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INAUGURAL GULF COAST TRAIL WORKING GROUP MEETING COINCIDES WITH FLORIDA BIKE MONTH

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Tampa, FL. (March 17, 2017) – Every year, the State of Florida observes March as Florida Bicycle Month to spread awareness on the importance of bicycle-pedestrian education and safety, as well as facilities that support nonmotorized modes of transportation. On March 30, 2017, the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority (TBARTA) will hold its inaugural meeting for the Gulf Coast Trail Technical Working Group, bringing together over eleven organizations across eight counties with a year-round focus on filling in the gaps to complete the eventual 250-mile, paved bicycle-pedestrian trail, stretching from St. Petersburg to Naples.

“Without a regional team, we won’t realize a regional trail,” said Doug Hattaway of the Trust for Public Land.

The Gulf Coast Trail stretches from Pinellas County to Naples and provides a paved, off-road multi use trail for bicyclists and pedestrians through urban and rural communities across seven-counties in West Central and Southwest Florida. This initiative continues the effort of TBARTA to develop an interconnected and balanced transportation system that provides for long-term equity across the Tampa Bay Region.

“Over twenty years ago, when I started working on trails and the bicycle program, I assumed this was a recreation activity,” said Brian Smith, former Director of the Pinellas Metropolitan Planning Organization and current Chairman of the Florida Greenways & Trails Council and Forward Pinellas Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee, “we now have two-thirds of the people on the Pinellas Trail using the facility not for recreation but for work, school, social, shopping, and various other purposes.”

The Pinellas Trail Loop is an integral part of both the Coast-to-Coast Trail (C2C) and the Gulf Coast Trail; it is the fabric knitting the two state trail corridors together. The C2C goes from Titusville, and the Atlantic Ocean, to Pinellas County, and the Gulf of Mexico, where it transitions to the Gulf Coast Trail, that heads east across the Courtney Campbell Causeway into Tampa and south to Naples. These two trail corridors, when complete, will create a 550-mile spine of a paved, off-road trail network that will connect local systems through urban and rural communities across 15 counties.

Building an off-road network is one part of the equation, and not always feasible through urbanized areas in the Tampa Bay Region. So how do we ensure safety for bicyclist when they get off the trail and ride through busy road corridors alongside vehicles?

“Bicyclists have the same rules and same rights as motorists,” said Becky Afonso, Executive Director of the Florida Bicycle Association. “Alternative transportation is gaining exposure now that FDOT adopted a Complete Streets policy.”

Complete Streets, as defined by Smart Growth America, are streets for everyone. They are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorist and transit riders of all ages and abilities. Afonso said local and county governments should “embrace Complete Streets policy and educate all road users to the rights of pedestrians and cyclists.”

For more information on the Gulf Coast Trail or the Technical Working Group, contact Anthony Matonti, Senior Planner, at anthony.matonti@tbarta.com.

**Gulf Coast Trail Technical Working Group – March 30, 2017 at 10:00AM
Sarasota County Administration Building, First Floor Conference Room
1660 Ringling Boulevard, Sarasota, Florida 34236**

TBARTA was created by the Florida Legislature in 2007 to plan and develop a multimodal transportation system that will connect the seven counties of the Tampa Bay region – Citrus, Hernando, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas and Sarasota. For more information, visit www.TBARTA.com.