



# PORT SALERNO





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### Community Snapshot

**VISION:** “The ‘2020 Vision for a Sustainable Martin County’ created the foundation for Port Salerno’s vision of the future and its Community Redevelopment Plan with a focus on: Retention of Port Salerno’s historic character and strengthening of neighborhoods, commercial centers, parks and the environment.”

**DESIGNATION:** 2001

**APPLICANT:** Martin County

**STATUS:** Inactive; participates as a member of the Port Salerno CRA Neighborhood Advisory Committee.

**KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS:** Established the Port Salerno Commercial Fishing Dock Authority; Initiated Phases 1-2 of Waterfront Boardwalk; Obtained funding for dredging at Manatee Pass; designed way-finding signs for downtown and the commercial pier.

**CURRENT CHALLENGES:** Assisting local businesses and homeowners with the dredging project; assisting the Port Salerno Commercial Fishing Dock Authority to design and build a more efficient and up-to-date dockside area for its operations.

#### FLORIDA ASSESSMENT OF COASTAL TRENDS DATA:

|                                     |               |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| <b>Number of Active Volunteers:</b> | 12            |
| <b>Volunteer Hours Contributed:</b> | 948           |
| <b>Public Dollars Contributed:</b>  | \$9.3 million |



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Port Salerno is a historic fishing village tucked away at the side of a protected harbor known as the Manatee Pocket. The community is located just south of Stuart, the governmental seat of Martin County, on Florida's Central Atlantic Coast. "The Pocket" is rimmed with small shops and restaurants; centers for boat storage, haul out, and repair; resorts; and a string of commercial fishing docks. The waterway opens into the St. Lucie River estuary and the St. Lucie Inlet, putting recreational boaters and sport and commercial fishermen within three miles of open waters — and federal regulation — in the Atlantic Ocean.

## HISTORY OF THE WATERFRONTS FLORIDA PARTNERSHIP

Located in an unincorporated area of the County, Port Salerno was among the first communities in 1997 to apply for the newly created Waterfronts Florida Partnership Program. While not selected as one of the first Waterfronts Florida communities, Port Salerno reapplied and gained designation in 2001.

In the intervening years, Port Salerno became one of the first areas to participate in Martin County's Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), taking part in charrettes and vision exercises to prepare a plan for what the fishing village should look like in the future. One of the key elements of the CRA vision was the development of the Manatee Pocket Walk, a boardwalk that would eventually allow the public to walk around the edge of most of the harbor, another priority aimed to preserve the fishing industry.

The CRA Neighborhood Advisory Committee and the County were ready to move into action by the time Port Salerno became a Waterfronts Community;

the program and its focus were viewed as tools critical to implementation of the vision. The designation came with seed money for planning and the potential for extra points on applications for some state grant funds. The CRA tax money paid for a planner to staff the Port Salerno Waterfronts Partnership and work associated with the boardwalk and other waterfront projects. Waterfronts Florida staff provided technical assistance to Martin County planners, helping them to work through unexpected problems encountered with obtaining environmental permits and securing a submerged land lease for the commercial fishing docks.

## PRESERVATION OF WORKING WATERFRONT

Waterfronts Florida Partnership Communities must focus on a set of four priority topics: provide for public access to the waterfront, attend to environmental and cultural resources, revitalize the economy, and pay attention to how to mitigate property damage and loss of life in hazardous situations. As it turned out, preservation of the historic commercial fishing industry served as part of the Partnership's work on both cultural resources and hazard mitigation. It also turned out to be one of the biggest challenges — and learning experiences.

Commercial operations traditionally lined the banks of the Manatee Pocket. Some say that fishing was among the first industries at Port Salerno, but the industry nearly collapsed here and in other parts of Florida after the 1994 Constitutional Amendment that outlawed most nets to harvest fish for commercial purposes in Florida waters. Commercial crabbers and hook and line fishermen who docked at Port Salerno survived the net ban, and some of the net fishermen adapted, switching to the smaller, more labor intensive cast nets still legal in state waters. But the fish houses — the waterfront businesses where fishermen got ice and sold their catch — failed, in part because of losses associated with the change in public policy and in part because of market forces. The last fish house was eventually converted to an art center and gallery.

In 1999 the Partnership began work on plans to create the waterfront boardwalk that would pass through the commercial fishing docks. In the course of design and permitting, the Partnership and the fishermen learned that the fishermen did not own the upland and that no one held a submerged land lease for the state-owned underwater property. The County, as owner of the adjacent upland, was the only organization that could apply for the lease.



In a complex and protracted series of events, the County obtained the state lease to support continuation of the working waterfront. The County, in turn, needed a lease from the fishermen, who up to that point had functioned as individuals, not as an organization. With encouragement from the County, the fishermen formed the non-profit Port Salerno Commercial Fishing Dock Authority, negotiated a lease, and preserved their place on the water at the Manatee Pocket. While the original agreement was based on the premise of “last man standing,” which prevented the Authority from adding or replacing new members, a new lease established in 2008 provides for successive three-year leases and permission to replace members as individuals leave or pass on.

The Authority’s waterfront set up is unique. While fish and crabs are landed at Manatee Pocket, none of the seafood is processed in Port Salerno. The waterfront investment consists of the wooden docks and four tarp-covered tube metal kiosks. The Authority as an organization contracts with the fish dealers — known as vendors in the agreement — who make arrangements with individual fishermen to purchase the catch. The vendors pick up fish and deliver ice on a daily basis, then haul the catch to off-water processing facilities in South or Central Florida or as far away as Destin in the Panhandle. The low-maintenance, low-cost kiosks and the off-water processing provides an example of how to reduce investment — public or private — in a high hazard area. The Authority is active in the Waterfronts Partnership and the broader local community; they recently sponsored the second annual dockside seafood festival that attracted 18,000 visitors to the waterfront for food and education about fish, fishing, and the environment.

The market for waterfront real estate challenged the revitalization of Port Salerno at other points. Several businesses provide haul out and repair services and store boats, yachts, and commercial vessels. Some of the property owners began to wonder how they could stay in operation, given the soaring prices and taxes associated with waterfront property. The recent economic downturn cooled the market and state-level policy changes may provide relief on taxes, encouraging business owners to stay put.



## SUCCESSION: THE FUTURE OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Some five years after Port Salerno became a graduate of Waterfronts Florida Partnership, the CRA Neighborhood Advisory Committee (NAC) does double duty and makes recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners to continue revitalization of the Port Salerno waterfront. Waterfront topics appear regularly on the agenda along with a report from the Partnership chair. One of the key Waterfronts projects is the development of Design Regulations for Port Salerno, a planning tool that is expected to help retain the architectural “look” of the fishing community. The day-to-day business of the Partnership is managed by County staff, who also administer the CRA. These individuals attend Neighborhood Advisory Committee meetings, write grant applications, oversee design and construction of individual projects, and manage CRA and grant funds.

The Port Salerno Waterfronts work is also guided by the “Manatee Pocket Bunch,” a collection of business owners, operators, and residents who meet on an occasional or as-needed basis to talk about what’s happening and what should happen in the Pocket. The group provides an opportunity and informal mechanism to integrate the interests and needs of a diverse population including the commercial and sporting fishing groups, which historically have a less than congenial relationship.

Two major projects are in the works—both funded largely by the County through the CRA. The County will extend the boardwalk that will someday ring the Manatee Pocket, giving the public access to the waterfront for fishing and a promenade. The County is also preparing to oversee the long-awaited maintenance dredging of the channel into and around the Manatee Pocket to make navigation easier for sport, recreational, and commercial boats. The County Engineering

Department obtained \$12 million in grants to support the dredging; the CRA Neighborhood Advisory Committee has contributed \$360,000 toward the project and is also pursuing additional funding to assist local businesses and homeowners to dredge access to their properties along with the County project.