

Crystal River Downtown Retail Recommendations

Gibbs Planning Group, Inc.

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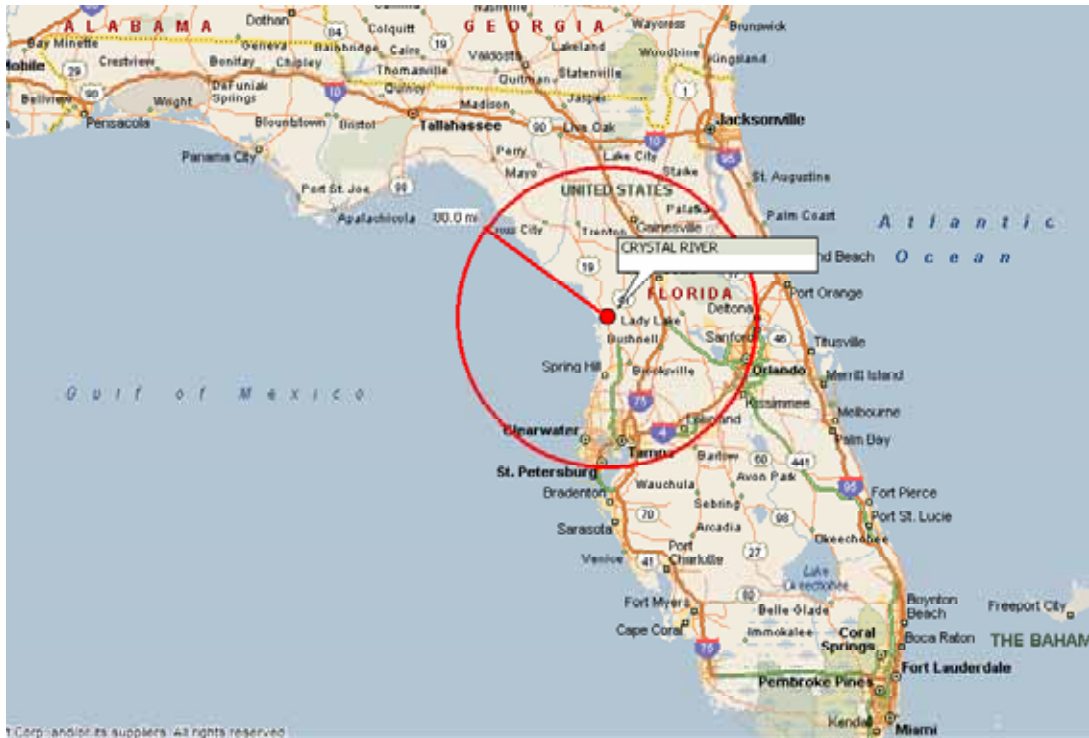


Crystal River has a small collection of local businesses and retailers located in a historical downtown setting.

General Observations

The Crystal River region is experiencing a major economic boom resulting from the area's abundant waterfront access and relative affordability. Much of the area's growth began with the recent opening of the Suncoast Parkway (Highway 589) which offers Tampa residents seeking a nearby affordable vacation home a direct link to Crystal River. In addition, Midwestern retirees are attracted to the region's relative abundant waterfront recreational opportunities and easy lifestyle.

However, Crystal River's historic downtown has not yet fully reached its potential as an attractive shopping and dining destination. The downtown is dominated by State Highway 19 that promotes high speed traffic and severely limits the downtown's walkability. The region does have a strong demand for an attractive downtown and waterfront commercial district as demonstrated by the success of its popular Heritage Village shops and riverfront restaurants.

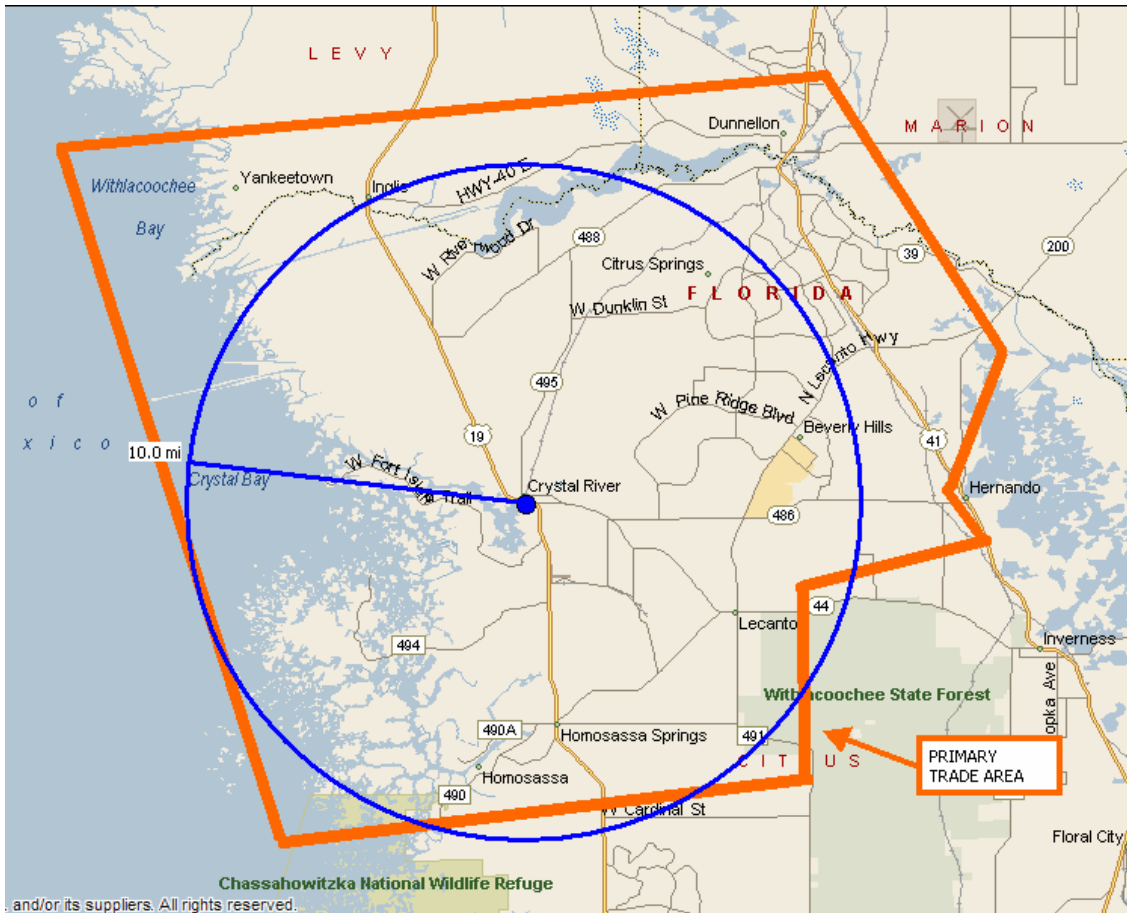


Crystal River is located within 80 miles of Tampa and Orlando, Florida.

Purpose and Limits of Study

GPG was commissioned by the State of Florida Department of Community Affairs to conduct a general analysis of the historic Crystal River commercial district. The purpose of GPG's observations and recommendations is to increase commerce and retail sales in the downtown. During this analysis, GPG visited the general entire Crystal River region on June 8-9, 2005 touring many of its shopping centers and the surrounding countryside. During this analysis, GPG also met with several city staff and small business owners to gain insight into the local demographics, market preferences and their suggestions for the study area.

The findings of this study are only based upon GPG's two day visit and brief interviews with the public and local stakeholders. These interviews and information received has not been independently verified. This report's observations and recommendations should not be the sole basis of any master planning, design, land purchases, capital improvements, leasing, financing or development.



The Crystal River primary trade area varies for each business type, but on average extends approximately up to 8-12 miles due to its major retail anchors including The Crystal River Mall and the numerous waterfront restaurants. Crystal River's total trade area extends over 100 miles because of its unique eco-tourism and waterfront recreational opportunities.

Market Observations

Due to its major retail centers including the Crystal River Mall and many national retailers, the region's total trade area extends over 12 miles and includes over 20,000 households. This large draw will likely continue to attract several other major retailers such as major discount department stores, restaurants and home improvement stores. In addition, the area's unique waterfront ecosystem and State Park's Pre-Columbian archeology exhibit, has a far reaching appeal that attracts tens of thousands of annual visitors. The State Park is reported to have over 40,000 visitors per year alone.

The greater Crystal River region's demographics are representative of the middle American market, with average household incomes ranging from \$32,200.-\$48,600. per year.



Crystal River has numerous popular tourist destinations including the Heritage Village shops and the Pre-Colombian State Park.

Merchandise Mix

Unlike many similar rural regions, Crystal River offers a wide selection of local and national retailers, restaurants and entertainment. In addition to the downtown, the Crystal River region has two primary commerce centers. The Crystal River Mall is located to the north of the CBD includes: Sears, Penney's, Dillards, Kmart and a multi-screen cinema. The south Highway 19 corridor located between Highways 495 and 486 is presently the preferred location for new commercial development, with numerous national retailers and restaurant chains proposed in the near future.

Crystal River's historic downtown is ideally sandwiched between the mall and the primary southern commercial zone. This central location allows for easy access for most visitors. The downtown's Heritage Village complements these major retailers and natural resources, and combined helps to broaden Crystal River's overall appeal. However, the historic downtown district that is located south of U.S. 19, is not presently pulling its share of these tourist visitors, and mostly relies on local residents as its customer base. Many downtown retail buildings are being converted to professional offices, further limiting the downtown's shopping appeal.

Recommendations:

- *As much as possible, the Crystal River should attempt to both retain its existing unique retail mix, while attracting new businesses that service local residents and tourists.*
- *Because of its small size and historic nature, Crystal River should attempt to focus on one primary business theme such as active sporting goods, arts, or quality neighborhood goods and services.*

- *The area should avoid directly competing with the regional mall, but should consider attracting a major region of national anchor tenants such as a coffee shop, bakery, restaurant, drug store or green grocery.*
- *Professional office and banks will contribute to the downtown, but should not be allowed to be the dominate commercial categories in the area.*
- *There should be special emphasis in attracting businesses that reinforce the waterfront recreational activities such as sporting goods, boating and fishing.*
- *The Heritage Village should be supported and additional similar businesses encouraged, including: home improvement, antiques, and garden, apparel and toy stores.*



State Highway 19 is designed for dangerous high speed vehicular traffic and limits safe pedestrian walkability and the commercial viability of the historic downtown.

Vehicular Circulation

State Highway 19 not only dominates the small town, but is largely responsible for holding back its economic viability and expansion. Unlike similar urban conditions, this highway has been designed and programmed for high speed traffic as it travels through the downtown area. Traffic signals appear to be timed to encourage high speeds, while pedestrian crosswalk signals are timed too short and require shoppers to literally run across the highway to avoid being hit by cars. The author was nearly struck by fast moving traffic during numerous attempts to cross Highway 19.

Traffic typically exceeding 50 mph at the Crystal Street intersection as compared to 25-30 mph that is the norm for similar small Florida urban conditions has been noted during this study. As a result of Highway 19, the southern historic downtown experiences little cross shopping between the Heritage Village and surrounding north Citrus Street shops. It is reported that the State is planning to compound this problem by widening State Highway even further in the near future.

Recommendations:

- Implement modern traffic calming standards for Highway 19 as it crosses the historic downtown: post speeds at 25 mph, narrow land width and retime stop lights to slow traffic speeds.
- Improve pedestrian cross walk signal times to allow for safe crossing of Highway 19 at Crystal Street.



The downtown streetscape is dated and lacks basic maintenance and is not representative of the community's quality.

Streetscape & Signage

Crystal River's downtown streetscape has two different characters. The Citrus Street north of Highway 19 is generally well maintained and attractive. Unfortunately, the historic downtown's streetscape located south of Highway 19 has a tattered and poorly maintained appearance. Tall weeds, broken street furniture and cracked walks combined with the

downtown's handful of poorly maintained store fronts creates a negative impression that is not in keeping with the overall quality of the community.

It is acknowledged that many of the businesses along Citrus Street are well designed and maintained, especially the some of the offices and the Heritage Village shops, however many of the most unsightly buildings are located in the downtown's prominate locations and form a negative first impression.



Crystal River's visitors and residents have a variety of well planned and maintained shopping districts to choose from. Photo on the left is the Crystal River Mall and photo on the right is downtown Inverness.

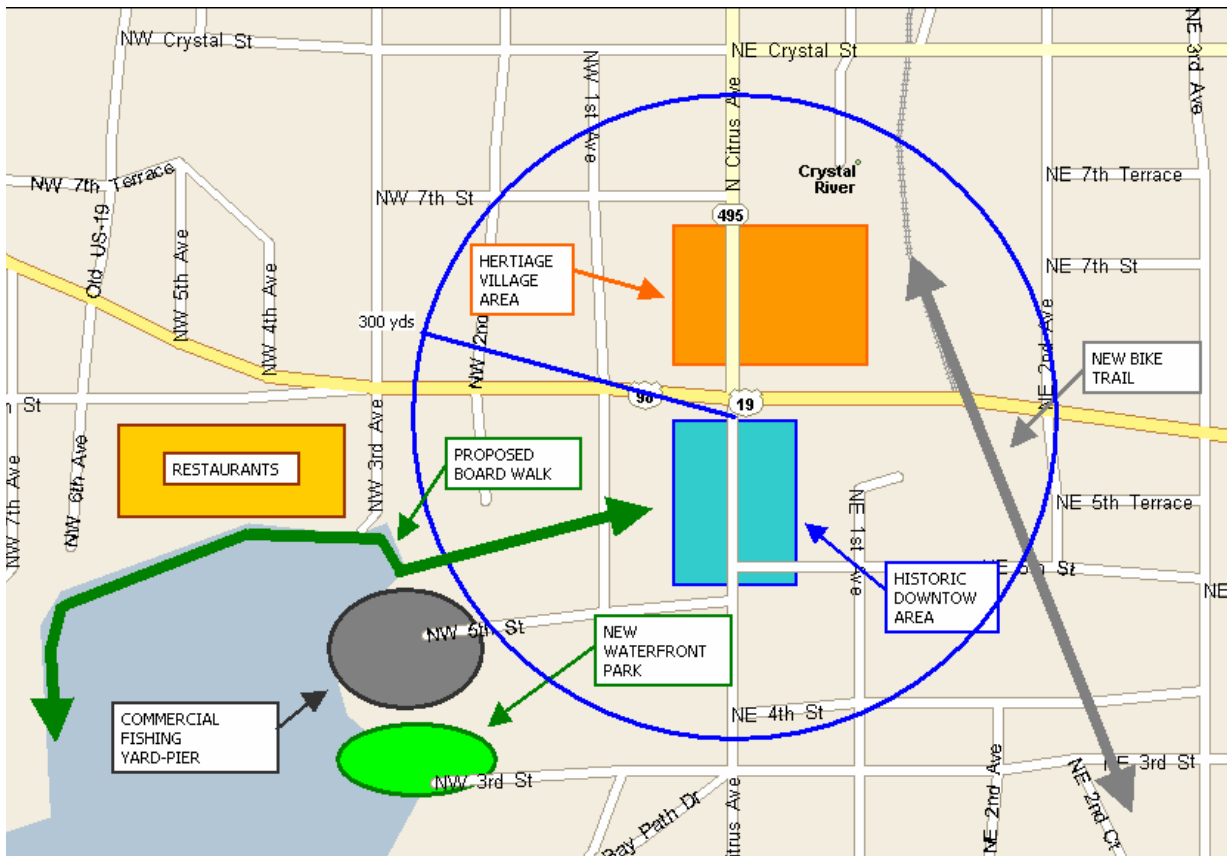
In addition, a large vacant lot is located at the downtown's prime corner, southeast corner of Highway 19 and Citrus Street, making the downtown look almost abandoned. Most sidewalks are poorly maintained concrete, with little or no street tree plantings. Site furnishings are generally lacking, or in a neglected state of repair. The downtown's 25-30' tall highway lighting was observed with exposed wires strung pole to pole. These light standards, although efficient, do not reinforce the area's historic nature and create an unattractive atmosphere for dining and shopping.

The City does have a master plan to install new sidewalks, landscaping and streetscape furnishings along Citrus Street and these improvements will make a noticeable improvement in the historic downtown. Several of the key elements of the new streetscape plan should be reconsidered as follows:

Recommendations:

- *Consider replacing proposed ornamental street trees with canopy trees to provide shade and allow for views of storefronts.*
- *Retain all existing on-street vehicular parking along Citrus Street.*

- *Repair existing damaged sidewalks, match present materials and standards.*
- *Improve maintenance of public right of ways, including cutting weeds and mowing grass, sweeping – washing streets and walks.*
- *Install large scale flower planters along both north and south Citrus Street and Highway 19.*
- *Continue to implement proposed streetscape furniture improvement plan: benches, trash containers and banners.*
- *Install updated “You are Here” business directory to locate all retailers and restaurants in the Citrus Street area.*
- *Widen existing sidewalks as much as possible; continue using concrete as the primary walk material.*
- *Install pedestrian scaled lighting.*
- *Improve pedestrian crosswalk along Highway 19, including improved markings, signage, and a longer walk timed signal.*



The historic downtown area is only 2 blocks east of the waterfront and surrounded by traditional residential neighborhoods.

Parking

Parking is one of the most critical issues facing any shopping district. People do not need to shop, and when parking is difficult, most potential

shoppers will avoid the visit, often never returning. The parking problem is typically compounded in urban locations because of the multi-uses and tight space. In addition, the parking problem is often made worse by employees and business owners occupying the prime spots.

In contrast, these same shoppers will demand parking directly in front of a convenience store such as a video store or carry-out food. Should such a space not be available, the typical shopper will believe that the parking is problematic and not convenient. As a result, shoppers will tend to avoid the center for shopping in the future.

Many of neighborhood shoppers prefer to run in and out of specific retailers and are unwilling to park in remote lots. This double standard held by American consumers is not necessarily fair to the small downtown merchant, but the behavior is a reality that must be addressed. The unwillingness to park in remote lots or underground decks could put many of the smaller neighborhood shops at risk. A grocery store or anchor type tenant's shopper will often use garages, because of the longer duration of their visit.



Crystal River has an abundant amount of waterfront access and offers numerous popular recreational activities including boating and eco-diving.

Shoppers have different parking expectations for destination businesses than they do neighborhood and convenience type of shops. When visiting restaurants, fashion and home furnishings, shoppers tend to make multiple store visits, often totaling more than an hour. In exchange for the greater variety of stores and merchandise offered in a destination type center, shoppers are willing to park further away from storefronts than they would be in a neighborhood center. Destination visitors will also perceive parking to be more convenient (and closer), if they can see the store entry from their parking stall, even if its hundreds of feet away.

The Crystal River commercial district appears to have plenty of parking for its existing size, plus for a limited amount of expansion. Most shoppers utilize the existing on-street parking spaces. A new surface lot

is planned east of Citrus Street. This new lot will allow for more business growth in the downtown.

Recommendations:

- *Continue implementation plans for the new surface parking lot planned east of Citrus Street.*
- *Reduce the existing residential on-site parking requirements for residential from the existing 2 stalls per unit to 1 stall per unit or less.*
- *Reduce the onsite residential parking requirement from 2 cars per unit to 1 car per unit, minimum.*
- *Retain on-street parking as much as possible.*



Crystal River's commercial buildings cover a wide range of historical periods and have the potential to become an attractive collection of specialty shops.

Building Facades:

The Crystal River area has a variety of pre and post war buildings that combine to create a unique urban shopping district. Such buildings are not only interesting, but help to make the commercial district unique and therefore, competitive with modern shopping malls and future lifestyle centers. In general many of the historic buildings located south of Highway 19 need upgrading and improved signage, while most of the buildings north of Highway 19 have been recently improved.

Recommendations:

- *Implement a color painting program to reinforce each buildings historical period.*
- *Implement strict historic preservation guidelines and codes to preserve important historic structures (consider the Main Street program guidelines).*
- *Establish incentive based historic design guidelines for new development in the downtown.*

- *Require store fronts along downtown streets with a minimum of 70% clear glass and retail frontages.*
- *Promote infill of new construction to help link the shopping district's businesses and to encourage cross-shopping.*



Crystal River has a unique opportunity to develop its waterfront into an exciting mixed use attraction.

Long Range Planning:

Historic downtowns can not be duplicated and Crystal River's historic shopping district area will continue to be an attractive amenity for the region. The quality and character of the Heritage Village area should be considered a model for the future improvements in the downtown area. In addition, the region's primary attraction and competitive edge with other commercial districts is its waterfront. The area's vast waterfront offers numerous recreational activities and could position Crystal River as one of the State's most unique destinations.

Recommendations:

- As waterfront properties become available, public access and continued development of residential and commercial improvements should be encouraged.
- *Attempt to link the Citrus Street business district with the water front, via walks and new street construction.*
- *Encourage as much new residential construction as is reasonable in the downtown.*
- *Continue to develop recreational opportunities including the bike path, waterfront parks and waterfront board walk.*
- *Consider routing the bike path along Citrus Street to increase activity in the downtown and to allow for crossing at the existing Highway 19 traffic signal.*

-- END OF REPORT --

