



FORT WALTON BEACH



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Community Snapshot

VISION: “Our vision is a vibrant waterfront area that will be a regular haunt for all of our citizens and our many visitors, to fish, to walk or jog the boardwalk, to enjoy a cold drink at a Sound-side restaurant, to sit on a bench by the water and enjoy a sunset. We see a waterfront that will be a magnet for boaters traveling the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, a not-to-be-missed stopover or a delightful destination. We see a waterfront that can serve as a model for other Florida communities attempting to balance the rights of individual property owners with the needs of the general public in an environment of intense development pressure.”

DESIGNATION: 2005

APPLICANT: City of Fort Walton Beach

STATUS: Active; Committee meets quarterly but City no longer funds a program manager

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Improved public access though the acquisition of new waterfront park; improvements to existing waterfront parks; “drains to bay” stencils on storm-water drains.

CURRENT CHALLENGES: Lack of financial and staff support from city due to budget cuts; developers have been reluctant to provide an easement for waterfront boardwalk.

FLORIDA ASSESSMENT OF COASTAL TRENDS DATA:

Number of Active Volunteers:	3
Volunteer Hours Contributed:	2,211
Public Dollars Contributed:	\$104,788

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Fort Walton Beach is located in Florida's Panhandle in Okaloosa County, nestled between the Santa Rosa Sound, Choctawhatchee Bay and the U.S. military installations of Hurlburt Field and Eglin Air Force Base. Compared to many of the designated Waterfronts Communities, Fort Walton Beach is a relatively young city. The community has been a popular destination for tourists over the last 30 years, many of whom were drawn by miles of bright white, sugar sand beaches bounded by the Gulf of Mexico, which at Fort Walton offers Caribbean-like aquamarine water.

The Santa Rosa Sound – while less appreciated by the beach-going tourist population – provides sheltered passage for barges and boaters, and is a critical element of the local economy. The Sound is part of the 1,000-mile Gulf Intracoastal Waterway that stretches from Brownsville, Texas, to Apalachee Bay just south of Tallahassee, Florida's capital city.

U.S. 98 serves as the main commercial corridor that runs along the "Emerald Coast," moving traffic through the city and connecting Fort Walton Beach to Panama City to the east and Destin and Pensacola to the west. Fort Walton's waterfront has been dominated historically by single-family homes, water-related businesses that include a marine supply store and a boat dealership, and a few chain restaurants. The four-lane roadway, coupled with the privately owned parcels, forms physical and visual barriers to the waterfront.

The small 1950s-era downtown is located just west of Brooks Bridge, which connects the City to its Gulf-front persona. The business district declined over the years as most cities do when shopping malls are built on the fringe. In the

1980s the old downtown remained viable, supported by airbrush t-shirt shops, a popular barbeque joint, gas station, surf shop, an old movie theater and two quality local department stores. Although it was not a walkable, pedestrian-friendly area, the downtown retained some charm, and, most notably, a great deal of underutilized waterfront property.

The City established the Water's Edge Committee in 2004 to advise the City Commission on ways to deal with land use, transportation, and water quality issues on U.S. 98 and along the Sound. A year later, the City applied for and was designated a Waterfronts Florida Partnership Community.

The City hired a full-time program manager and re-established the Water's Edge Committee to serve as the Waterfronts Committee. Soon after designation, they hosted a series of public workshops to develop a waterfront vision. "Charting the Course" sets out multiple objectives related to enhancing the economy, increasing public access, and enhancing hazard mitigation – all of which support revitalization of the waterfront and meet the priorities of the Waterfronts Florida Partnership Program.

The Waterfronts Committee and the City set to work and accomplished a lengthy list of objectives identified in the vision. The "complete" column now includes:





In addition, the City-made improvements to Liza Jackson Park, adding 32 new boat/trailer parking spaces in 2007 along with upgrading the park's playground equipment and landscaping. The City also acquired a waterfront parcel across the street from City Hall and created Sound Park — a passive park that includes a 98-foot long fishing pier, two walking paths, a playground, picnic tables, a seawall and native plants.

Budget cuts have taken a toll on Fort Walton's plans to upgrade the waterfront. The City dropped the funding for the program manager position. Without financial assistance from the City, including staffing and overhead costs, the future of the Committee remains unclear. City staff has encouraged the Waterfronts Committee to form a non-profit organization and to pursue projects on its own. While such organizations may still draw from local funds – when available – they can also reach out to foundations and other private sources grants. The Waterfronts Committee now meets on a quarterly basis and is considering the non-profit option.

- Allowable heights reduced from 150 feet to 70 feet or less for new buildings at the waterfront to ensure public views of the water;
- Land Development Code provides a density bonus to encourage developers to create waterfront boardwalk easements to promote waterfront access
- Grants received to install stormwater pollutant separators at four waterfront sites and stencils for educational messages – “Don't Dump! Drains to Bay” – at some 230 stormwater inlets to improve water quality;
- Grants received to rehabilitate a portion of the shoreline with native plants and teach children about native plant and animal species to protect the shoreline;
- Chamber of Commerce and Historic Downtown Association to include property owners and merchants in events such as Arbor Day / Earth Day, Friday Night Flicks, and Coastal Beach Clean-up to reorient the downtown and provide activities to draw people to the waterfront; and
- City's Emergency Management Plan and zoning regulations posted to a Web site to foster public education on waterfront issues.

