



CORTEZ



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Community Snapshot

MISSION: “The mission of the Cortez Waterfronts Ronda Committee is to protect and maintain the values and neighborhood spirit of the Village of Cortez by guiding change in a way that preserves our community and our commercial fishing heritage.”

DESIGNATION: 1999

APPLICANT: Manatee County

STATUS: Inactive as Waterfronts Partnership; still participates in state Waterfronts network.

PARTNERS: 1000 Friends of Florida; Manatee County Planning Department; Manatee County Clerk of Court; Florida Institute of Saltwater Heritage (FISH); Cortez Historical Society; the Selby Foundation; FDOT; local fishing families and residents of Cortez.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Preservation and restoration of the Burton Store and 1912 School; purchase of 100 acres for the FISH preserve; removal of invasive exotics from preserve property; zoning code overlay and design guidelines; establishment of the Florida Maritime Museum at Cortez.

CURRENT CHALLENGES: Finding funding to purchase additional waterfront property

FLORIDA ASSESSMENT OF COASTAL TRENDS DATA:

Number of Active Volunteers:	45
Public Dollars Contributed:	\$1.1 million
Private Dollars Contributed:	\$62,000

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The Village of Cortez is tucked away off of the highway connecting Bradenton with Anna Maria Island. Nestled on the shores of Sarasota Bay and located off Cortez Road, there are a few visual cues that the village exists. Pedestrian crosswalks with red-stamped concrete pavers on Cortez Road connect the village to “the other side” where an upscale community resides. The other clue that civilization exists off the beaten path is the cleared property where the freshly restored 1912 school house and an old cistern sit under tall palms and pines. If you hit the brakes and turn onto one of the side streets in the village, you will see old cracker-style homes with a rustic patina, some of whose front yards still carry signs opposing the net ban; boats on dry docks that are in various stages of restoration or decomposition; and crab traps tucked away under pole barns and carports.

DEFYING DESTINATION

Cortez is not the tourist destination that many coastal communities have become in Florida. In fact, it is unlike any other Waterfronts Community, as it strives not to become a destination. There are no signs for boat tours or other attractions. It is a fishing village stubbornly striving to maintain its family-based operations as well as celebrating its maritime heritage. The community’s vision plan describes it best.



“There is a certain tolerance required of residents in Cortez, and those who move here are expected to understand that need. Cortezians build, refurbish and repair boats in their yards. They build crab traps and mend fishing nets. They store commercial fishing equipment in their front yards. These activities have been a part of community life in Cortez for over 110 years. Putting up with the noise, unsightly clutter and accompanying odors is not for everyone. Those who move here need to not only tolerate the impacts of this commercial fishing culture, but embrace it. Almost all who live in Cortez understand that the sense of community is what makes this a special place.”



PRESERVATION, PREVENTION, AND PROCESS

The Waterfronts Florida Program plays a significant role in the Village’s ability to maintain its identity. 1,000 Friends of Florida, the stewards of the Waterfronts Program in its infancy, conducted several workshops with the residents and the business owners to develop a vision plan in 2000. The vision can be summed up in three words — preservation, prevention, and process. Preservation refers to the preservation of the historic character and fishing economy; prevention refers to the prevention of land uses that would be incompatible with or intolerant of what can

be perceived as a nuisance — living and working next to a fishing operation; and process refers to establishing a formal process that would allow the review of site plans and designs for compatibility with the working waterfront and scale of existing historic buildings.

With the support of the County, the village succeeded in making changes to the zoning code to provide for a zoning overlay, design guidelines, and a process to review development plans. The most important element of the zoning overlay is that it specifically allows for boat and fishing equipment storage to be permitted in a home's front yard. The overlay also limits uses on the waterfront to fish houses, boat building and repair, aquaculture, marine research, maritime museums, and restaurants.

The Waterfronts Partnership Committee met on a regular basis in the first two years of designation. Once Cortez became a graduate community, the group no longer met as part of the Waterfronts Partnership, but its members are now active participants in either or both the Cortez Historical Society and the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage, or F.I.S.H. Both of these non-profit groups existed prior to the Village's Waterfronts designation and are still going strong today. With small annual fundraisers and donations, F.I.S.H. has managed to purchase 100 acres of environmentally sensitive land just east of the village that was once slated for development. Over the years, the site was used as a dumping ground and was infested with invasive exotic plants such as Australian Pine and Brazilian Pepper. Through negotiations with organizations such as the Florida Department of Transportation and grants from various local charitable organizations and foundations, the site has been cleared of debris and exotic plants. F.I.S.H. has further improvements planned for the site, including a trail bridge through the preserve so visitors can meander through the various habitats and hammocks without disturbing the flora and fauna.



IT'S FOR THE CAUSE

Two other major victories for the village include the restoration of two historically significant buildings, the 1912 school and the 1890 Burton Store. The 1912 school has been almost completely restored and now serves as the Florida Maritime Museum at Cortez. The main room of the old schoolhouse is used to display local artist's works and houses a small library, while the remainder of the building exhibits photos, boat models, fishing tools and gear, and other maritime related objects. Volunteers donated time and materials to hand-craft the bead board displays, and most of the collection is on permanent loan from the village families — items gradually pulled out of attics, drawers, and carports and given to the museum “for the cause.”

The Burton Store was built in 1890 and was the first commercial building constructed in Cortez. It served as a post office, store, and community gathering place. In 1990, the store was in a severe state of disrepair and slated for demolition, as was the fate of many other buildings in Cortez over the years.

However, F.I.S.H., with funding from Manatee County and the Selby Foundation in Sarasota, was able to purchase the store and move it to its present location next to the schoolhouse. The store, currently undergoing a complete restoration, will be a small classroom and research center to educate visitors on the symbiotic relationship of uplands, hammocks, wetlands, and estuaries and their impact on the health of fisheries. The school and store are located on property adjacent to the F.I.S.H. preserve, and visitors will be able to walk through the preserve and view its coastal habitat. For the graduate community of Cortez, it has been all about leveraging money to meet its goal of education and preservation. Their continuing efforts for self-preservation, and maybe isolation, have kept them one of “Old Florida's” best kept secrets.