



APALACHICOLA



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Community Snapshot

VISION: “Maintain the unique character, scale and small-town feel of Apalachicola through support of the local seafood industry. The Waterfronts Partnership will work to preserve and promote the history and traditional commercial uses that make this district so unique.”

DESIGNATION: 2003

APPLICANT: City of Apalachicola

STATUS: Active; the Chamber of Commerce turned administration of the Partnership over the City of Apalachicola in 2007. The city, in turn, appointed a seven-member advisory committee that reports to the City Commission; the committee meets as needed by project. City staff serve as Program Managers and attend Waterfronts Florida functions including the quarterly Program Managers’ Meetings.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Key waterfront property acquisition for public spaces and parks; upgraded walkways and car parks; docks and piers repaired; renovated Battery Park marina; marketing brochures; design guidelines; named one of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Dozen Distinctive Destinations for 2008.

CURRENT CHALLENGES: Identification of funding; derelict vessel removal.

FUTURE ENDEAVORS: Implement Phase 1 at Scipio Creek (the Mill Pond); work to connect waterfront to off-water parks; create a kids’ water park at the waterfront; establish a waterfront site for the sale of fresh seafood; make improvements to sewer and wastewater systems to protect Apalachicola Bay.

FLORIDA ASSESSMENT OF COASTAL TRENDS DATA:

Number of Active Volunteers: 6

Public Dollars Contributed: \$12.5 million

APALACHICOLA



Apalachicola flanks the Apalachicola Bay, an estuarine system that serves as a nursery ground for shrimp and seafood harvested inshore and in the north and central reaches of the Gulf of Mexico. The Panhandle City's namesake — the Apalachicola Oyster, which is known to chefs across the nation — is harvested from the bay that is recognized as a national treasure and one of Florida's Outstanding Waters.

The City serves as the county seat of Franklin County, where some 85 percent of the land is either preserved for conservation by federal and state governments. The 12,000 or so inhabitants are divided between two cities — Apalachicola and Carrabelle, another Waterfronts Florida Community — and a string of unincorporated communities, such as Lanark Village, St. James Island, Alligator Point, and Eastpoint that mark the scenic coastal highway U.S. 98, and the offshore barrier isles of St. George and Dog Islands. With more than 200 historic homes located inside the city limits, Apalachicola joined the ranks of the

Dozen Distinctive Destinations in 2008, a title bestowed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

THE WATERFRONTS

Apalachicola and the whole of Franklin County are defined by water—the river, the creeks, the bay, the estuary, and the Gulf of Mexico. The County functioned as a major port up to and during the U.S. Civil War, with warehouses and businesses supporting shipment of cotton and goods from inland plantations to other parts of the United States and overseas. The oyster and fishing industry emerged by the 1880s, helped along by development of the ice machine by Apalachicola's own Dr. John Gorrie in 1851. His story and local grave contribute to the historical importance of the community.

Today, Apalachicola produces roughly 80 to 90 percent of the oysters harvested in Florida and is the home of the Florida Seafood Festival, where King Retsyo (oyster spelled backwards) reigns over the oldest maritime event in the state.

Oysters are hand-tonged by oystermen working from homemade wooden boats, landing the catch at the waterfront in Apalachicola, "the Miles" west of town, or alongside U.S. 98 in Eastpoint on the eastern shore, depending on time-of-year and long-term relationships with seafood dealers. Crabbers set traps in the bay and produce soft-shell crabs or "peelers" in backyard tanks. Commercial shrimpers remain offshore for extended periods of time, depending on ice or onboard-freezers to process the catch at sea, then sell at the dock. Semi-



tractor trailers and local trucks haul seafood to markets in Florida, around the Gulf Coast, and to other parts of the country. Sport and recreational fishermen plow the same waters with hook-and-line. Timber and seafood sustained the local people for generations, both declining in recent years with competition of global markets, changes in corporate business plans, government regulation, and loss of freshwater to upstream cities. Government, utilities, and work in construction and tourism contribute to the constellation of economic opportunities as the area becomes a destination for short-term and seasonal tourists interested in a water-based



REVITALIZATION: A CASE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Apalachicola’s work to revitalize its waterfront reflects a continuum: the story is based on a collection of ideas, plans, and activities, some that go back to the 1980s and the town’s first planner, John Myers. While the community became a Waterfronts Florida Partnership in 2003, the City itself has long been active in the planning and grant-getting sphere, the life-blood of protecting, rebuilding, and renovating public property.

Funding is bolstered in part by the potential for line item allocations from the Legislature and points awarded to communities holding state designation as an Area of Critical State Concern. The City was awarded grants over the last eight years from local, regional, state, and federal organizations to purchase waterfront buildings and open space, upgrade walkways and car parks at Veterans Park, repair Water Street docks damaged in the 2004-2005 hurricanes, and renovate the Battery Park Marina at the south edge of town.

THE WATERFRONTS FLORIDA PARTNERSHIP

The Apalachicola Bay Chamber of Commerce partnered with the City of Apalachicola to seek designation as a Waterfronts Florida Partnership Program in 2003 at the height of the nationwide real estate run up. The City’s application painted a picture all too familiar to coastal communities in that economic period:

“...This area is experiencing great pressure from real estate speculation and development and there is a strong desire among the residents, the city government and the waterfront stakeholders to develop and implement a plan for the future of Apalachicola’s waterfront.”

The area of interest is bounded by Water and Commerce Streets on the east, 6th Street on the west, and the two marinas — one known for sport and recreational boats and another for commercial vessels — to the south and north. The waterfront restaurants, hotels, a Coast Guard outpost, and seafood processors busy with the buying and selling of fish, oysters, shrimp, and crabs all frame Veterans Park, the current centerpiece for revitalization and a part of the walkable downtown.

The Waterfronts Committee first encouraged property owners to think about what they could do with their properties, individually and collectively; to

experience, ecotourism, and the world class beaches off St. George Island. Apalachicola, rich with historic and cultural activities, shops, picturesque waterfront — and all within a walkable community — has its own strong draw for visitors. Tourism has been a leading economic engine in recent years.

PICTURESQUE BUT FRAGILE: THREATS TO WATERFRONT

In 1985 the oysters — and the local economy — failed after Hurricane Elena and a series of tropical storms flooded the bay with freshwater and wind-whipped waves scoured the beds. In 1994, Florida voters amended the Constitution to ban the use of most nets for seafood harvest in state waters, a decision that weakened the commercial fishing industry and the fish house/seafood processing system that maintained the working waterfronts statewide. By 2003, ad valorem taxes shot up on individual properties, fueled by real estate “flippers,” threatening small, traditional waterfront businesses. In 2005, Hurricane Dennis damaged oyster bars and destroyed waterfront buildings and processing equipment. Then the harmful algal bloom known as red tide broke out, closing the bay to harvesting and leaving behind local damages that, compounded by the wreckage of the storms, tallied more than \$40 million.

think about reasons to stay in business instead of selling out to waterfront development; and to think about how to preserve a place at the waterfront for offloading fish. This work led to the formation of a Waterfront Property Owners Committee.

By August 2004, after a year of committee and sub-committee meetings, the Waterfronts Group was ready for broad-based community contact. The scheduled public workshop drew in 80 individuals involved in the development of a common vision, and more came for subsequent meetings.

The Partnership initiated work to revitalize the Scipio Creek marina area at the north end of the waterfront to add a restaurant, dock space, and a market for selling seafood directly from the boats. In 2006, the group worked through the City Commission and obtained a \$50,000 grant from the Governor's Office of Tourism, Trade, and Economic Development (OTTED) to consider the feasibility of haul out services for large commercial and recreational boats and yachts.

The Partnership also produced "soft changes" that strengthened the social infrastructure beyond the traditional business of revitalization by speaking in favor of the creation of an independent Seafood Advisory Committee, which in 2008 spearheaded public acquisition of waterfront property at Two Mile to preserve a seafood landing area for oystermen. The Partnership worked to bring disaster planning for historic homes to the attention of local government,



Photo: Paul W. Puckett www.flickr.com/photos/paulstravelpics

participating in a survey of buildings conducted by 1000 Friends of Florida. On a regional scale, the group participated in "The Panhandle Peers," a collection of Waterfronts Florida Partnerships, to market Northwest Florida as a destination.

SUSTAINING THE WATERFRONTS INITIATIVE

The Chamber of Commerce stepped back from the Waterfronts Partnership and passed leadership off to the City Commission in 2007. In turn, the commissioners appointed a six-member Waterfronts Working Advisory Committee to oversee the implementation of the community vision, including the start of Phase 1 that would make improvements to the Scipio Creek dock and set up haul out services. Other projects for 2008 included continuation of renovations at Battery Park Marina and design and construction of renovations at Riverfront Park that include a 420-foot boardwalk/pier to create new space for offloading seafood from commercial boats. The City also has plans to begin to tie the waterfront park areas to off-water parks such as the Three Service Men South Veterans Memorial. The City contracted the Fanning Institute at the University of Georgia to develop visions of the public waterfront, with an eye toward landscape, physical improvements, and historical design.



Two separate initiatives — one sponsored by the City, the other by waterfront property owners — focus on updates to the local comprehensive plan. The City, which is an Area of Critical State Concern, will receive technical assistance from the Florida Department of Community Affairs to prepare its Evaluation and Appraisal Report (EAR) for the plan, which has not been updated since 1991. The recommendations will resolve, among other things, conflicts between the comprehensive plan and the land development code as applied to the waterfront area. The goal is to maintain a historic working waterfront district in the City of Apalachicola. Separately, the property owners, a continuation of the Waterfronts Committee by the same name, hired a planner to conduct research and draft an economic development element for the comprehensive plan, which can be taken into consideration by the Commission.

CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge in Apalachicola, as in most communities, is money. Where can the City get the funding to take on the next phase of the vision, the next project? Beyond the dollars and cents of buying, improving, and managing waterfront property, the City continues to experience problems with derelict vessels — the sunken or half-sunken boats abandoned by owners. Removal can be difficult: owners have to be located and notified, in some instances a process that delays other projects. Yet the City moves on with its long-term vision melded with the Waterfronts Partnership plans, underscoring what could be the motto for waterfront revitalization in Apalachicola — steady as she goes.

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