

SARASOTA

## Sarasota County shifts \$15.6 million to key evacuation route

*Sarasota County shifts \$15.6 million toward widening River Road and may redirect another \$7.5 million from a school grant.*



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Sarasota Herald-Tribune

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### Key Points

- Sarasota County allocated \$15.6 million in federal funds to help widen a 7.2-mile stretch of South River Road.
  - The funds became available after a plan to buy a golf course for flood mitigation was abandoned.
  - The county also voted to terminate a \$7.5 million grant to the Sarasota County School District from a separate hurricane recovery fund.
  - Commissioners have expressed interest in redirecting the terminated \$7.5 million grant to the River Road widening project.
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*(This story was updated because an earlier version contained an inaccuracy.)*

The Sarasota County Commission moved closer to fully funding the [widening of River Road south of Tamiami Trail](#) on Aug. 26, when it allocated \$15.611 million in federal Resilient SRQ funding meant to aid in recovery from the 2024 hurricane season.

That gap could close even further if commissioners follow through on plans to terminate a \$7.5 million Resilient SRQ award to the Sarasota County School District.

The widening of a sometimes tortuous 7.2-mile stretch of South River Road between U.S. 41 and Winchester Boulevard — technically a portion of the [River](#)

[Road Regional Interstate Connector](#) — has been a goal of Sarasota County since 2002.

When county commissioners reviewed transportation goals at an April 22 workshop, they were still about \$26.5 million short of the funding required for what was then an \$88 million project.

Sarasota had earmarked \$15.611 million from the 2024 federal grant to [buy Forest Lakes Golf Course](#) for a flood mitigation project.

A local group opted to buy the course and keep it open, thus freeing up that sum.

It was an easy choice for the five commissioners to dedicate those funds to River Road.

“I’d rather take a big bite of the apple and I mean a big bite of the apple and complete an infrastructure project,” said County Commissioner Teresa Mast, who would later make the motion to apply the \$15.611 million to the road project.

A total of \$70,325,616 in Resilient SRQ funds has been allocated to widening South River Road — \$40 million following Hurricane Ian and \$30,325,616 following the 2024 hurricane season.

Commission Chairman Ron Cutsinger, an Englewood resident, said the opportunity to almost fully fund widening of the evacuation route was paramount.

“This is infrastructure 101, this is such a valid need,” Cutsinger said.

## **What is the Resilient SRQ program?**

Resilient SRQ was created in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian as a way to administer U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery funds.

Sarasota County [received \\$201.5 million](#) from the federal government in 2023 to pay for recovery from Hurricane Ian.

The funds are intended to assist low- to moderate-income households and will fall within one of these categories: housing, restoration of infrastructure, economic revitalization, and mitigation.

The federal funding [can be used for activities](#) like rebuilding homes, fixing damaged infrastructure, and assisting business owners affected by the hurricane.

Sarasota County received another \$210.1 million following the 2024 hurricane season.

More information on both programs can be found at [resilientsrq.net](https://resilientsrq.net).

## **Why is Sarasota County canceling a \$7.5 million grant to the school district?**

The \$7.5 million was intended to allow the school district to expand the STC North Port campus to increase its ability to train electricians, carpenters and air-conditioning maintenance workers.

Instead, according to a proposal outlined in a letter by Superintendent of Schools Terry Connor, the district wanted to spend the \$7.5 million on equipment and furnishings at both the North Port and Sarasota technical college campuses.

“A key component of this request is the expansion of our Nursing Program,” Connor wrote. “Sarasota County continues to experience a significant demand for qualified healthcare professionals, a need that will only increase with the continued growth of the Sarasota Memorial Health Care System and its expanding presence in the North Port community.”

In a follow-up email, Connor noted that expansion of the North Port campus was never taken off of the table and the School District planned to use its own capital funds on construction costs.

There were as many as five school district representatives in chambers when county commissioners discussed the proposed change of what was meant to be an expansion of construction trade training in North Port.

Commissioner Joe Neunder said that in his mind the intent of the award was site-specific to North Port and for those specific jobs.

He later characterized the proposal as a “my way or the highway approach,” a mindset that led the County Commission to reject the proposal on a 5-0 vote.

Even without that mindset, county officials worried that the proposed change would have meant that the project would not be in line with HUD requirements.

On a second 5-0 vote, which occurred after the board agreed to spend the \$15.6 million of 2024 grant funds on River Road, the commission voted to terminate the school board contract.

As part of that process, the county will send the school district a 30-day notice of its intent to terminate the contract, something that could leave a window open for both sides to resurrect the deal.

School district spokeswoman Kelsey Whealy said the district requested the change “after learning through the initial process that nearly half of the \$7.5 million award could be consumed by compliance-related costs rather than directly supporting the STC-North Port trades academy.”

“Sarasota County Schools’ goal was to preserve as much funding as possible for the project and fulfill the grant’s intended purpose,” she added.

Connor, in a prepared statement, called the county commission’s decision unexpected.

“The district had no indication that revocation of the full \$7.5 million award was under consideration,” Connor said. “Our understanding was that if the requested

revisions were not approved, the parties would proceed under the original agreement, which had already received approval.

“Given that understanding, we are disappointed that the district was not provided an opportunity to continue under the original terms before the funding was revoked.”

The \$7.5 million is part of a \$15 million sum earmarked for education and training as part of the Hurricane Ian recovery grant.

In October 2023, county commissioners awarded \$7.5 million to the school district to expand programs at the Suncoast Technical College North Port campus and \$7.5 million to the Building Industry Institute, a nonprofit affiliated with the Suncoast Builders Association which is run under the auspices of CEO Jon Mast — Teresa Mast’s husband.

Mast, who was elected to the commission in 2024, recused herself in April 2025, when the funds were [pulled from the Building Institute on a 3-1 vote](#).

## **What’s next?**

Though anecdotally school district officials are now aware of Sarasota County’s intent to cancel the \$7.5 million award, they must receive a formal notice before the 30-day window begins.

Though no official vote has occurred yet, all five county commissioners expressed an interest in spending the \$7.5 million on widening River Road.

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