

Professors assert road will harm UF natural lab **END OF FOUR-LANE ROAD DID NOT END NATL DEBATE.**

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Any intrusion of a road through UF's Natural Area Teaching Lab will irreparably harm local plants, wildlife and classes that utilize the area, UF professors told a panel studying the issue Thursday.

"You're not just talking about the footage that road will occupy, but the peripheral area that will be impacted," professor Jim Kimbrough said to UF's Southwest 24th Avenue Task Force.

And while one purpose of the group is to consider ways to lessen potential effects of the proposed road extension into the NATL, some professors were unwilling to even speculate about the possibility that the NATL would be disturbed.

But Chairman Ed Poppell, who is also the vice president of finance and administration, said he expects the task force to make recommendations by the end of January to UF committees that will help decide the NATL's fate.

Professors said the NATL was the best - and, in some cases, the only - area suitable to teach hundreds of UF students each year about animals, plants and fungi.

"You are running a road through a biological auditorium or classroom," said Charlotte Porter, associate history professor.

Mark Brown, a professor in the Department of Environmental Engineering Sciences, said the area's proximity to UF's main campus is a feature that cannot easily be replaced by another natural area.

Utilizing other natural areas away from campus would be expensive, time-consuming and less safe, professors argued.

But when asked, Brown said extending the road would not stop work at the NATL.

"We could still teach the courses...[but] it would make the area a lot smaller," he said. "There's no question about it."

But professors also said the road would disrupt the environment. Cars would create noise and water pollution, and the road may separate wildlife from their water sources, zoology professor Robert Holt said.

Despite the Alachua County Commission's recent refusal to fund a four-lane Southwest 24th Avenue, its two-lane version may still penetrate the area - as some local officials had planned since 1997 - to improve the road network and lessen traffic in Gainesville.

University officials, including former UF President Charles Young, sent letters to city and county officials approving of such actions.