

SAN CARLOS





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Community Snapshot

VISION: "San Carlos Island is a people-oriented community with an important working waterfront that includes vibrant commercial seafood and other marine-based industries and recreational opportunities. These assets contribute in making San Carlos Island an attractive community for its permanent and seasonal residents as well as an interesting area for visiting tourists."

DESIGNATION: 1997

APPLICANT: Lee County Economic Development

STATUS: Active; committee meets quarterly; Partnership now established as a non-profit organization.

PARTNERS: Lee County; Ostego Bay Foundation; U.S. Coast Guard; local marinas; local fishermen; University of Florida; Florida West Coast Inland Navigation District.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Working Waterfront Trail tour; Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Code "Water Dependent" Overlay; Ostego Bay Oil Spill Co-op.

CURRENT CHALLENGES: Incorporation as a city desired but not allowed by Florida Statutes; high property taxes in addition to submerged land leases.

FLORIDA ASSESSMENT OF COASTAL TRENDS DATA:

Number of Active Volunteers:	12
Volunteer Hours Contributed:	3,000
Public Dollars Contributed:	\$71,642

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San Carlos Island is a small working waterfront tucked under the Matanzas Pass Bridge connecting Fort Myers with Fort Myers Beach. The half-mile long barrier island is dotted with fish houses, commercial fishing docks, an open-air waterfront restaurant and seafood market, a mix of single family homes and trailer parks, and various small businesses.

A HEALTHY BAY = HEALTHY SEAFOOD

In 1997, a self-created committee, with the help of the Lee County Office of Economic Development, applied for Waterfronts Florida designation to help the community deal with the capacity of shrimping and fishing boats that docked there seasonally, as well as educate residents and visitors about the Island's working waterfront.

To implement the public education portion of the committee's goal, the community developed a self-guided working waterfront tour called "A Healthy Bay = Healthy Seafood." Starting at Main Street with an informational kiosk, the tour takes participants along a short trail to a boardwalk where there is a clear

view of the shrimp and fish boats that line the waterfront. The kiosk provides information about the bay, the habitat, and fish that live in it. Although originally designed to be a self-guided tour, a volunteer is available to provide a narrated tour every Wednesday.

During its second year of designation, the Waterfront Partnership attempted to tackle the issue of crowding along the docks by commissioning a study to come up with alternatives. The resulting recommendation was to construct an enclosed basin large enough to dock 40 shrimp boats. Although well received by the public, the construction of the basin has not yet been undertaken.



The Waterfronts Committee has been spearheaded by the same volunteer program manager since its inception. Also serving as the CRA board, the Committee morphed into a non-profit Community Redevelopment Corporation that meets quarterly. The program manager is also the executive director of the Ostego Bay Foundation Marine Science Center, and the activities of the two groups gel together. The Ostego Bay Oil Spill Co-op, made up of volunteer commercial fishermen and marina employees and partnering with the Coast Guard, provides first response in the event of an oil spill. The Marine Science Center provides a marine science experience through interactive exhibits,



aquariums, hands on tank, collections and displays, and holds a children’s day camp during the summer months.

In 1999, the Florida West Coast Inland Navigation District commissioned a study to determine the affects of the local fishing industry on Lee County’s overall economy. The study found that although the impacts vary from year to year depending on economic conditions the shrimping industry contributes \$55 million and over 1,500 jobs to the economy. The study reported that:

“The shrimp processing/packing industry on San Carlos Island represents an important component of the Lee County economy. Activities associated with the harvesting, off-loading, processing, packing, and shipping of shrimp from San Carlos Island facilities have been shown to be intrinsically linked with several factors of the local economy. These activities create positive economic impacts to the local economy as shrimp products are sold to buyers located outside of Lee County and as shrimp is purchased locally by non-residents. The sale of shrimp to both local and non-local buyers results in the purchase of inputs from a variety of services and supply firms, and the distribution of

incomes to local employees. These expenditures are circulated within the Lee County economy as these dollars are spent and re-spent...¹”

Recognizing the need to protect the local fishing fleet and related waterfront uses, Lee County amended its Comprehensive Plan to include the “San Carlos Island Water-Dependent Overlay Zone.” This land use overlay allows for marinas, marine-related industrial and commercial uses, and marine storage areas such as dry-docks. Ancillary uses, such as restaurants, are also permitted under certain conditions. The County’s Land Development Code was also modified to permit marine-related businesses.

In spite of these protections, a 40-acre parcel is slated for redevelopment into a condo/hotel and a yacht club. At one point, the committee explored the possibility of incorporation to gain autonomy over its zoning and land use issues, but Florida Statutes generally limit the creation of a new city if it is within two miles of another city. San Carlos Island’s proximity to Fort Myers Beach stifles its ability to become an independent city. As of late, taxes have also been an issue for San Carlos Island—taxing on the highest and best use of the property, as well as paying the submerged land lease to the State of Florida, has been a strain on the commercial fishing industry.

Despite these pressures, San Carlos Island prides itself on its public education regarding the health of sea grass and mangrove communities and how they relate to the health of the bay and the fishing industry.

¹ Adams, Chuck; David Mulkey, and Alan Hodges. 1999. An Assessment of the Economic Importance of the San Carlos Island Shrimp Processing Industry to the Lee County Economy, p. 9. Food and Resource Economics Department, Institute of Food and Agricultural Department (IFAS), University of Florida: Gainesville, Florida.

