

BAGDAD





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Community Snapshot

VISION: “A beautiful and safe community closely connected to the water, the Village of Bagdad is a residential community committed to maintaining and enhancing its unique historic character and natural resources. Recreation and cultural opportunities abound, and small businesses complement the natural and historic character of the area. Bagdad residents enjoy a quality of life that fosters pride, welcomes visitors, and encourages families to remain for generations. ”

DESIGNATION: 2005

APPLICANTS: Blackwater River Foundation and Santa Rosa County

STATUS: Active; committee and sub-committees meet regularly; Partnership formed a separate non-profit corporation in 2007 to work solely on waterfront issues.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Update to Land Development Code clarifying Historic Zoning District development regulations, creation of design guidelines and conservation overlay; Mill Site Park Master Planning; Community Lighting Program; Vegetation survey of Bagdad’s waterfront; Creation of the Bagdad Front Porch Art Stroll; Adoption and Development of the Ollinger & Bruce Shipyard Trail Pocket Park; Bagdad Community Award Program for Beautification and Historic Preservation; Community-wide Cleanups; Development of Intensive Outreach Program to Enhance Public Participation.

CURRENT CHALLENGES: Need for additional volunteers; seeking funding to complete projects in vision plan.

FUTURE ENDEAVORS: Waterfront District Master Plan; construction of Bagdad Heritage Trail; streetscaping.

FLORIDA ASSESSMENT OF COASTAL TRENDS DATA:

Number of Active Volunteers:	25
Volunteer Hours Contributed:	20,735
Public Dollars Contributed:	\$5.2 million
Private Dollars Contributed:	\$2.5 million

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with the state, eventually donated the 20-acre waterfront tract to the State of Florida for use as a park, now known as the Mill Site Park.

The once industrialized waterfront stands vacant today. What buildings remain have been damaged by hurricanes and vandals, and plans to turn the site into a community park were delayed by Hurricanes Ivan and Dennis. The site is littered with debris and barricaded by chain link fencing, gates, and locks. The Partnership and Santa Rosa County developed a master plan which will guide the eventual development of the park.

The present-day village is a mix of one and two story houses, mostly frame; some historic, all clustered under a heavy canopy of live oaks draped with Spanish Moss. People fish and put in boats at Oyster Shell Pile Boat Landing. Churches, an elementary school, and the Bagdad Volunteer Fire Department bespeak community life. Many of the people have been here for generations. Residents old and new like the character of the community — the feel of a small, off-the-beaten-path village with the absence of big box stores, and where people know one another by name.



The Village of Bagdad lays claim to a rich waterfront history told in many chapters, each reliant on access to natural resources and the waterfront. The community grew up as a mill town, dependent on freshwater from Pond Creek for power and the Blackwater River's link to the Gulf of Mexico for shipping. Lumber mills and shipyards appeared in this Florida Panhandle settlement by 1760, creating an infrastructure for factories and freight handling operations that sustained residents for more than 150 years. The waterways were the lifeblood for all industrial activity – from powering steam engines to transporting goods throughout the world.

After years of decline, the 1970s saw a revival on the Bagdad waterfront when a concrete plant set up shop to make pre-stressed concrete products at the old lumber mill site located at the confluence of Pond Creek and Blackwater River. During the 1990s asphalt producers used the site for production but departed after a series of problems and legal action linked to alleged pollution and destruction of natural resources. The owners, as part of a global settlement



The lack of a modern, local economic base is an issue in Bagdad, which serves as a bedroom community for nearby Milton and Pensacola. While no one foresees revitalization of the industries that created the village, locals hope to take a “non-consumptive” approach to draw attention to the area’s abundant natural resources through its heritage and ecotourism, perhaps drawing in small shops, a seafood restaurant, and a bed and breakfast to complement the few existing businesses.

HISTORY OF THE WATERFRONTS FLORIDA PARTNERSHIP

Bagdad needed a way to envision and set a path toward a positive future of the village. Yet, when community projects were discussed, they were met with skepticism and often viewed as items on someone’s private agenda or haphazard attempts to control community process.

Enter the Waterfronts Florida Partnership Program, which recognizes visioning as the catalyst for change within a community. A local non-profit organization — the Blackwater River Foundation — partnered with the Santa Rosa County government to seek the designation in 2005, with the hope of developing a community-based vision to revitalize the waterfront area and protect the existing Bagdad National Register Historic District.



The Partnership established a steering committee of 20 and hired a program manager to oversee and manage the day-to-day business. With an eye to the past, the group worked to involve the community. They established a separate, ad hoc “visioning committee” to guide development of the plan and to solicit broad-based public participation. The committee staged a series of small group sessions as orientation to maximize involvement, define the process and build trust.

The Partnership and its predecessor, the Blackwater River Foundation, began to establish working relationships throughout the broader Santa Rosa County community soon after designation. Invitations went out to civic organizations, churches, the fire department, and the elementary school within the program area. Members of the Partnership met with Santa Rosa County officials and made presentations to the County Commission and the City Commission in nearby Milton. The committee mailed invitations to property owners, posted notices in public areas, published articles in community newspapers, and sent volunteers house-to-house to spread the word about the upcoming visioning. The Partnership extended office hours, inviting those who could not attend meetings at scheduled times to drop by when convenient.

The hard work paid off. At its first meeting, the Partnership welcomed dozens of village residents and community groups, as well as numerous representatives from Santa Rosa County, the City of Milton, state agencies, Main Street Milton, the West Florida Regional Planning Council, and The Nature Conservancy.

Nearly 200 people took part in the visioning process. They expressed concerns that focused on guidelines for the historic district, environmental protection for the previously industrialized waterfront, opening now-closed waterfront public lands, and recovery after hurricanes. The Mill Site Park was identified as the focal point for a hoped-for ecotourism waterfront economy, in part because of its proximity to thousands of acres of public lands and waterways. The committee staged a separate visioning workshop for the Bagdad Mill Site Park to accommodate specific interest in the area. The creation of a cohesive, all-inclusive community vision plan is credited with defusing criticism and developing support for new project ideas.

The Waterfronts Partnership worked closely with various Santa Rosa County agencies to accomplish the following actions:

- Develop the Bagdad Conservation Overlay District, creating architectural guidelines for the historic district that includes zoning standards tailored to various parts of the Village to underscore the community's distinctive elements.
- Work with the Santa Rosa Sheriff's Office to explore options available to curb crime in Bagdad by creating a lighting and signage program that is credited with a decrease in Village crime.
- Held pre-visioning meetings to develop traffic calming options that deters speeding through the Village.

In 2007, the Partnership adopted a one-acre riverfront parcel from the Northwest Florida Water Management District adjacent to the Oyster Shell Pile Boat Landing to develop a passive-use pocket park. Volunteers, in partnership with Santa Rosa County, cleared the land and built a picnic pavilion in 2008. Native trees have been planted and a split rail fence set up to define the park beside the Blackwater River, which is designated as one of Florida's Outstanding Waters.

The people of Bagdad are determined to maintain the residential atmosphere of the Village while encouraging development of a small base of commercial activities related to ecotourism. The Partnership intends to develop a master plan for the Bagdad Mill Site Park and the surrounding waterfront area to identify commercial activity compatible with waterfront recreation and the Village's quality of life. The Partnership with local government paid off in other ways. In addition to providing administrative and professional services for the Waterfronts Committee, the County waived permitting fees and provided labor for projects that included relocation and installation of signs, construction of a picnic pavilion, and roadway improvements.

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SUCCESSION

At the end of the two-year designation cycle, the Bagdad Waterfronts Florida Partnership recommended creation of a non-profit organization focusing exclusively on implementation and extension of the Waterfronts vision. The Partnership's steering committee served as the initial board of directors for this inclusive new organization. The Blackwater River Foundation transferred all grant assets to the Bagdad Waterfronts Florida Partnership. The Board of Directors includes a Santa Rosa County planning official, the district's County Commissioner, representatives from civic groups, and many residents. All meetings remain open to the public and decisions and recommendations are made with broad community input.

CHALLENGES

The historic district was a lightning rod for disagreement in Bagdad throughout the first year of the Waterfronts Partnership. Soon after designation, a cadre of Bagdad residents petitioned the Santa Rosa Board of County Commissioners to remove the Village from the National Register of Historic Places, a designation that had been in place since 1987. The request included elimination of all development regulations attached to land within the historic district. The Commission unanimously tabled the request until after completion of the Waterfronts Partnership visioning process. The development of the Bagdad Village Historic Conservation Overlay District emerged from that work.

Like many groups in small communities, the Bagdad Partnership is long on ideas and perpetually short on money, yet they persist, reaching beyond the waterfront to meet the needs of the whole community and to recruit additional volunteers. In 2008, the Public Access Committee began to prioritize items from the vision plan for the Mill Site Park, which included tasks such as setting goals and actions to reduce invasive plants and replant native flora and finding funding to get the engineering work done. Beyond the mechanics of organizing and getting the work done, the Partnership and its members maintain an enthusiasm and energy for the future of their village.

