

I-75 REST AREAS PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT (PD&E) STUDY

SARASOTA AND CHARLOTTE COUNTIES

FINAL SITE SELECTION REPORT

FINANCIAL PROJECT NO.: 436602-1-22-01

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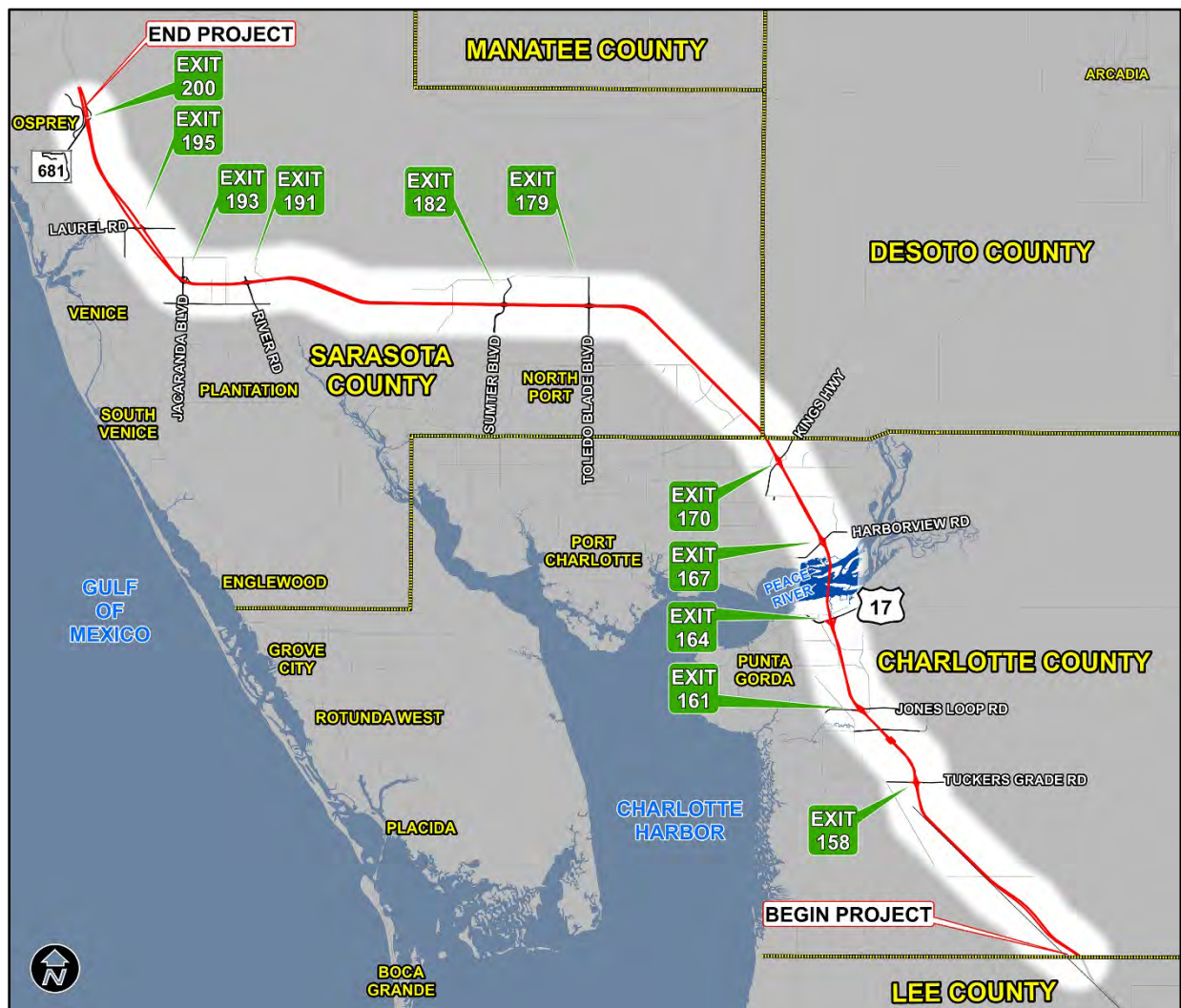
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) is conducting a Project Development and Environment (PD&E) study to identify sites for the placement of one northbound (NB) and one southbound (SB) rest area facility along I-75. The study limits extend from the Charlotte/Lee County line north to the interchange of SR 681 and I-75, see **Figure 1-1**. The total study corridor length is approximately 51 miles (22 miles in Charlotte County and 29 miles in Sarasota County). Note that there is a very small portion (approximately 0.214 miles) of I-75 located in DeSoto County between Charlotte County and Sarasota County. For this study, this portion is included in the Sarasota County portion of the project. The purpose of this report is to describe the process used to select locations for potential rest area facilities along I-75 and recommend potential sites for further detailed analysis. During the course of the PD&E study, the No Build option will remain a viable alternative until the final selection is made.

FIGURE 1-1 PROJECT LOCATION MAP



1.1 PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of FDOT rest areas on the interstate is to provide safe rest stops for the motoring public. The rest areas provide comfort and convenience with restrooms, parking, and vending machines adjacent to the interstate. The rest areas enhance safety by providing a safe place for motorists to stop, reducing

driver fatigue. Also, the rest areas can provide a site for FDOT and Florida Highway Patrol (FHP) emergency operations during disasters, such as hurricanes.

The purpose of this study is to identify the locations for the replacement of a recently closed rest area with two new rest areas (northbound and southbound). In April of 2015, the FDOT closed the Jones Loop Rest Area at exit 161 in Charlotte County. This facility was an “off-system” rest area that serviced vehicles in both directions of I-75. The closure of this facility increased the distance between existing rest area facilities. The next closest rest area is the Lee County Rest Area, located at exit 131 on Daniel’s Parkway. However, this site is planned for closure as it is also an “off-system” site. With the planned closure of the Lee County Rest Area, the nearest adjacent rest areas on I-75 are the Hillsborough County Rest Area, located at mile marker 238, and the Collier County Rest Area, located at mile marker 63. The distance between these two rest area facilities is approximately 175 miles. The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) guidelines recommend rest areas should be spaced approximately a one-hour drive between appropriate stopping opportunities. At interstate speeds, this equates to approximately 70 miles between stopping opportunities. It is important to note that one set of rest areas will not meet the recommended spacing of 70 miles between the stopping opportunities. One of the considerations for the placement of the new rest area facilities will be that they are as equidistant to the existing rest area sites as possible.

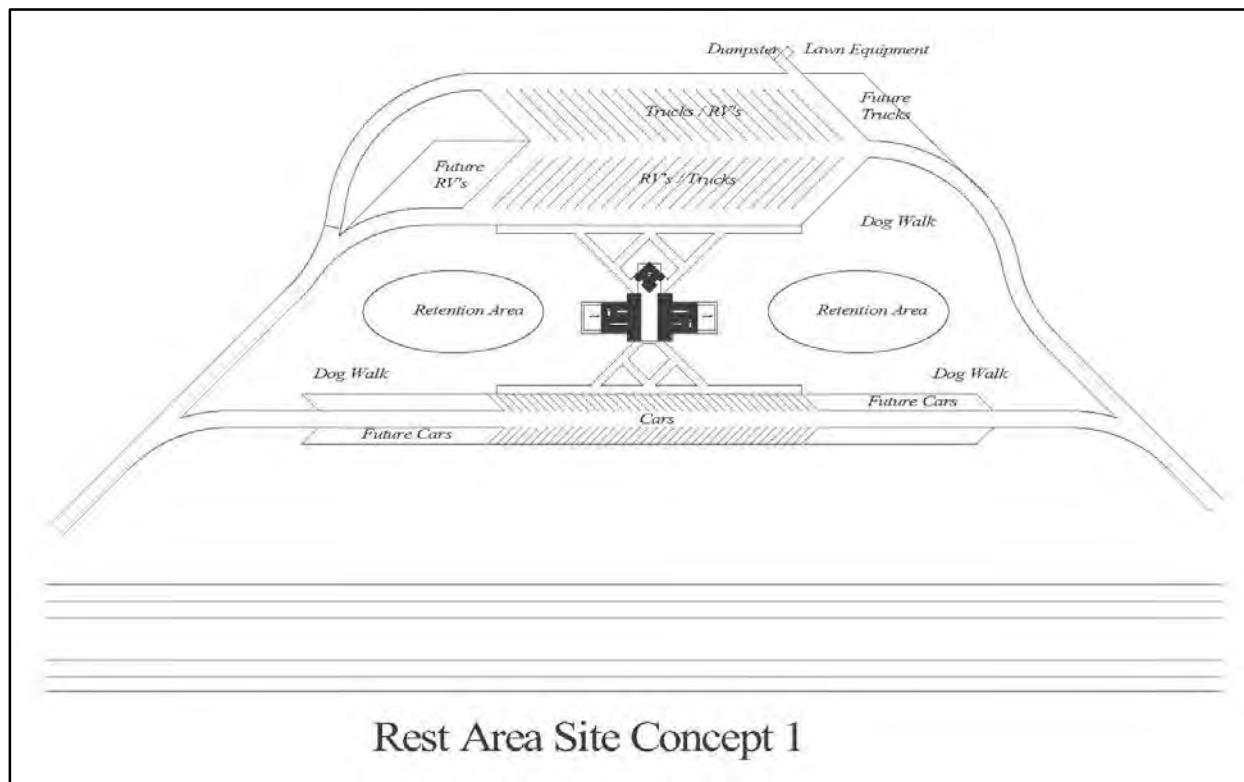
1.2 REST AREA DESIGN CONCEPT CRITERIA

A rest area facility is designed to serve several functions to accommodate automobiles, RV, and truck motorists. The rest area facility will provide:

- Separate parking for automobiles and RVs/trucks
- Restroom facilities – men, women, and family
- Vending facilities
- Facility maintenance office
- Security/Information office
- Dog walk
- Picnic pavilions

The FDOT Facilities Design manual describes two site concepts for rest areas. The first concept, see **Figure 1-2**, provides automobile parking between the interstate and the building and RV and truck parking behind the building. In this configuration, the building would have two approaches from the two parking areas. The second concept, see **Figure 1-3**, sites the building between the interstate and a single parking area for all vehicles, with only one approach connecting the building to the parking area.

FIGURE 1-2 REST AREA SITE CONCEPT #1

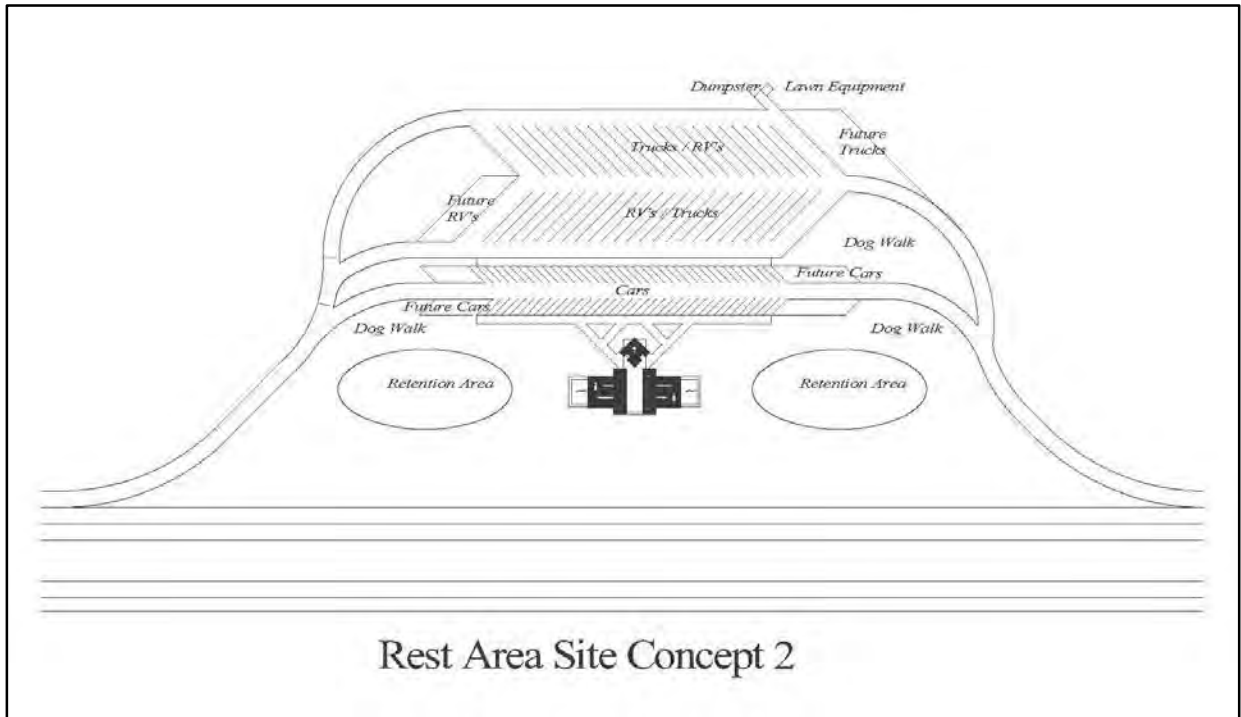


The final rest area concept may be adjusted to fit the recommended site selected during the study, to minimize and/or avoid environmental and right-of-way impacts.

The FDOT Facilities Design Manual describes two sizes of buildings, small and large, based on the number of bathroom fixtures. Based on the projected traffic along the interstates, the manual indicates that all rest area facilities on interstates will require a large building. The large building will accommodate up to 70,000 vehicles Average Daily Traffic (ADT) on the interstate. The manual also states that above this volume of traffic, the region around the rest area would be so urbanized as to probably not require the presence of a rest area. Private facilities in the area could accommodate the needs of the traveling public, eliminating the need for a public rest facility.

I-75 is an interstate highway that includes limited access rights. These limited access rights allow connection to I-75 only at specific interchanges. The rest area facility will require additional right-of-way with limited access rights, accessible only to I-75. A distance of approximately one (1) mile is needed to accommodate a large rest area facility parallel to I-75. To accommodate the building, parking and other required facilities, it is anticipated that the rest area site will be approximately 15 acres.

FIGURE 1-3 REST AREA SITE CONCEPT #2



CHAPTER 2

REST AREA LOCATION EVALUATION PROCESS

A three phase evaluation process was used to determine the best location for a new rest area for I-75. During the first phase, data was collected from a variety of sources to develop a preliminary base map of the I-75 corridor's existing conditions within the study's limits between the Charlotte/Lee County line and SR 681 in Sarasota County. During the second phase, an initial corridor screening was used to locate segments within the corridor with potential for a new rest area site. Next, a viable segment screening of the initial segments was conducted to determine which segments presented the best potential for a new rest area site. The following sections provide the details of each phase of the rest area location evaluation process.

2.1 SITE SELECTION CRITERIA

Site selection criteria used in the evaluation process were developed to reflect the purpose and need of the study, while minimizing impacts to the corridor's existing physical and natural environment. The ideal location for a new rest area would be away from existing interchanges where travelers could access similar services. The traffic characteristics of rest areas, such as large traffic volumes and truck acceleration/deceleration, generate additional noise that can be objectionable to nearby residences. Therefore, adequate distance from residential areas was important. Finally, avoidance and minimization of impacts to potential Section 4(f) resources, wetlands, listed species, and the 100-year floodplain were additional important considerations. The list below summarizes the site selection criteria used to select the most viable sites:

1. Be located greater than a mile from an existing interchange
2. Avoid or minimize Section 4(f) impacts
3. Avoid or minimize proximity to existing and planned residential areas
4. Avoid or minimize impacts to wetlands
5. Avoid or minimize impacts to the 100-year floodplain
6. Avoid or minimize impacts to listed species habitat

2.2 DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected from a variety of sources to develop a preliminary base map of the I-75 corridor's existing conditions within the study's limits. Datasets included major roads, interchange exits, city limits, county boundaries, existing and future land uses by jurisdiction, Section 4(f) resources, wetlands, and floodplains. The table below shows the datasets and sources used to develop the preliminary constraints map:

TABLE 2-1 PRELIMINARY CONSTRAINTS MAP DATA SOURCES

FEATURE DATASET	SOURCE
Interchange Locations	Florida Department of Transportation, 2015
Major Roads	Florida Department of Transportation, 2015
City Limits	GeoPlan, 2014
County Boundaries	Florida Geographic Data Library, 2015
Existing Land Use	Charlotte County Property Appraiser, 2015; Southwest Florida Water Management District, 2011; Aerial Imagery, 2014
Future Land Use	City of North Port, 2015; Sarasota County GIS, 2015; Charlotte County GIS, 2015
Section 4(f) Resources	Florida Natural Areas Inventory, 2014
Wetlands	Southwest Florida Water Management District, 2011
Flood Zones	Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Statewide National Flood Hazard Layer (NFHL), 2015; FEMA Sarasota County Preliminary NFHL, 2014

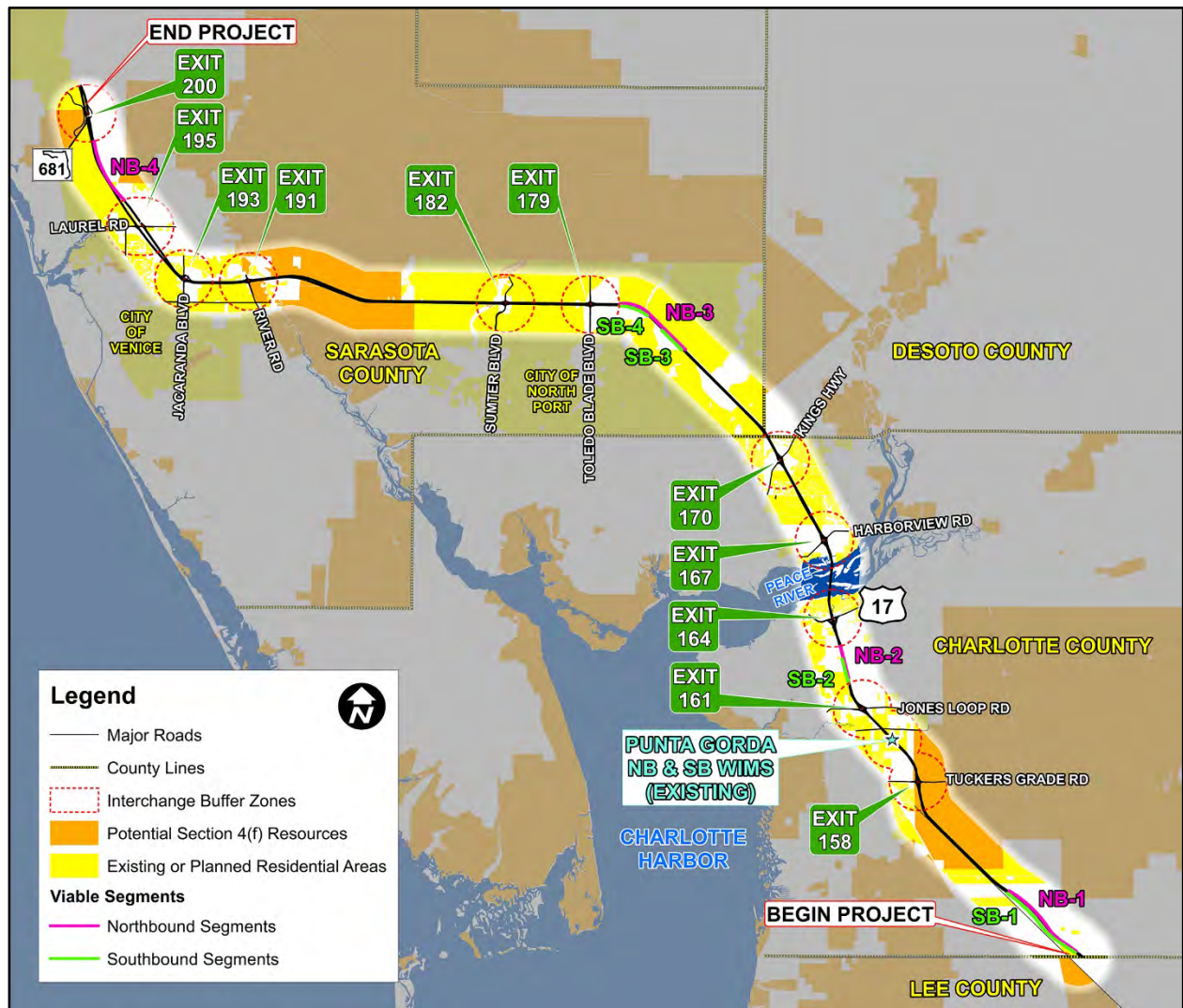
2.3 INITIAL CORRIDOR SCREENING

The initial corridor screening was based on the first three site selection criteria: interchange locations, the location of potential Section 4(f) resources, and the location of existing and planned residential areas. This preliminary constraints map shows the constraints used in the initial corridor screening to identify ten (10) viable rest area segments. The preliminary constraints map and viable segments are listed in **Table 2-2** and shown in **Figure 2-1**. These ten viable segments were advanced into the more detailed, viable segments screening phase.

TABLE 2-2 VIABLE REST AREA SEGMENTS

NAME	LOCATION DESCRIPTION
NB-1	Charlotte County, Just north of Charlotte/Lee County Line
Punta Gorda NB WIM	Charlotte County, between Exit 158 and Exit 161
NB-2	Charlotte County, near Charlotte Co. Airport between Exit 161 and Exit 164
NB-3	Sarasota County, just east of the City of North Port between Exit 170 and Exit 179
NB-4	Sarasota County, south of SR 681 between Exit 195 and Exit 200
SB-1	Charlotte County, Just north of Charlotte/Lee County Line
Punta Gorda SB WIM	Charlotte County, between Exit 158 and Exit 161
SB-2	Charlotte County, near Charlotte Co. Airport between Exit 161 and Exit 164
SB-3	Sarasota County, just east of the City of North Port between Exit 170 and Exit 179
SB-4	Sarasota County, just east of the City of North Port between Exit 170 and Exit 179

FIGURE 2-1 PRELIMINARY CONSTRAINTS MAP WITH VIABLE SEGMENTS



2.4 VIABLE SEGMENT SCREENING

The ten viable segments were analyzed and evaluated for potential impacts to the 100-year floodplain, wetlands, and listed species habitat in accordance with the site selection criteria for avoidance and minimization of impacts to these environmental features. **Figure 2-2** shows the viable segments and the detailed environmental constraints along the project corridor.

To assess impacts to the 100-year floodplain, the best available Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) data was used to map the floodplain within Sarasota and Charlotte Counties. The FEMA Statewide National Flood Hazard Layer (NFHL) from 2015 was used to map floodplain designated as Zone A Charlotte County, as well as unmapped areas of Charlotte County designated as Zone D. Sarasota County is not included in the statewide FEMA layer. Therefore, the FEMA Sarasota County Preliminary NFHL data from 2014 was used to identify the 100-year floodplain in Sarasota County. For both counties, the percentage of Zone A designated floodplain was quantified as part of the evaluation matrix.

Several resources were used to determine listed species utilization including Element Occurrence Data from the Florida Natural Areas Inventory and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's online Bald Eagle Nest Locator. Only the Bald Eagle Nest Locator was useful in determining if protected species had been documented in this area. To identify available habitat, FDOT's Florida Land Use Code and Classification System (FLUCCS) was used to call out undeveloped land uses. Land class definitions with codes 300 to 700 include Rangeland, Upland Forest, Water, Wetlands, and Barren Land. Each of these land use types could be potential habitat for listed species. Therefore, this group of land uses was designated as Available Natural Habitat for the purpose of this evaluation.

Detailed mapping and calculation of potential impacts was supplemented with a field review of each of the ten viable segments on December 30, 2015. The characteristics of each site are summarized in the following sections, along with photographs documenting existing conditions. These constraints and segment conditions were used to determine the best segments for a new rest area site.

FIGURE 2-2 VIABLE SEGMENT LOCATION MAP

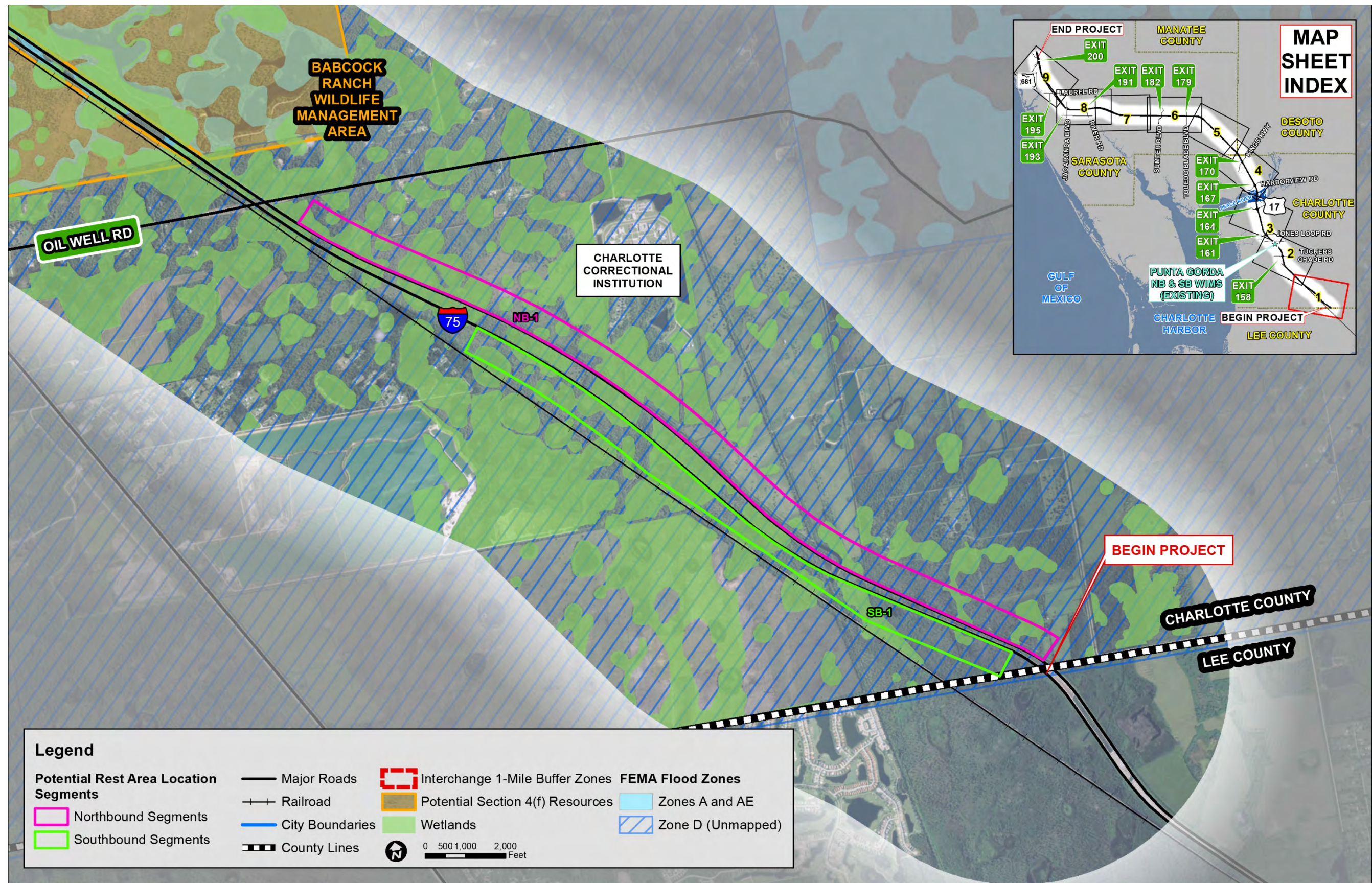


FIGURE 2-2 VIABLE SEGMENT LOCATION MAP (CONTINUED)

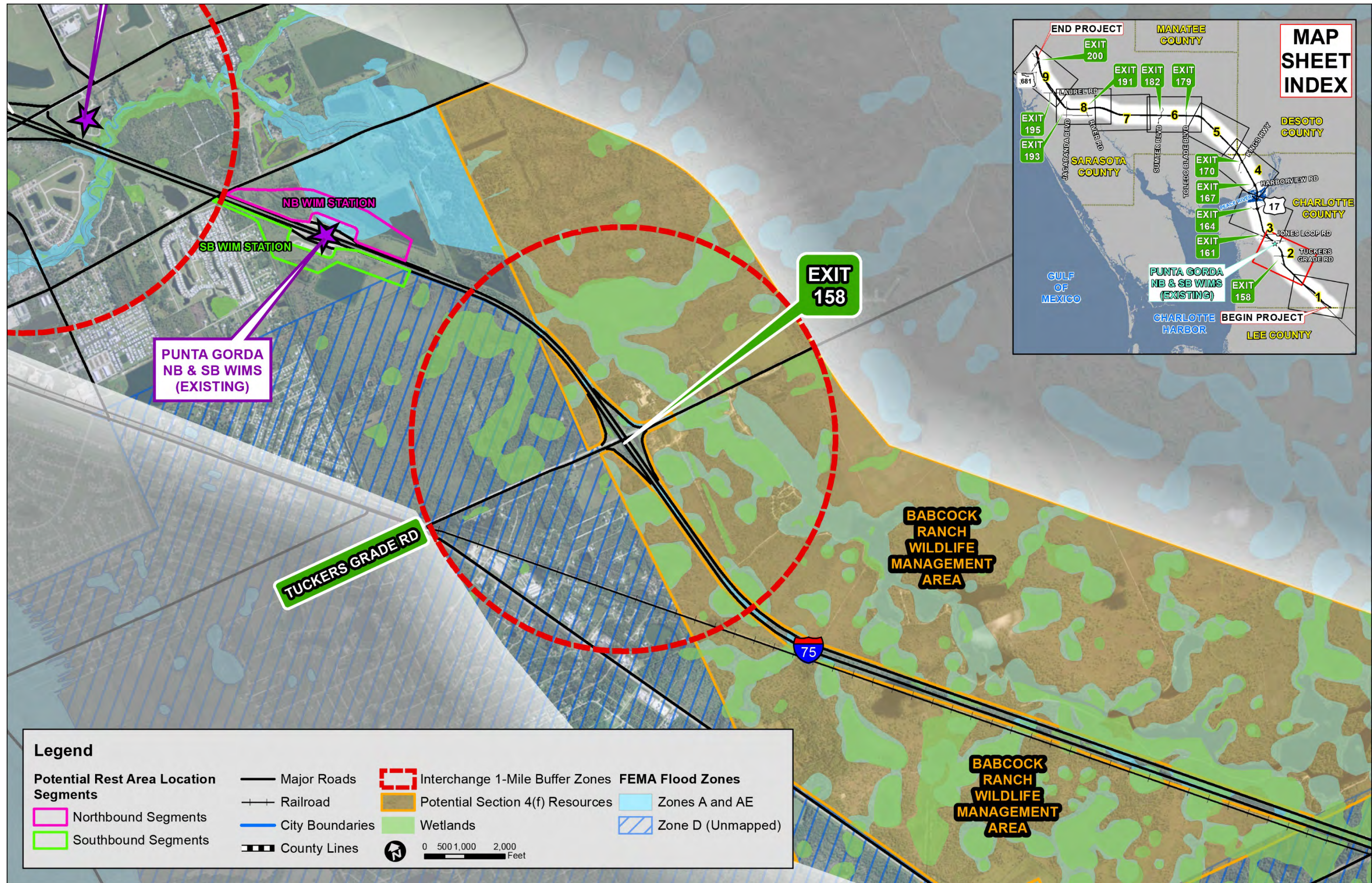


FIGURE 2-2 VIABLE SEGMENT LOCATION MAP (CONTINUED)

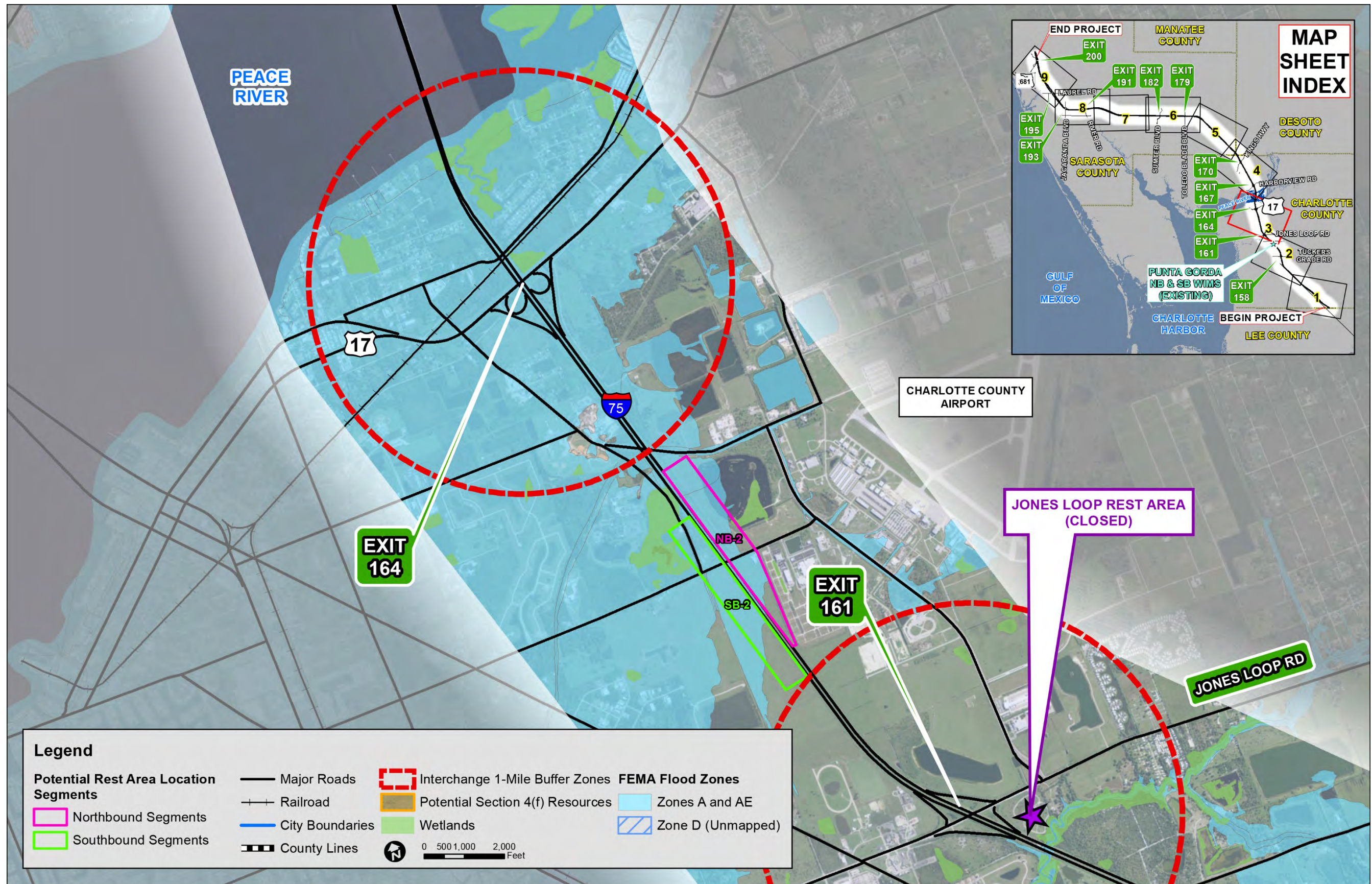


FIGURE 2-2 VIABLE SEGMENT LOCATION MAP (CONTINUED)

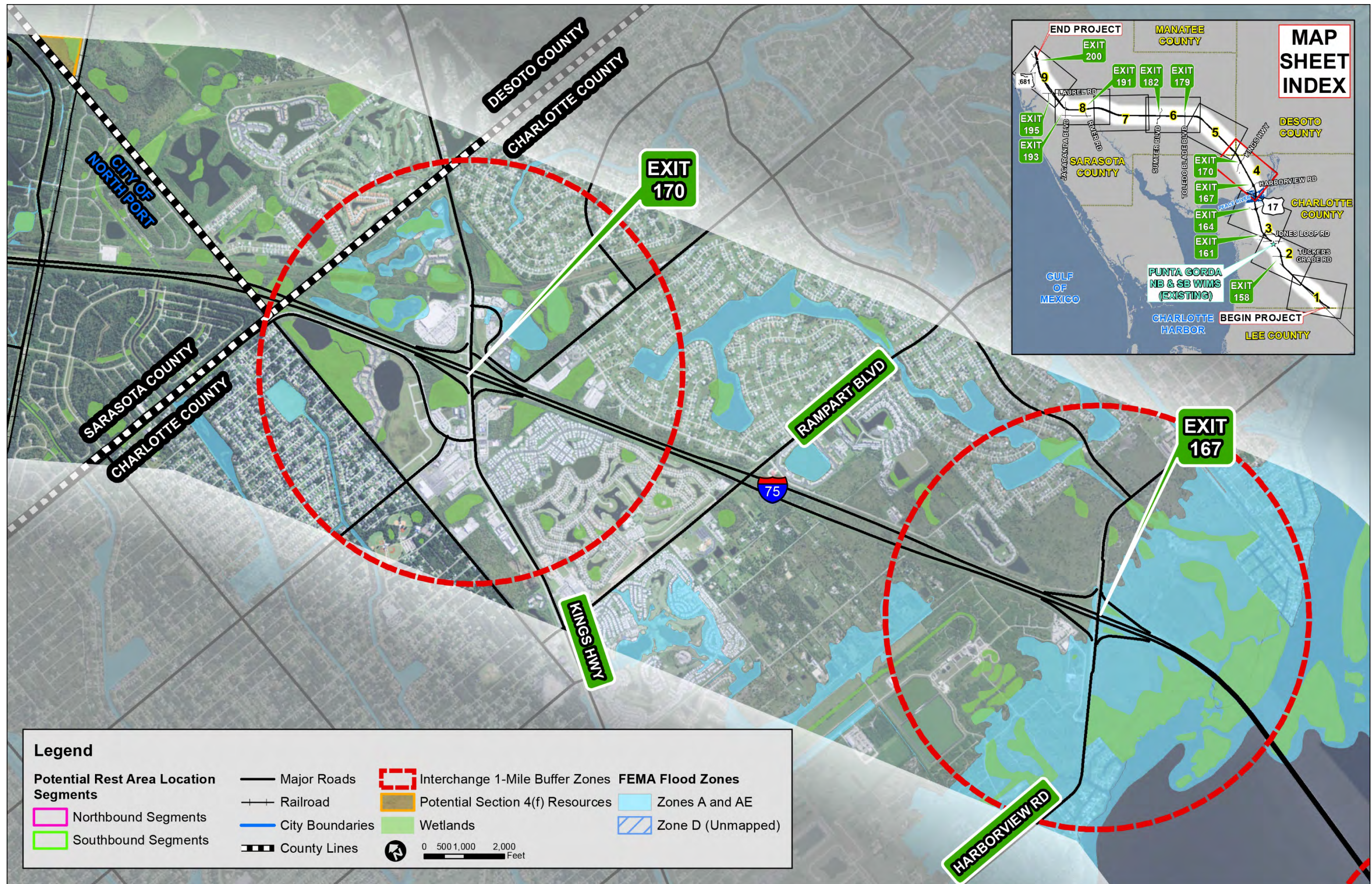


FIGURE 2-2 VIABLE SEGMENT LOCATION MAP (CONTINUED)

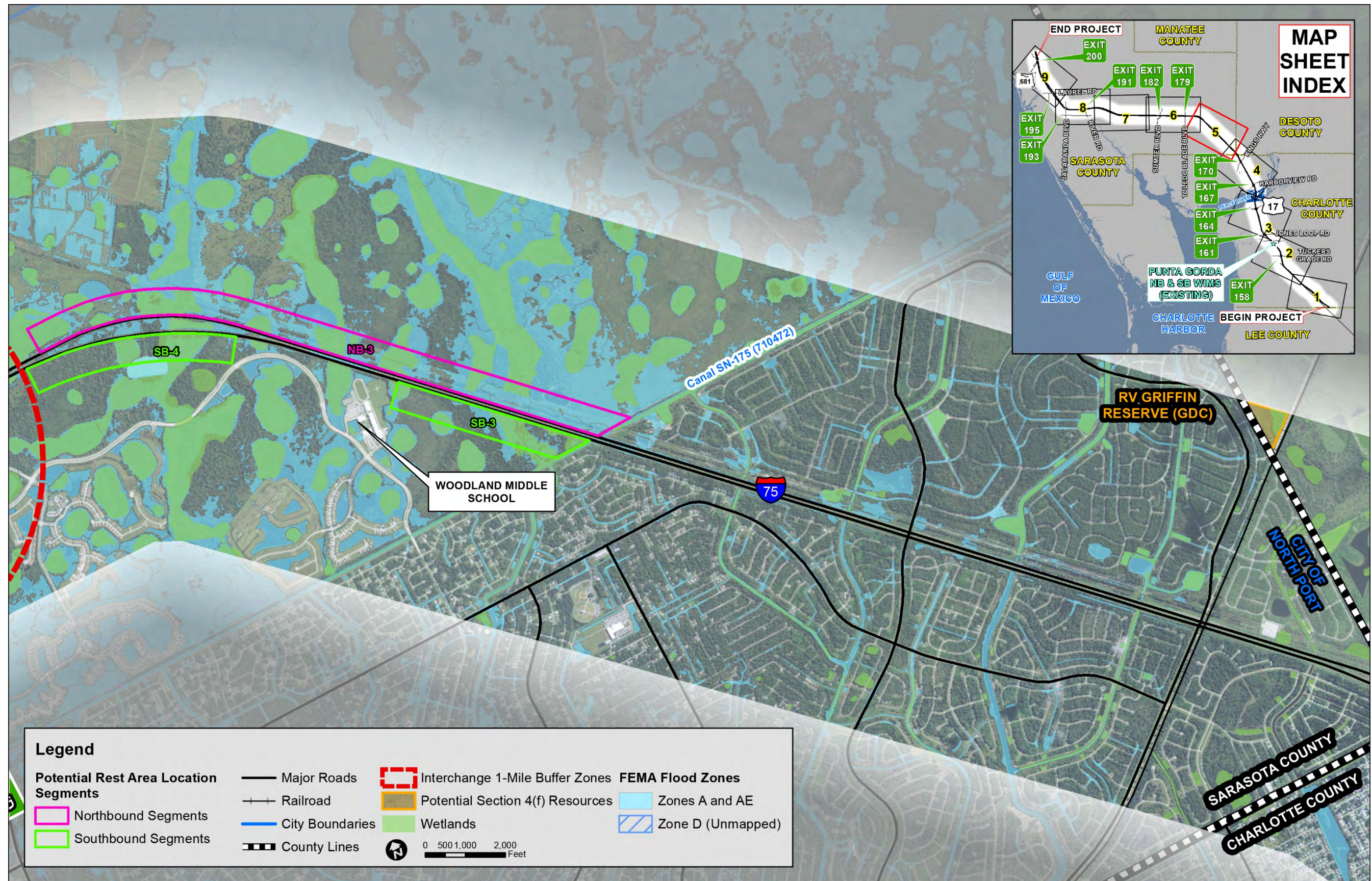


FIGURE 2-2 VIABLE SEGMENT LOCATION MAP (CONTINUED)

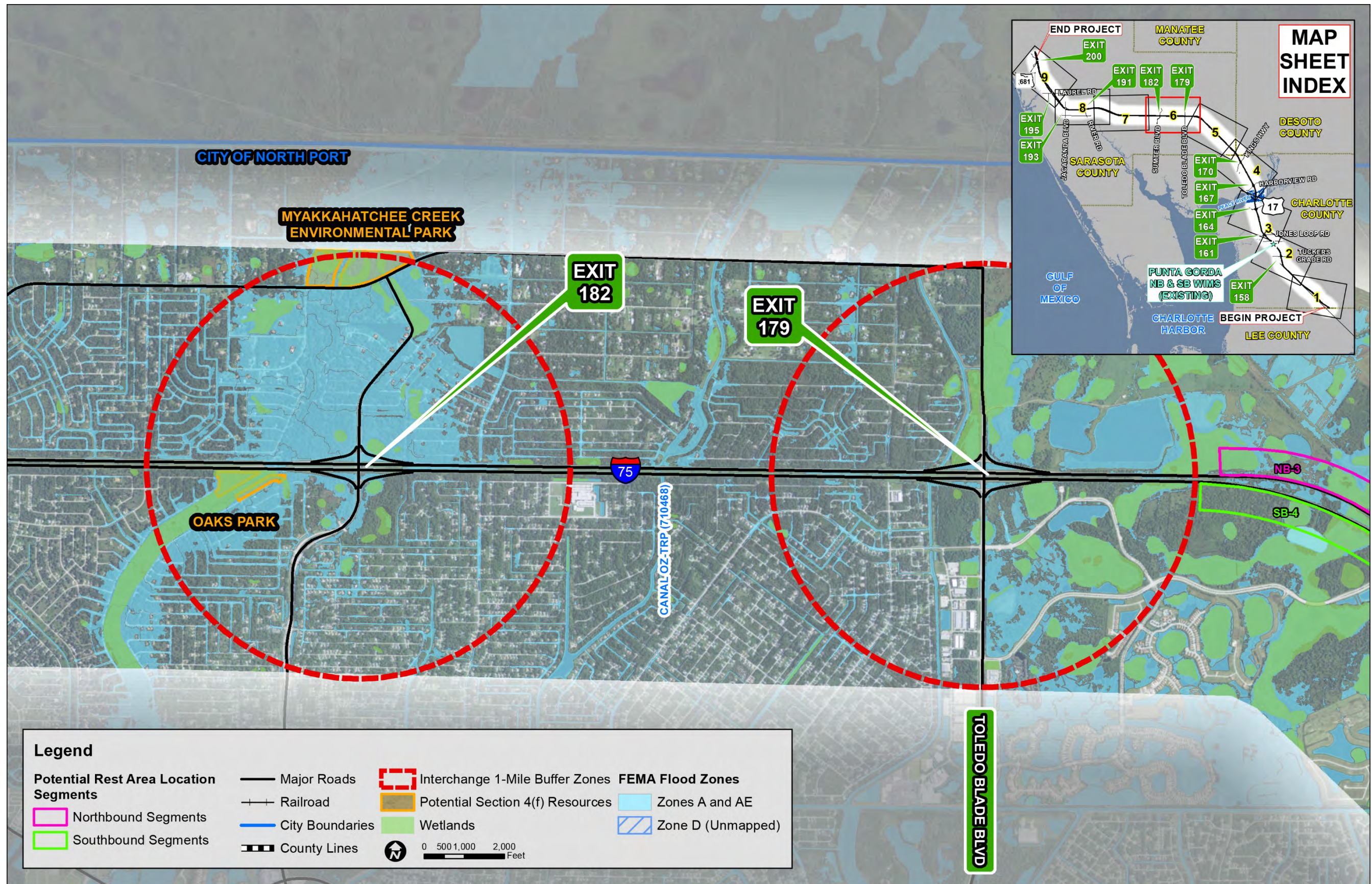


FIGURE 2-2 VIABLE SEGMENT LOCATION MAP (CONTINUED)

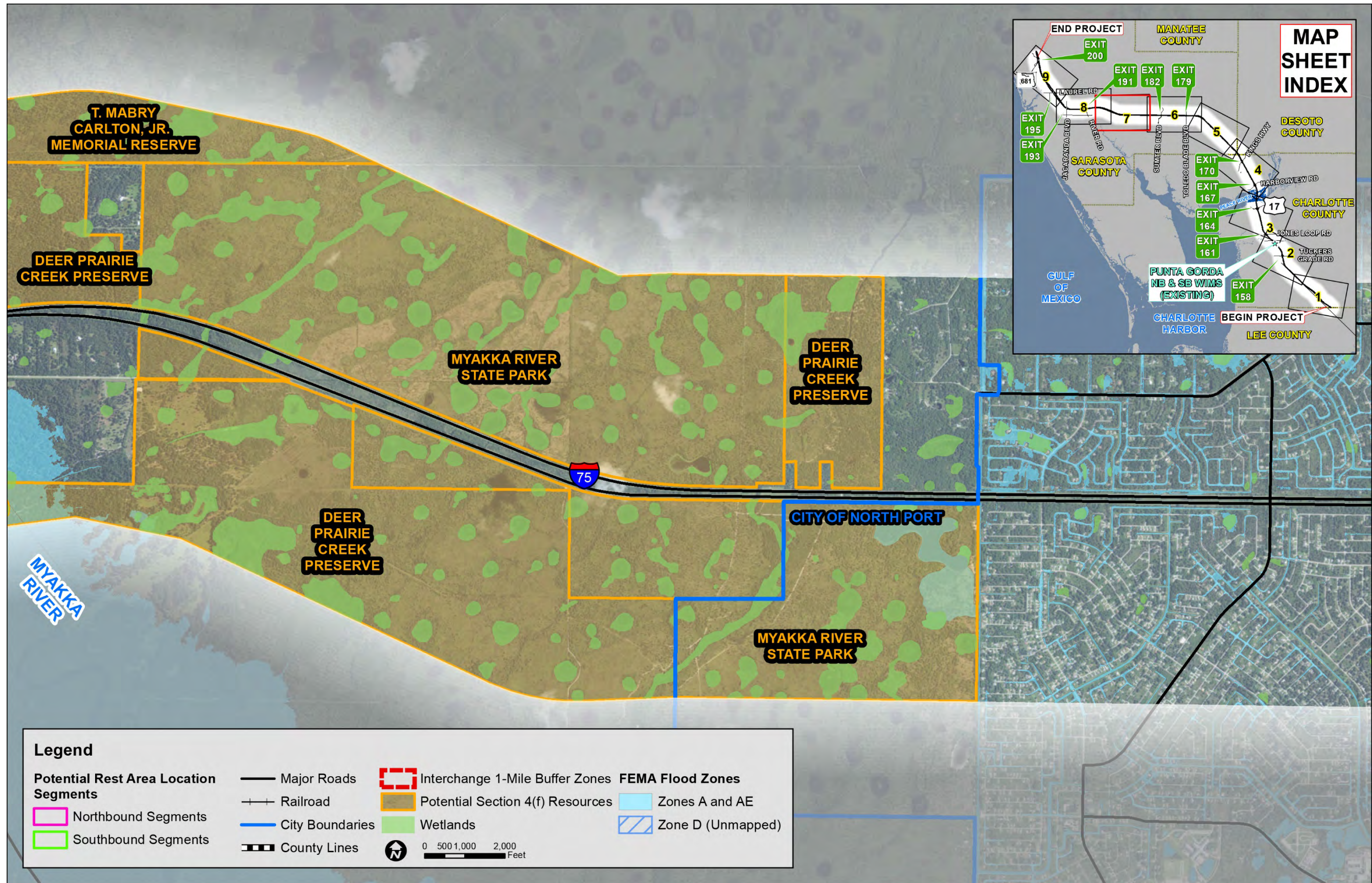


FIGURE 2-2 VIABLE SEGMENT LOCATION MAP (CONTINUED)

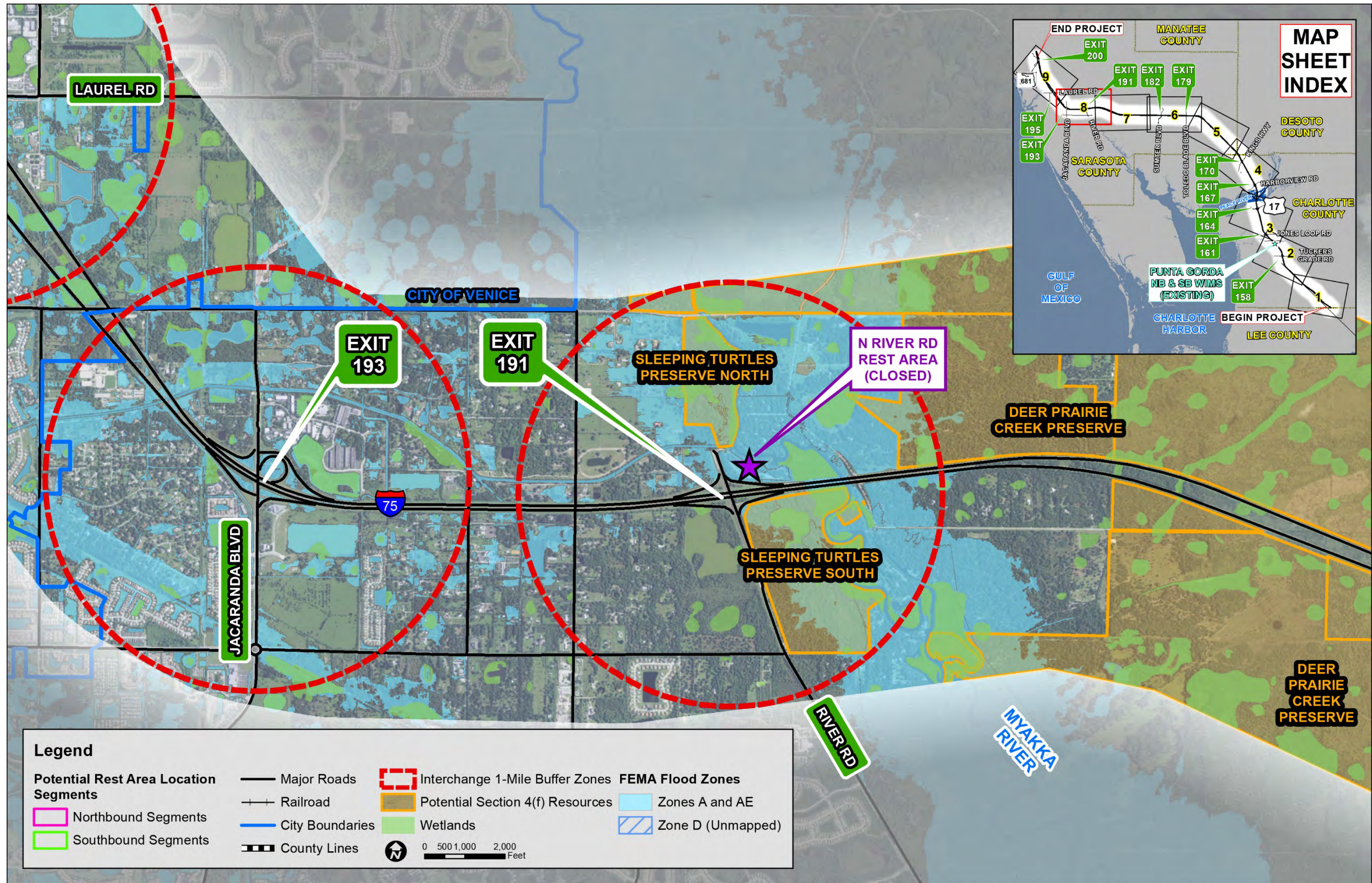
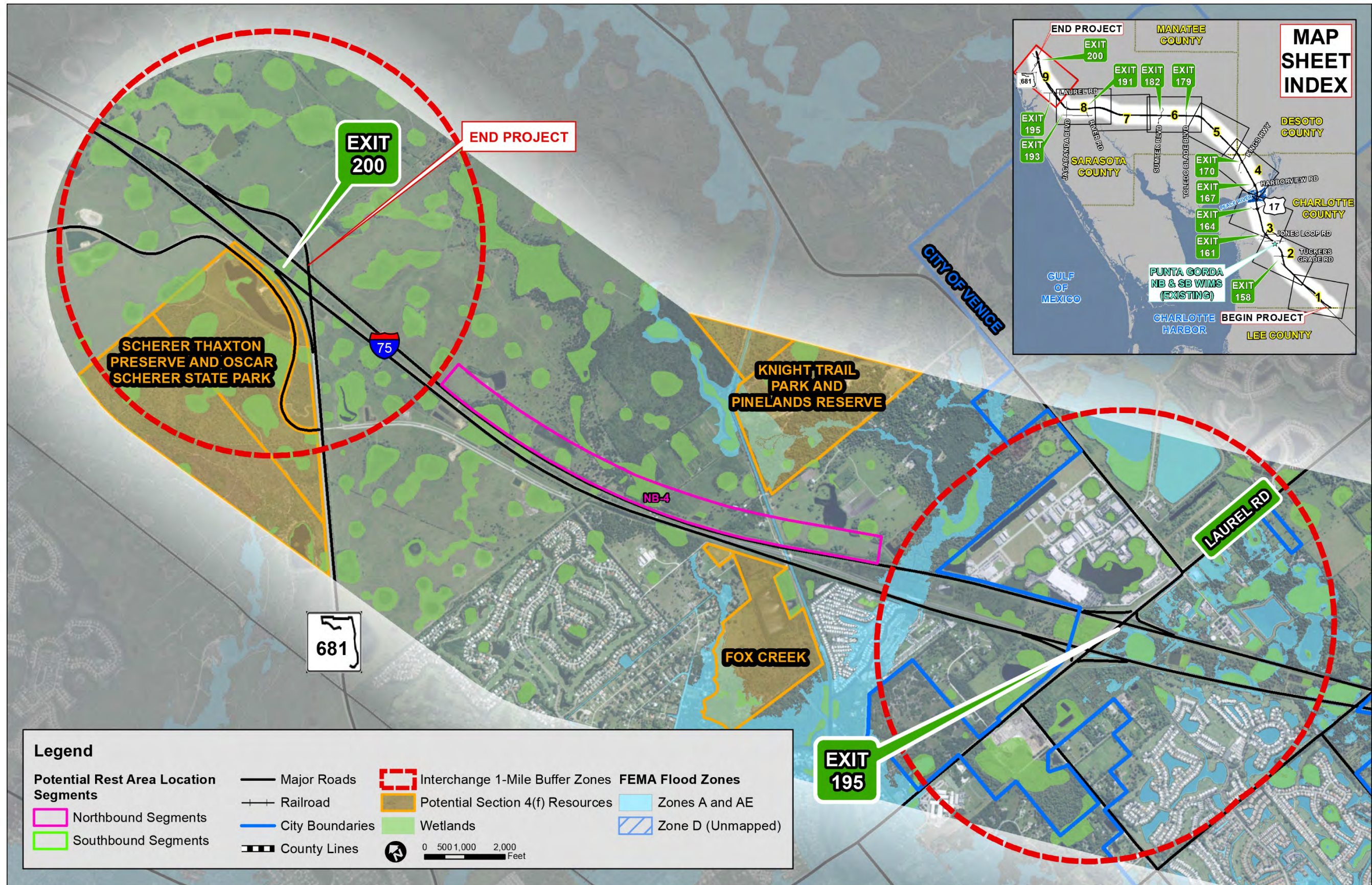


FIGURE 2-2 VIABLE SEGMENT LOCATION MAP (CONTINUED)



NORTHBOUND SEGMENTS

2.4.1 NB-1

Proposed site NB-1 is over three miles long and stretches from the Lee and Charlotte County Line to Oil Well Road. The site is a mix of uplands and wetlands, neither of which are unique to the area. Much of the area has been disturbed previously by clearing, cattle grazing, ditching or berms. An earthen berm parallels the eastern side of the right-of-way fence for almost this entire site. Ditching is also apparent from field reviews and aerial imagery. Based on GIS analysis, approximately 39% of this study area is wetland or surface water. The entire segment (100%) is located within Flood Zone D, or unmapped areas. Field reviews noted that even more areas should be classified as wetland habitat. Previously undocumented ditches and habitat that appear to be wet prairie persist throughout much of the site. The upland areas within this area appear overgrown with a pine and oak canopy and a dense shrub layer of saw palmetto and Brazilian pepper. Invasive plants like melaleuca are also present. One small area has an overhead electric line, and in the same vicinity, a line of cypress was observed. Cattle were also observed grazing in open pastureland. A pair of limpkins, a Florida state Species of Special Concern, was observed foraging in one of the marshes along the corridor.

FIGURE 2-3 NB-1 FIELD PHOTOS



Typical NB-1 wetland



Potential gopher tortoise habitat

2.4.2 Punta Gorda NB WIM Station

Proposed site NB WIM encompasses the area around the existing northbound Weigh-In-Motion (WIM) station. The site consists of predominantly disturbed uplands and man-made ponds. The ground has also been altered by ditches and spoil piles. Much of the area appeared to be heavily grazed by cattle. Based on GIS analysis, approximately 15% of this study area is wetland and 41% is floodplain. Most wetlands are readily discernible via aerial imagery because they are ponds or ditches. Large patches of uplands exist within the site. Several protected species were observed utilizing the area including: wood stork, little blue heron, and tricolored herons.

FIGURE 2-4 PUNTA GORDA NB WIM FIELD PHOTOS



Flooded pasture with wood stork



Disturbed upland and spoil piles

2.4.3 NB-2

Proposed site NB-2 is approximately one mile long and is located between Exit 161 and 164. The site consists almost entirely of improved pasture. The parcel between Airport Road and Henry Street is owned by the Charlotte County Airport and includes a floodplain compensation site and an existing borrow pit. Based on GIS analysis, less than one percent of this study area is wetland or surface water. However, 78% of the site is floodplain and about 6-7 acres of the site is an open water pond and ditch. Ditching is evident parallel and perpendicular to I-75 but is minor in comparison to the ditching in other sites. The southern portion of this site is currently used for cattle.

FIGURE 2-5 NB-2 FIELD PHOTOS



Pasture west of airport borrow pit



Ditch south of Airport Road

2.4.4 NB-3

Proposed site NB-3 is approximately two and a half miles long and is located between Canal SN-175 and Toledo Blade Boulevard. Based on GIS analysis, approximately 34% of this study area is wetland or surface water, and 81% is located in the floodplain. The habitats within this area are a mix of marsh and densely canopied upland. At several places along the corridor, the marshes reach far into the existing right-of-way. A berm also exists outside the right-of-way which prevents natural sheetflow. Bald eagle nest # SA030 has been documented within this study area, it was last known active in 2013 when it was surveyed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). During the field review, a large nest was observed on a utility pole but it is not clear if this is the same one recorded by the FWC previously. There are several overhead utilities present in this segment which could provide additional opportunities for nesting raptors.

FIGURE 2-6 NB-3 FIELD PHOTOS



Observed nest near known bald eagle nest SA030



Typical NB-3 marsh system

2.4.5 NB-4

Proposed site NB-4 is approximately two and a quarter miles long and is located between Exits 195 and 200. The study area segment is between I-75 and Knight Trail Park and Pinelands Reserve. It traverses several surface waters including Fox Creek. Based on GIS analysis, approximately 25% of this study area is wetland or surface water, and 6% is located in the floodplain. The marshes consist primarily of Carolina willow and cattails. South of the I-75 overpass is open pasture. North of the I-75 overpass is overgrown upland with a dense canopy of oaks, Brazilian pepper, sable palms, and wax myrtle. These uplands do not appear to provide suitable habitat for gopher tortoises. Low density residential and agricultural land uses are also present adjacent to the site.

FIGURE 2-7 NB-4 FIELD PHOTOS



Uplands not suitable for gopher tortoises



Available improved pasture

SOUTHBOUND SEGMENTS

2.4.6 SB-1

Proposed site SB-1 is approximately three miles in length and is located north of the Lee/Charlotte County line and south of the Oil Well Road overpass. Based on GIS analysis, approximately 42% of this study area is wetland or surface water. The entire site (100%) is located in FEMA Flood Zone D, or unmapped areas. The high quality marshes in this segment typically consist of grasses, sedges and alligator flag with occasional shrubs. The uplands in this segment are very dense with pines, sable palm and exotic carrot wood. The circular, depressional marshes within this segment often extend into the right-of-way. Almost all of this site is considered good habitat for listed species with 98% coverage of FLUCFCS codes in the 300 to 700 range. Overhead utilities and underground utilities were noted in this segment.

FIGURE 2-8 SB-1 FIELD PHOTOS



Typical SB-1 wetland



Dense canopy and sub-canopy of uplands

2.4.7 Punta Gorda SB WIM Station

Proposed site SB WIM Station encompasses the existing WIM just south of Jones Loop Road. Based on GIS analysis, 10% of this study area is wetland or surface water. Only 7% of the area is located within FEMA's Flood Zone D, or unmapped areas. This site consists of a disturbed area with sabal palmettos, Brazilian pepper, andropogon and other weedy groundcover species. Surrounding the ponds within this site, dog fennel and wax myrtle shrubs are prevalent. The ponds are colonized with cattail. The open area could provide habitat for gopher tortoises but none were observed during the initial field review. There are several utility poles in the vicinity of the WIM which could be utilized by raptors for nesting.

FIGURE 2-9 PUNTA GORDA SB WIM FIELD PHOTOS



Potential nest sites available

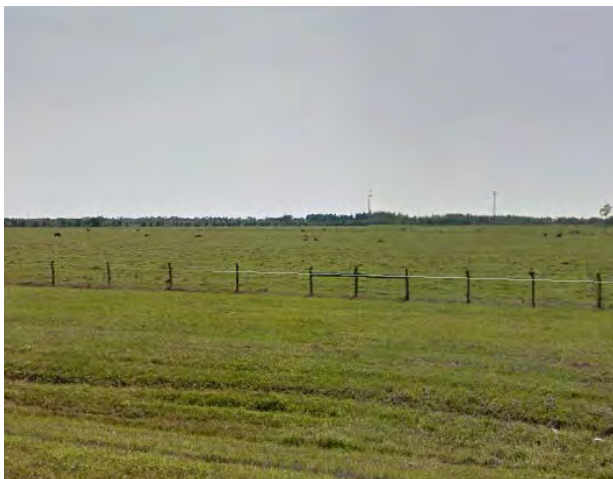


Improved pasture

2.4.8 SB-2

Proposed site SB-2 is approximately one mile in length and is located between Exits 161 and 164. Based on GIS analysis, less than 1% of this study area is wetland or surface water. Approximately 72% of the site is considered floodplain. This site mainly consists of open improved pasture colonized with exotic forage grasses and *Andropogon* species. This site was actively being grazed during the field review. Some potential gopher tortoise habitat exists in a small patch of upland just north of the Airport Road overpass. Vegetation at this site is consistent with gopher tortoise habitat, it has little to no canopy cover and a mix of vegetative species like grapevine, grasses, and beauty berry. West of the open area is a more densely canopied area of oaks, pines, and palms.

FIGURE 2-10 SB-2 FIELD PHOTOS



Improved pasture



Potential gopher tortoise habitat

2.4.9 SB-3

Proposed site SB-3 is approximately one mile in length and is located between Canal SN-175 (710472) and Woodland Middle School. This segment is a defined mix of uplands and wetlands. Some of the uplands beyond the right-of-way appear scrubby and may provide good habitat for gopher tortoises and other listed upland dwelling species. Other uplands are overgrown with a dense canopy of sabals and oaks. Based on GIS analysis, approximately 35% of this study area is wetland or surface water, and 43% is located within the floodplain. The marshes within this segment consist of grasses with some shrub cover such as hypericum species. The wetland edges often intrude into the existing right-of-way. A roadside ditch exists in the right-of-way which runs almost the entire length of the segment. Almost all of this site is considered good habitat for listed species with 98% coverage of FLUCFCS codes in the 300 to 700 range.

FIGURE 2-11 SB-3 FIELD PHOTOS



Thick oak canopy of SB-3 uplands



Typical SB-3 grass/sedge marsh

2.4.10 SB-4

Proposed site SB-4 is approximately one mile in length and is located between the Woodland Middle School and Toledo Blade Boulevard at Exit 179. Based on GIS analysis, approximately 31% of this study area is wetland or surface water, and 31% is located within the floodplain. A roadside ditch exists in the right-of-way which runs almost the entire length of the segment. Vegetation within the ditch consists of cattails and Carolina willow. The round, open, depressional marshes within this segment are populated with hydric grasses and sedges, sagitaria and pickerelweed. The uplands in this segment consist of oaks, gallberry, pines and saw palmetto. Much of the uplands are too dense to be considered gopher tortoise habitat but some open areas could still harbor suitable foraging habitat for this species. Almost all of this site is considered good habitat for listed species with 99% coverage of FLUCFCS codes in the 300 to 700 range.

FIGURE 2-12 SB-4 FIELD PHOTOS



Suitable habitat for gopher tortoises



Typical SB-4 grass/sedge marsh

CHAPTER 3

SCREENING RESULTS

Following the Initial Corridor Screening and Viable Segments Screening, an evaluation matrix was developed to compare the natural environmental characteristics of the ten viable segments. The segments recommended for further study were selected based on the information shown in the evaluation matrix.

3.1 EVALUATION MATRIX RESULTS

The evaluation matrix is shown below in **Table 3-1**. Based on the evaluation matrix, NB-1, NB-3, SB-1, SB-3, and SB-4 have the highest percentage of wetlands and available natural habitat. Only four of the ten viable segments, NB-1, NB WIM Station, NB-3, and SB-3 have protected species that were either observed or known to occur. Segments NB-2 and NB-3 had the highest percentage of mapped floodplains as compared to the other viable segments (NB-1 and SB-1 are located completely within in Flood Zone D, or unmapped zones).

TABLE 3-1 EVALUATION MATRIX

ENVIRONMENTAL CRITERIA	NB-1	NB WIM	NB-2	NB-3	NB-4	SB-1	SB WIM	SB-2	SB-3	SB-4
Wetlands	39%	15%	<1%	34%	25%	42%	10%	<1%	35%	31%
Floodplains	100%*	41%	78%	81%	6%	100%*	7%*	72%	43%	31%
Available Natural Habitat (FLUCFCS 300-700)	50%	23%	<1%	58%	31%	98%	<1%	<1%	98%	99%
Protected Species Observed/Known	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Recommended for Further Study	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No

*Percent shown represents Flood Zone D - unmapped areas

3.2 SEGMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

The four segments recommended for further study include NB WIM, NB-2, SB WIM, and SB-2. Segments NB-1, NB-3, SB-1, SB-3, and SB-4 are recommended to be eliminated from further consideration due to their comparatively higher impacts to the natural environment, including wetlands and available natural habitat. Segment NB-4 is recommended to be eliminated from further consideration because it does not have a viable southbound counterpart.