

Panacea Waterfronts Florida Community

A Work Plan for a Walkable Waterfronts Community

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Work plan for a Walkable Waterfronts Community:

Background

Panacea is an historic fishing and tourism waterfront village located in unincorporated Wakulla County, Florida, just 30 miles southwest of the state capitol of Tallahassee. This small, platted rural community is totally surrounded by federal lands of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and has a working waterfront with access to the Gulf of Mexico. Panacea has a wide range of nature and heritage based tourism and recreational assets and opportunities. These and other geographic attributes lend it to be a walkable community for both residents and visitors to enjoy and protect.

In July 2001, Panacea was designated as a **Waterfronts Florida Community** by the State of Florida. This designation followed a two-year community visioning process, which resulted in a vision plan (Panacea 2020) and began a partnership arrangement among citizens, civic organizations, the business community, and local, state and federal governments in assisting in the implementation of this plan and the revitalization of Panacea.

A major component and driving force of that partnership was the establishment of the **Panacea Waterfronts Florida Committee (PWFC)**. Since September of 2001, this citizen membership organization has met monthly to establish and work on specific objectives and projects to meet their collective vision for Panacea. A number of specific projects, from creating a welcome center to revitalizing a community park and general town beautification, have set the stage for this committee to develop more specific work plans to reach the goals and objectives outlined in the Panacea 2020 vision plan.

One of the major vision statements for Panacea in the 2020 Plan is to “create (or recreate) an economically and environmentally sustainable community based on the natural resources and history of the areas past”. This is to be accomplished “in concert with best management practices and a development plan for the future”. One of the major goals of the Panacea 20/20 visioning plan was - “to protect and enhance the natural and historic environment”.

Developing Panacea into a “walkable community” was identified early on as a specific strategy to meet that goal. Now that a number of community projects have been or are nearing completion, it is a good time to develop a more detailed work plan to see how a walkable community approach in Panacea could enhance and tie together a number of identified economic and environmental interests and objectives of the community.

Major Areas of Interest

Panacea has a number of very unique and distinct areas of interest that contributed to the early establishment of the community, as well as its continued livelihood and character. These include:

- **Panacea Mineral Springs**

In the late 1800's, the small sulphurous springs that bubble up in the area became known as "Panacea Springs", which attracted many well-to-do northerners for their suspected healing attributes. This resulted in a number of hotels, restaurants, health spas, bottled water plants and pavilions over the bay to be built, all oriented around the healing power of the Panacea Mineral Springs water. Although little remains of its past glory, the mineral springs and its history are a definite attraction and asset to be capitalized on. The new Panacea Visitor Center, located directly across Hwy 98 from the mineral springs, is an additional plus for attracting visitors to this area.

- **Dickerson/ Levy Bay**

Through the years the bay and its rich natural resources (springs and wetlands) has contributed to the establishment of the community and the livelihood (fishing industry) of local residents. The unique natural resources present in the bay include expansive marshes and sea grass beds that provide foraging habitat for endangered sea turtles and rare birds such as the wood stork and bald eagles. Manatees often forage in the tidal bays during the summer months. Upland areas surrounding the bay and its marshes provide habitat for numerous bird and other wildlife species. This is a great attraction for nature lovers and other outdoor enthusiast who travel long distances to see and experience these resources. Dickerson Bay also forms the gateway to the Gulf of Mexico and adjacent waterways for much of the local boating and fishing public. Numerous boat ramps and other water access points found on Dickerson and Levy Bay have been identified as points of attraction and interest in the Panacea area.

- **Rock Landing**

For generations commercial fishermen have landed their catches at Rock Landing. In the 1920's it was a fish camp. The old Rock-landing dock was one of the prime areas where gill net fishermen brought in their catches of mullet for market. Although the number of commercial fishing boats have declined over the last decade, fishermen still land their catches of blue crab, oysters, pink and white shrimp, mullet, and grouper at the county's Rock Landing dock. A full service recreational marina, public boat ramp and seafood restaurant highlight Rock Landing as a definite area of interest in Panacea.

- **Commercial/ Shopping District**
 Although not of direct historic interest, the commercial shopping area along Hwy 98 provides an attraction to both visitors and residents of Panacea. Centered in the Panacea Shopping Plaza, a major food store, restaurants, convenient store, boat sales and supplies, gas station, medical center, and a variety of retail shops are all within walking distance. Although no sidewalks or defined walking paths exist, numerous dirt paths and trails connect many of these establishments to surrounding neighborhoods.
- **Wooley Park**
 This local park, managed by Wakulla County's Parks & Recreation Department, provides restroom and picnic areas, and is a short walk from the shopping center of Panacea. The park is the site of the historic Panacea Blue Crab Festival, which attracts thousands of participants in May each year. The park has recently been renovated and improved as part of the Florida Waterfronts Community program, and now offers a fishing pier, lighted walking trail and parking area, and children's playground equipment for year round use.
- **Otter Lake Recreational Area**
 Owned and operated by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Otter Lake Recreational area provides a great destination for bikers and pedestrians. Only 2.2 miles from the Panacea shopping district, Otter Lake offers clean and well-maintained picnic, restroom and boat ramp facilities and a great outdoor setting for fishing, canoeing and kayaking and other activities.

Existing Roadways and Pathway

The town of Panacea covers an area approximately 1 mile (east-west) by 2 miles (north-south). This size and distance between points of interest is ideal for establishing a very walkable and pedestrian friendly community.

Figure 1 shows the major and minor roadways in Panacea and the boundaries of the Panacea Waterfront Community. Bottoms Road out to Fiddlers Point border the Panacea Waterfronts Community to the north and east. Chattahoochee St., extending east at Tower Road and on to Levy Bay on Levy Bay Road, forms the Southern boundary of the Waterfronts community.

A number of paved and unpaved county roads and numerous dirt footpaths and trails occur throughout the community. The major roadway in Panacea is federal Highway 98 that bisects the town running north and south. This "coastal highway" is the only major transportation route into and out of Panacea. Other paved roads include Bottoms Rd., Levy Bay Rd., Rock Landing Rd., Otter Lake Rd., and Clark Dr. Except for the recently painted crosswalks mentioned below, no formal

sidewalks, bike paths, or other pedestrian friendly constructed features occur in the area. A number of the paved roads lead to public access areas on the water, many with boat ramps and public parking.

Wakulla County, as part of its road-paving program, is in the process of paving Jer-Be-Lou Blvd and other roadways in Panacea. Highway 98 has recently undergone a major resurfacing and improvement project completed by the Florida Department of Transportation (DOT) just this year. This project included wide marked shoulders along both sides of the road and major stormwater improvements. This has provided a marked increase in both pedestrian and bike use along this highway. In addition, as a result of actions taken by the PWFC, four marked crosswalks and a handrail culvert crossing Mineral Springs creek were established by DOT as an add-on to this Hwy 98 improvement project.

Pedestrian improvement now exist at the Panacea Visitor Center crossing over to Mineral Springs Park, as well as at Jer-Be-Lou Blvd. connecting the Post Office to Citizens Bank, at Otter Lake Road from the major shopping area to residential neighborhoods, and at Rock Landing Road connecting a major motel to restaurants, a marina and seafood retail shopping areas.

Panacea is designated and recognized as an urban area in the Wakulla County Future Land Use map and Comprehensive Plan. Much of the developed properties are zoned either residential or commercial. Portions of undeveloped property along the north end of Dickerson Bay and leading into Levy Bay remain zoned agriculture. A small area north and south of the Waterfronts Florida Community area is zoned industrial. As mentioned earlier, the entire land-surrounding Panacea is within the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and designated for long-term conservation.

Existing Areas of High Traffic and Interest

From a general familiarity of the area and a road/ pedestrian survey of the Panacea Waterfronts community area conducted November 11-12, 2003, twelve (12) sites were identified as those of high interest and traffic to visitors and residents alike. These areas, listed below and shown on Figure 2, are potential destination sites for pedestrians and bikers in Panacea.

1. Panacea Visitor Center*
2. Panacea Mineral Springs Park*
3. Panacea Post Office
4. Panacea Shopping Area & Plaza
5. Wooley Park*
6. Gulf Specimen Laboratory
7. Rock Landing Boat Ramp and Marina*
8. Walker Street Boat Ramp*
9. Otter Lake Recreational Area and Boat Ramp*
10. Panacea Women's Club & Recreation Park
11. Levy Bay Boat Ramp*
12. Fiddlers Point Boat Ramp*

* indicates water access

Each of these potential destination areas has attributes, recreational, aesthetic, commercial or civic, that would lend them to be connected to a pedestrian or bike path. Eight of the 12 sites are on the water and, in most cases, could provide access for some form of boating or visitor activity. Five of these sites have County maintained boat ramps (7,8,9,11,12). All of these sites are on or adjacent to county paved roads.

A Power Point presentation, prepared as part of this report, visually provides examples of the attributes and impediments to many of these sites, discussed further below.

Additional sites of interest for connecting bike and walking paths in Panacea can best be subtracted or added to this list based on community consensus and support.

Physical Impediments to Pedestrian and Bikers

As mentioned previously, until recently little to no transportation improvements in the area have considered pedestrian or bikers modes of transportation. The recent marking of major intersections on Highway 98 have greatly aided in pedestrian crossings in Panacea. The wider shoulders on either side of Highway 98 have also improved the walk ability and ride ability along this major highway.

Major impediments to Panacea's walk ability between the points of interests identified in the area are:

1. Lack of good directions and signage to many points of interest.
2. No sidewalks, curbs or vegetated borders protecting pedestrians from oncoming traffic.
3. Some back roads are poorly lighted and may be considered visually unattractive as walkways and paths to visitors.
4. No central parking area identified for public use.
5. Many sandy and uneven roads make biking and walking difficult.
6. Parking of vehicles, on and off roadways, dangerous and difficult in some areas.
7. Except for Highway 98, no wide shoulders of pavement to permit bike lanes separate from traffic.
8. No bike racks at major points of interest.
9. No public safety signs recognizing bikers or pedestrians.

Physical Assets to Pedestrians and Bikers

In balance, there are many attributes and opportunities for Panacea to be a very walkable and bike friendly community in the future. Some of these physical assets include:

1. Small size of community and many points of interest make it very accessible and desirable for both residents and visitors to walk and bike.

2. Most roads off Highway 98 have little traffic and are ideal for walking and biking.
3. Back roads connecting neighborhoods and businesses are County maintained. Many are paved, providing opportunity for improvements for pedestrian and bikers when upgraded.
4. Business and residential areas are nicely mixed and readily accessible.
5. Many back roads are scenic and rustic to outside visitors
6. Many businesses and residential areas are being renovated and improved, providing opportunities for better parking, landscaping features, and pedestrian and bike friendly amenities (i.e., lighting, bike racks, safety features).
7. Many access points to water and other natural areas lend themselves to small resting areas for bikers and hikers (benches, gazebos, bike racks) and interpretive/ educational displays on natural resources and cultural heritage of the area.
8. Potential to connect bike paths and trails in Panacea to other County and state maintained trail systems like the Florida Trail, Mashers Sands Bike Path and Sopchoppy GF&A Trail.

Work plan

Although this report has attempted to investigate and highlight the points of interest and advantages and opportunities in establishing Panacea as a very walkable and bike friendly community, it will necessary to involve others in the process of developing a more detailed work plan for specific projects, goals and objectives. Below is a four-step work plan recommended to begin that process:

1. Establish a Walkable Community Committee.

A standing committee of the Panacea Waterfronts Florida Committee should be established to further refine, track and implement a more detailed work plan for a walkable community in Panacea. This Walkable Community Committee should have representation from, and coordinate with, other existing PWFC committees (i.e. Economic Development, Design and Beautification, Historic and Environment and Natural Resources committees) as well as other outside experts and partners.

2. Design and Conduct a Walkable Community Charrette.

A formal community charrette is a visually engaging, interactive, and collaborative series of public workshops, focus groups, field condition inventories and design sessions on a given topic. It offers opportunities for friendly, informal discussion and debate among community citizens, and the process achieves workable visions and solutions for specific neighborhoods problems and the community as a whole.

A variety of local and outside interests and talent should be identified and invited to assist in the design charrette. This could include local and state community planners, transportation and public safety specialists, parks &

recreation interests, school and church groups, neighborhood and civic organizations, natural and historic resource interests, architects and engineers, merchants and business and community leaders. Local knowledge of prominent buildings and attractions, existing transportation patterns, commercial and neighborhood interests, and other assets is essential.

A walkable community Charrette, however, is best designed and conducted by an outside professional facilitator. Preferably one with direct experience and success in helping communities to vision and plan for such an outcome. An outside consultant can provide valuable technical aid and process assistance to create a working plan with projects that may avoid and resolve key land preservation and acquisition, community development, economic health and transportation systems management issues. Regardless, the Walkable Community Charrette should be a collaborative community process.

3. Establish List of Priority Projects & Long Term Goals

Through the work of the Walkable Community Committee and results of the design Charrette, a list of long term goals and objectives will lead to a list of specific projects. These projects could range from simple placement of signage and bike racks at strategic locations to long range planning for placement of a town center, architectural standards and set backs for new buildings and roadways, to bike/pedestrian path construction. These projects can then be evaluated and prioritized for implementation according to criteria established by the committee. Each project should tie into the long-range goals of the community and have specific design, time frame, costs and benefits identified and associated with each.

4. Identify Potential Funding Sources & Partnerships

A number of state, local and federal programs are available to help communities become more pedestrian and biker friendly. These include federal and state Departments of Transportation, Florida Office of Greenways and Trails, Department of Community Affairs, County and State Parks and recreation, and others. As a number of the identified points of interest in our initial survey are on the water and associated with boat ramps, the state's Boating Improvement Trust Fund may be approached to provide certain improvements. Also, as the Panacea area is virtually surrounded by the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and many of these pedestrian/bike paths could enhance access and enjoyment of the refuge, this federal agency should also be approached for assistance in funding projects.

In addition, outside private and public partnerships should be investigated to aide in achieving project goals. New construction and redevelopment of existing structures in the Panacea area could provide opportunities for

designing pedestrian and biker friendly features and attractions. Property owners and developers should be contacted early for best results.

Various non-profit groups and associations (i.e. Bike Florida, Florida Bicycle Association, Florida Paddle sports Association, etc.) could also be contacted to lend their support on individual projects, or the Panacea Walkable Community as a whole. These partnerships and associations can be extremely helpful in finding and soliciting outside grant funding.