

PORT ST. JOE





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Community Snapshot

VISION: “Provide increased access to St. Joseph’s Bay, promote water-based businesses, and provide an opportunity to learn about Port St. Joe’s colorful history.”

DESIGNATION: 2005

APPLICANT: City of Port St. Joe

STATUS: Inactive; City works on implementing waterfront projects through CRA.

PARTNERS: City of Port St. Joe Community Redevelopment Agency.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Waterfront Master Plan integrated into updated CRA Plan; Port St. Joe waterfront park land acquisition; cultural center feasibility

CURRENT CHALLENGES: Line item funding from CRA removed; future funding for program is unclear; currently there is no program manager.

FLORIDA ASSESSMENT OF COASTAL TRENDS DATA:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| Number of Active Volunteers: | 7 |
| Volunteer Hours Contributed: | 1,860 |
| Public Dollars Contributed: | \$5.1 million |
| Private Dollars Contributed: | \$250,000 |

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Port St. Joe is similar in many ways to its sister Waterfronts Communities. Like Fernandina Beach and Bagdad, it has a history as a mill town; like Fort Walton Beach, U.S. 98 is a physical barrier to the waterfront; like Steinhatchee and Old Homosassa, it is off the beaten path; like Vilano Beach, it was not significantly scathed by the net ban. But here along the Gulf coast between Apalachicola and Panama City, Port St. Joe is unique in that it may be one of the only coastal cities in Florida that has not feared overdevelopment even though the town is in the shadows of Florida's largest private land-owner and master planned community giant, the St. Joe Company (JOE).

Located in what is now branded by JOE as "Florida's Great Northwest," Port St. Joe had dignified beginnings but developed in fits and starts. In the early 19th century, St. Joseph was the most populous community in Florida, and was the site of the Florida Territory's first Constitutional Convention in 1838. With a natural deepwater port, two rail lines were constructed to connect to the Apalachicola River to take advantage of the goods being shipped downriver to overseas destinations. Plagued by yellow fever and hurricanes, this bustling place was a ghost town by 1843 and remained so until the 20th century.

Port St. Joe was resurrected in the early 1900s as a paper mill town. Fumbling a bit in the 1920s after most of the natural pine forest was harvested, the town boomed through the war years until the 1990s when the paper mill fell on hard economic times. JOE began to turn its eyes to residential development of its vast land holdings. After struggling under the ownership of another paper company for a few years, the paper mill—the largest employer in the area—closed for good in 1998. The mill was torn down in 2003 and JOE has put forth a mixed-use redevelopment plan for the site, just north of the city marina.



The City adopted a Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) in 1989 that encompassed the downtown. By 2004, the City realized its redevelopment plan was in need of an update and also wanted to capitalize on its underutilized waterfront location. The City applied for the Waterfronts Florida designation and was chosen with four other communities for the 2005-2007 cycle.

Partnering with the Redevelopment Agency and with funding from the Waterfronts Florida Program and the Coastal Partnership Initiative through the Department of Environmental Protection, the Waterfronts steering committee conducted a series of visioning workshops in 2005 that contributed to the Waterfront Master Plan. The Master Plan was adopted as part of the overall redevelopment plan for the CRA. The Waterfront Master Plan recommends several physical projects to make the waterfront more accessible, including:

- Baywalk — a 2.5-mile waterfront pathway that connects the City Marina to a trailhead to the south. Baywalk will also feature three piers extending into the bay;
- St. Joseph's Landings — a multiuse waterfront park featuring an amphitheater, kiosks for a farmer's market, and walking paths that connect to the Baywalk; and
- Two trail head facilities and trail connectors—pedestrian and trail connections are proposed at 3rd Street, 5th Street, 16th and 20th Streets and at Allen Memorial Way. Improved pedestrian crosswalks with brick pavers, pedestrian safety zones and increased signage are proposed for the U.S. 98 intersections at 3rd Street and 16th Street for better access to the waterfront.

These projects were put into the redevelopment plan and planning-level costs were estimated. Because they are in the plan, these projects may be eligible for tax increment financing funds. The community has put forth a great deal of effort to ensure that the visions for each of the three areas are integrated to create a master vision for the waterfront.

The steering committee obtained grant funds from the Florida Communities Trust in 2008 to build the trail facilities. While the steering committee lost its program manager in late 2008, participants say the group has initiated work to form a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. Meanwhile, the City of Port St. Joe is leading current waterfront activities. Plans call for purchase and restoration of venues to host community events; the old theatre is a candidate if grants can be obtained.

