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THE SARASOTA News Leader

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With \$15.6-million boost, county commissioners believe South River Road improvements finally might be completed

September 3, 2026 by Rachel Brown Hackney, Editor & Publisher

Mast proposes use of leftover Resilient SRQ money

Available Funds by Allocation:

- Hurricane Ian – Infrastructure and Public Facilities
 - Fire Department Logistics Warehouse Generator Grant - **\$87,675 unallocated (\$97,675 less \$10,000 environmental)**
- Hurricane Ian – Multifamily Affordable Housing
 - Ekos at Arbor Park II - **\$990,000 unallocated (\$1,000,000 less \$10,000 environmental)**

Total Hurricane Ian: \$1,077,675 unallocated.

- 2024 Storms – Infrastructure and Public Facilities
 - Forest Lakes Floodplain Creation / Mitigation Initiative unable to move forward - **\$15,611,000 unallocated.**

Total 2024 Storms: \$15,611,000 unallocated.



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This is a slide that Resilient SRQ Program Manager Steve Hyatt showed the commissioners on Aug. 26. Image courtesy Sarasota County Government

In early July 2023, the Sarasota County commissioners seated at the time agreed to dedicate \$25 million out of a federal grant for recovery from Hurricane Ian to improvements to South River Road, which is a major evacuation route not only for South County residents but also for those in Charlotte County, as county staff has pointed out.

The team handling what has been known as the [Resilient SRQ Program](#) had recommended a \$30-million award for that project.

In a June 2024 update to the County Commission, Spencer Anderson, then-director of the county's Public Works Department — which handled both transportation and stormwater work — acknowledged the \$25 million for South River Road construction out of the \$201.5-million grant that the county had received from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). He indicated that the rest of the funding the county needed for the project would be expected to come from the federal government.

In fact, Rob Lewis, director of governmental relations for the county, had talked about the efforts of U.S. Rep. Greg Steube, a Sarasota Republican, to include money for River Road in the 2025 federal budget bill. [Steube's District 17 website explained at](#)

the time that he was seeking \$3 million for the River Road initiative. However, Steube ultimately was unsuccessful in that effort, county staff told *The Sarasota News Leader* on Sept. 2.

Last week — again, during a Resilient SRQ Program discussion — the commissioners took the opportunity to add another \$15,611,000 in federal dollars to the River Road initiative, thanks to unspent funds out of the county's nearly \$210.1-million HUD grant in 2025 for recovery from the 2024 storm season.

The decision came after an Aug. 26 presentation by Steve Hyatt, manager of the Resilient SRQ Program, which focused on the status of the awards that the County Commission had made out of both the HUD grants.

Hyatt had shown the board members a slide noting that, because the owner of the Forest Lakes Golf Course in Sarasota had decided not to sell the property to the county for what commissioners and Stormwater Department Director Ben Quartermaine had characterized as a “legacy stormwater initiative,” the \$15.6 million remained unspent.



Option 2 – Temporary Pause

- Option 2 –Temporary Pause for Current / Future Needs
 - **Housing Recovery Program Considerations:**
 - Hurricane Ian – 227 funded homeowners (119 remaining)
 - 2024 Storms – 189 homeowners pending award
 - **Major Infrastructure Project Considerations:**
 - River Road, St. Armands, Phillippi Creek, others.
 - Entering and/or finalizing design and construction costs.
 - **Unmet Needs Considerations:**
 - Allocations and programs are decisions at a point in time.
 - Long-term recovery needs continually evolve and change.
 - **Expenditure Timelines Considerations:**
 - Hurricane Ian – February 28, 2030
 - 2024 Storms Deadline – June 29, 2031



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This is another slide that Steve Hyatt showed the board on Aug. 26. Image courtesy Sarasota County Government

Hyatt provided a number of options for use of that money, including a review of the applications staff had received for grant funds that had not been approved. One of his proposals called for the board to consider a “Major Infrastructure Project,” such as the River Road initiative or more stormwater improvements on St. Armands Circle in the city of Sarasota or in the Phillippi Creek Basin.

Commissioner Teresa Mast was the first board member to respond to Hyatt’s request for direction, proposing that the leftover 2024 grant money go to the South River Road improvements.

“I think it’s a very critical infrastructure project that, in my opinion, needs to get across the finish line,” she said. “Its’ only been 20 years, but who’s counting?” she added.



Commissioner Teresa Mast. File image

For decades, county commissioners have talked of the need for major work on the road, to provide not only safer driving conditions, but to make it a much better hurricane evacuation route.

With the \$15.6 million added to the funding already assembled, Mast continued, “It would appear that we might have just enough funds to complete the task.”

Mast also stressed the board members’ focus on county infrastructure needs.

"It's really challenging to get *large* opportunities with a lot of money," Chair Ron Cutsinger responded, emphasizing the fact that the South River Road improvements are "desperately needed ... to benefit the entire South County region."

"We're already way down the road in getting this thing moving," he added of the plans, referring to prior allocations approved for the undertaking.

"I couldn't agree more" with Mast's proposal, Cutsinger said.

"Obviously, I'm in favor of River Road," Commissioner Mark Smith told his colleagues.

Commissioner Joe Neunder concurred, as well.

Cutsinger then pointed out that he had been hearing staff talk about the fact that construction bids have been coming in lower than anticipated. With the extra \$15.6 million, he added, "We're going to be very, very close to what we need" to finish the River Road project.

"This'd really be huge if we could go all the way to Englewood," Commissioner Tom Knight said.

Mast then made a formal motion to allocate the full \$15,611,000 to the South River Road evacuation corridor initiative. After the other board members called out "Aye," Cutsinger told them, "The chair enthusiastically votes 'Aye,' " as well.

Project plans, in detail



An aerial map shows part of Winchester Boulevard and South River Road. Image from Google Maps

The county's Capital Projects Department September update on the South River Road/Winchester Boulevard Widening Initiative explains that South River Road will be widened from two lanes to a four-lane divided roadway with open drainage. It will begin at U.S. 41 and continue down Winchester Boulevard. Then Winchester Boulevard will be widened to the Charlotte County line.

The length of the segment is approximately 7.3 miles, that update notes.

The design calls for the travel lanes in a “proposed typical section” to range from 11 to 12 feet, with a 22-foot raised median and a 5-foot to 7-foot “flush outside paved shoulder serving as an undesignated bicycle lane,” plus a 12-foot recreational trail or sidewalks along both sides of the South River Road corridor.

A 5-foot wide sidewalk is planned on the west side of Winchester Boulevard, with a 10-foot trail on the east side of Winchester.

An award of a construction contract is expected this fall, the update also points out.

The document says the start of construction is anticipated in the spring of 2027, with completion expected in the summer of 2029. (See the related article in this issue.)

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