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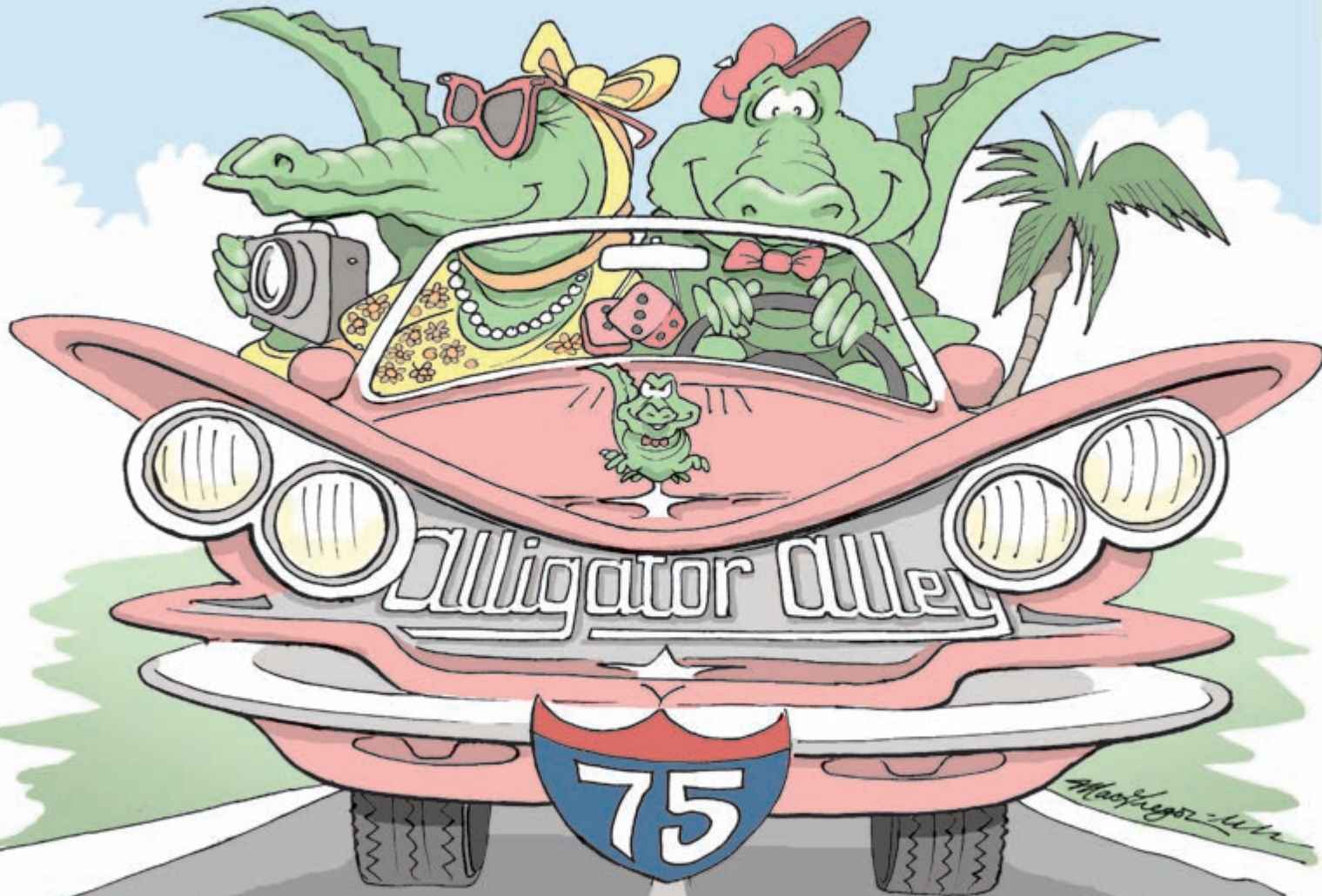
| INSIDE |



Yoko comes in peace

Abstract art at the Rauschenberg Gallery. **C1** ▶

Cruisin' along



Our east-west corridor through the wilderness

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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BOB NAPIOR MAY BE THE LAST PERSON YOU see for 50 miles, or the first in 50 miles, depending on which direction you're heading. He's the guy you see when you're out of gas and full of pee and in need of a Subway sandwich or cigarettes.

He's the manager at the BP food mart and service station at exit 101 off Interstate 75 in Naples, where he's worked for a decade. Mr. Napior is happy to answer a

SEE RIDE, A8 ▶



Music Walk

And other society shots around town. **C29-31** ▶



Foreclosure inventory

The unfinished business of the housing crisis. **B1** ▶



May I have this dance?

Life lessons from the ballroom. **A23** ▶

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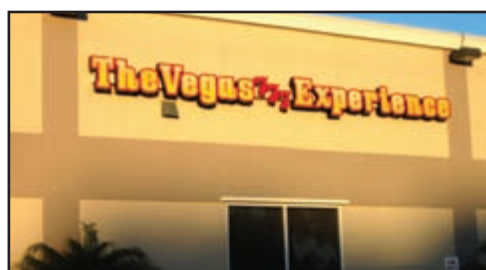


Senior arcade owners cautiously reopen their doors

BY ATHENA PONUSHIS
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Last spring, legislators moved to shut down Internet cafes and senior arcades with haste. Within three months, a niche industry that bloomed in recent years by catering mostly to seniors disappeared.

A law passed in April did not ban the businesses, but it did ban cash prizes, gift cards and machines that too closely resembled slot machines. Now a number



OSVALDO PADILLA / FLORIDA WEEKLY

The Vegas Experience is one of a handful of senior arcades that have reopened.

of venues are reemerging with retrofitted machines, giving away linens and electronics, playing by the rules.

"Bad politics shut the arcades down," says Karen Kopp, owner of The Vegas Experience, a senior arcade in South Fort Myers.

Ms. Kopp has been in business for eight years. She shut her arcade down for two months immediately following the new

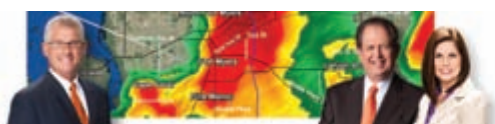
SEE ARCADE, A18 ▶

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ROGER WILLIAMS A2
OPINION A4
NEWS OF THE WEIRD A13
ANTIQUES A15

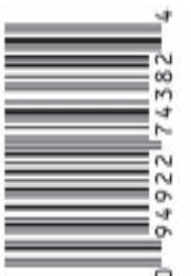
HEALTHY LIVING A30
PETS A34
BUSINESS B1
REAL ESTATE B10

ARTS C1
EVENTS C6-7
SOCIETY C29-32
CUISINE C35



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DOUG MACGREGOR ILLUSTRATION

DOUG MACGREGOR ILLUSTRATION



Bob Napior manages the BP food mart and service station just before the toll onto I-75.

Alligator Alley was expanded to four lanes in 1993.



RIDE

From page 1

question or ring up a soda, dispatching customers with polite, easy efficiency. The South Florida-themed souvenirs sell well, the taxidermy alligator heads most of all. About two-thirds of Mr. Napior's customers are either getting on or off the Alley, he estimates.

"Half are in a hurry."

From there, the highway turns into a toll road: four lanes shooting arrow-straight, east and west across the wilderness of the Everglades. The 75-mile stretch has been called Alligator Alley ever since it opened in 1968 as a two-lane state road. Today's version opened in 1993. It ends (or begins) in Weston, taking travelers on to the greater Miami and Fort Lauderdale areas.

Known for being the speediest route across the peninsula, the Alley splits two distinct ecosystems — the Everglades and the freshwaters of the Big Cypress Swamp. Beyond the roadway, there are hidden ghost orchids, panthers, alligators and invasive pythons. It took months and truckloads of dynamite to blast out the trail. Nearly two decades later, planners reworked the road to make it safer for people and animals, and better for the Everglades. But today, drivers reaching triple-digit miles per hour aren't that uncommon.

After paying a \$3 toll, a driver can end up in Miami a couple of hours later, without noticing the National Panther Wildlife Refuge, Big Cypress National Preserve, and the greater Everglades, a vast wilderness inhabited permanently only by wildlife and the Seminole and

Micosukee Indian Tribes. There are numerous exit points into Big Cypress for hiking, hunting and fishing, and scenes of breathtaking beauty if the trip is at least as much about the journey as the destination. People drive it for all kinds of reasons.

Mitchell Austin of Punta Gorda uses the Alley to get to continuing education courses on the other coast, and to go to sporting events like Miami Dolphins games.

"It's this little ribbon of perceived civilization because you're on this super-highway," said Mr. Austin, a 39-year-old city planner. "But right off it you're in the wilds. You're not the top of the food chain out there."

Pull off the road, and escape

At 4:07 p.m. on a Sunday in mid-January, a transparent white moon hung above the road.

You pass exit 80 at the State Road 29 overpass. If you get off, signs point to main entry points for Big Cypress National Preserve (729,000 acres) and Everglades National Park (1.5 million acres).

Down the road, mile marker 70 has stops for both east and westbound traffic. There are no bathroom facilities, but there is a place to get out and stretch — as well as access to Big Cypress National Preserve. About a quarter mile in on a trail, a deer's footprint was printed in the mud, and the sun was dropping below the tree line. It leads into the Turner River Unit of the preserve, which contains more than 170 miles of trails.

Fort Myers-based town planner Bill Spikowski remembers stopping there once with his son.

"We walked two or three miles that

day. We probably saw 50 alligators sunning themselves," he recalls.

There is also access to the preserve at mile marker 51 for westbound travelers. Once the state is finished refurbishing a rest stop later this year, there will be access at mile marker 63, said Bob DeGross, spokesperson for the Big Cypress National Preserve. There are hiking, hunting, fishing and camping opportunities.

"Driving across (the Alley), you go through two distinct regions of the Everglades ecosystem," he explained. "As you drive from Fort Lauderdale west to about mile marker 48 or so you're in the open sawgrass prairies of the greater Everglades. And then west of mile marker 48 or so you get up into the Big Cypress, and so you go from this vast open area of the Everglades to more of a mosaic of several different habitats."

"It's really a remote region that people don't really think about. They just drive 90 miles per hour through it. But if they really take their time to look around, they'll find that it's a unique area that provides an opportunity of escape from the very large urban areas on the east and west sides of it."

At the rest stop

The only fully equipped rest stop to gas up or eat on the Alley is off exit 49 at Snake Road, 50 miles from Mr. Napior at the BP station. It's run by the Micosukee Tribe on its largest reservation, totaling 74,812 acres, according to the tribe website. The Business Council, which handles public relations, didn't respond to a request for comment. The Tribe is not known for responding to requests from journalists.

The reservation lies north and south of the Alley. The tribe protects 55,000

in the know

Everglades National Park:

>> www.nps.gov/ever/index.htm

Big Cypress National Preserve:

>> www.nps.gov/bicy/index.htm

acres as wetlands, with another 20,000 reserved for development. Of that, 13,000 acres is leased for cattle grazing. The rest includes the service station and Micosukee police substation.

Along Josie Billie Highway, about a 20-minute drive from the Micosukee stop, you'll find the Seminole Indians' Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki museum, boardwalk and other attractions. The gently winding drive goes through countryside. At 5:16 p.m. sprawling fields with cows were lit in hazy gold. On the other side of the road, vultures pecked at the lifeless body of a small alligator.

At 5:49 p.m. a family watched football at the Seminole gift shop and convenience store. A teenage couple looked at clothes, bows and arrows. On a bulletin board outside, a swamp buggy was for sale for \$35,000.

"My loss is your gain," the ad read.

Merging back on to the Alley, it was early night with planes, stars and planets in the sky.

Surprisingly, the soundtrack to the drive along the Alley came in clearly on the radio: "Blurred Lines," "Red Red Wine," "Every Breath You Take," "Stay-in' Alive," something by Chopin, and a country song.

"Take the keys to my heart and the keys to my car and just drive," the singer moaned.

Alligator Alley

By the numbers ...

75

The distance between the Alley's tollbooths, from mile marker 25 at the eastern end to 100 at the western end. The highway is also called Interstate 75.

\$19.6

Millions of dollars of tolls collected in 2012

19,500

Average number of vehicles per day traveled the Alley in 2012.

\$3.56

Millions of dollars for the cost of tollbooth operations in 2010

110

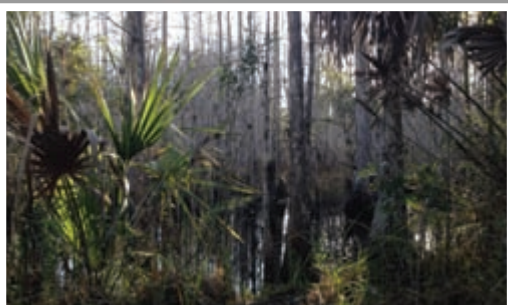
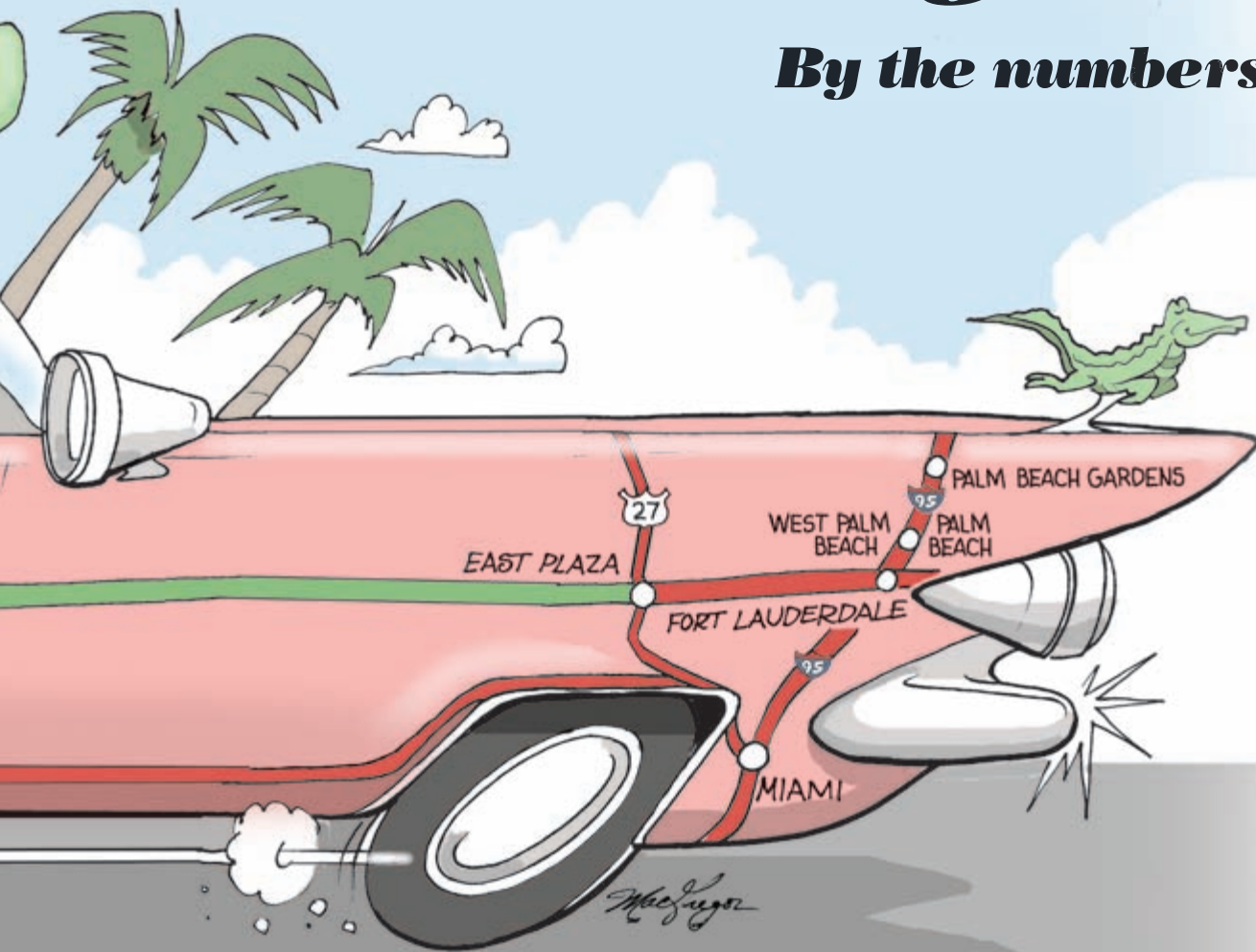
Miles per hour: How fast L.A. Dodgers outfielder Yasiel Puig was driving one Saturday night this December. He was stopped by FHP near mile marker 99.

\$1.50

the toll in 1969

\$3

the toll cost today



Motorists can pull off the road in several spots to view the native flora and wildlife.

Alligator Alley in 1969



Driving at night, the wilderness seemed deeper, and the highway narrower, the traveler guided by lights as electronic message boards blinked the minutes to the next exit.

First, strip off the muck

In spite of fierce opposition, the original Alley, two-lane State Road 84, opened in February 1968.

"The (American Automobile Association) thought up the name of Alligator Alley to express supreme contempt for a road which it said was 'designed with a flagrant disregard for essential safety; that didn't to where its proponents said it would go; and that charged a toll besides,'" wrote August Burghard in his 1969 account, "Alligator Alley: Florida's Most Controversial Highway."

But 10 years before that, the Seminole Indians supported construction of the Alley and granted a right of way across their reservation. (Later, the Miccosukee Tribe split from the Seminole). Collier and Broward counties in 1961 pledged gasoline tax funds to guarantee construction bonds.

Clearing the way for the road was a tremendous effort. The Alley required a truckload of dynamite for rock blasting each week.

"Huge draglines, walking on special mats, inched their way out into the sawgrass to strip off the muck," Mr. Burghard wrote. "Barges carrying dynamite drills floated in behind these draglines to blast out the lime rock of the 'Glades floor.'"

Finally, the highway was laid, providing "a farm-to-market route for agricultural products and a swift, time-saving path across peninsula Florida for tourists."

The road was "... a badly needed transportation link between two of our

state's fastest growing areas," said then Road Commissioner Jay Brown.

The Alley today still fulfills those needs, but there were major changes in the late 1980s. The state undertook a widening project, making it four lanes, two each way. The new highway opened in 1993.

Catching cars in the canals

Jim Noth remembers when the Alley was widened. As a two-lane road, "It was very dangerous," said Mr. Noth, vice president and transportation director with the West Palm Beach engineering firm Erdman Anthony.

"People would get behind trucks so you start getting more aggressive trying to pass. And if you dropped off the road, you basically just dropped off into the swamps."

But it wasn't just extra lanes that made the modern version a success. Mr. Noth recalls walking into the office of an old colleague who was working on the new design for FDOT. He saw a map on the wall with unusual lines drawn on it that marked the paths of panthers — collared and tracked — as they crossed the Alley. The state used the data to help design points where wildlife could cross under the road. Fences guide them to those points.

"There was a lot that went into that that I don't think people really recognize," Mr. Noth said.

It also improved the flow of water through the Everglades, which is often likened to one big, slow-moving river, from north to south.

"The old one probably functioned more as a dam in the Everglades than anything else," Mr. Noth said. "The new I-75, what we call Alligator Alley, addresses those kinds of things; (it

addresses, if you will, sins of the past."

More recently, cables running along the bottom of the fenceline are designed to help stop cars from sliding into a canal. As soon as a car runs into them, FDOT employees who monitor traffic from remote locations are alerted and strobe lights on the road begin flashing. Adding the cables, said FDOT spokesperson Debbie Tower, was in response to vehicles and people that went missing on the Alley, who left for their destination and "simply didn't arrive." There were times they veered into canals, which can be 30 feet deep in places.

"These cars would disappear sometimes into the canal, literally submerge and disappear," Ms. Tower said. "Now, the minute that happens, we know it."

Dinner and a sunset

Capt. Rhett Morris and his wife JoEllen, owners of Beyond Borders Outfitters in Punta Gorda, often take the Alley to visit family and to vacation in Key West. Mr. Morris used to go hunting and fishing in wetlands near the Alley. He recalls sitting in a canoe in a canal one morning, counting alligators.

"You could easily count 200 alligators," he said. "It was the most incredible number of alligators in one short distance. They gravitate toward that canal when the 'Glades are drying up in the dry season.'"

On one trip he was waiting on a trail for a wild hog. It spooked before reaching him, and as it ran, a panther began its chase, parallel to the hog. Mr. Morris watched the hog travel across a 20-foot opening in a thicket with the cat in pursuit.

"(The panther) was running so fast it just happened to hit that open ground in a whole leap and it never touched the

ground," he said. "I listened to it catch the hog, 30 or 40 yards away, which I might add was very brutal and vicious sounding." He left the hunting site and headed back to civilization, hoping the cat was full. Still, after witnessing the harrowing scene, he continues to enjoy the drive across the Alley.

"It can be very scenic in the heart of the summer because of the monster thunderheads that build up around the area and watching those as you drive across can be pretty neat," he said. "There are some instances where you'll run into an approaching storm with the sun setting in the west on the way home. It's totally different watching them cross the beautiful grass prairie."

If you blink, you might miss it

Some drivers say they rarely see gators on the Alley, while others have more luck. It depends on different factors, such as the time of year, said Mr. DeGross of Big Cypress Preserve. Along with other wildlife, they may concentrate in canals or near water in the winter when it's dry. If it's cold outside they may stay down at the bottom. It also helps if you're familiar with the landscape, and of course if you slow down and stop at an access point.

Panthers, black bear, coyote, bobcats and white-tailed deer make their home in the preserve. Birds along the Alley include great blue herons, American egrets, ibis, little blue herons, wood storks and snow egrets. Especially in the evening, large flocks of white birds may roost in groups, "and it looks like snow on the trees," Mr. DeGross said.

The road is surrounded by herbaceous

RIDE

From page 9

vegetation such as lilies and brooms hedge, and of course, sawgrass. The sprawling cypress forests go dormant in the winter as the days become shorter. A wispy brown color in January, they're often studded with nest-like clumps of bromeliads or "air plants" (not parasitic) that cling to the trees as support.

"(Cypress trees) usually begin to leaf out again depending on a number of factors but typically around middle to late March," Mr. DeGross said.

You can see bears, too

These days, you're as likely to see a state trooper as you are an alligator on the Alley. Speeding is the biggest problem, and Florida Highway Patrol is aggressive about keeping a presence and enforcement. Distracted driving — texting, picking something up from the floor, chatting with other people in the car — exacerbates the problem.

"(It) is in a sense a true limited access highway," said Trooper Ken Watson with the FHP. "It is a straightaway. That's where we have our issues with really high speed."

The average speed throughout I-75 is 80 mph, Mr. Watson estimates, or 10 miles over the limit.

"It seems to be consistent throughout the whole state," he said. "Now you go to Alligator Alley, you can crank it up a little bit more. We have more triple digit speeds on a daily basis on that stretch of highway. Because it's such a high rate of speed if you have failure of any of your wheels, you're going to be flipping, spinning, the good word to use would be a catastrophic crash. Chances of survival are slim."

Mr. Watson remembers pulling over a motorcyclist riding with his girlfriend. They were doing 136 miles per hour, he said; fast enough that you could crash just from turning your head the wrong way into the wind.

Almost all the crashes on the Alley are due to "human factors," he stresses. In other words, they're preventable. Nearly three-quarters of crashes on the Alley occur in clear weather, and the majority occurs between 6 a.m. and 1 p.m.

"Either someone is looking at their phone, they're not paying attention or because it's such a linear road people have a tendency to go into a kind of trance," he said. ■

in the know

What's been said

■ "Please Lord, I've been a good man. So if I get cotton-mouth bit, or attacked by some of Oscar the Alligator's brothers, and if I get to that Big Job in the Sky, oh, please, Lord, let it be on dry land. Amen!"

— Prayer by an anonymous construction worker on the Alley, from August Burghard's 1969 book, "Alligator Alley."

■ "The Alley is the fastest. If you've gotta get somewhere fast, you take it. That's why I think it's kind of unpleasant to drive."

— Bill Spikowski, Fort Myers-based town planner

■ "There were what I'll call lilies, small bushes, along the side of the road as I was heading toward Miami-Dade County — about five to 10 minutes away from the toll booth. I noticed the lilies were covered in something gauzy and damp — spiderwebs. Mile after mile of thousands — tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of spiderwebs. It was beautiful how they went on and on,

the sunrise bouncing off of them — translucent nets catching and warping yellows and oranges. I thought about this innumerable army of spiders keeping the mosquito population under control."

— Osvaldo Padilla, editor, Fort Myers Florida Weekly

■ "That idea of connecting places to enable mobility and economic growth are certainly critical..."

"It would be a much different road if there were opportunities for development along it."

— Steven E. Polzin, P.h.D., director of mobility policy, Center for Urban Transportation Research

■ "Honestly I find that people drive on that road about the same speed they drive on I-75 through this state. You've got your people puttering along at 65 miles per hour and people going more or less the speed limit and people flying 90 plus miles per hour."

— Mitchell Austin, city planner for Punta Gorda



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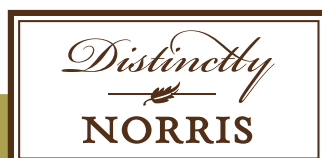


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