

ST. MARKS





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Community Snapshot

VISION: “To promote controlled economic development while preserving the “Genuine St. Marks Experience.” We see St. Marks as a waterfront community that:

- Preserves the fishing community and enhances the experiences of the natural environment, including life on the water
- Preserves and enhances the unique, significant history of the City of St. Marks and adjacent areas
- Ensures public access and open areas on the river
- Provides a retreat/getaway atmosphere
- Is a place to live, work, and relax for a lifetime
- Is a fruitful place to invest financially and personally”

DESIGNATION: 2007

APPLICANT: City of St. Marks

STATUS: Active; committee and subcommittees meet regularly; Partnership acts as Advisory Board to City Commission.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Boardwalk along river; upgrades to boat ramps and parking; feasibility and marketing study for conference center; oral histories of St. Marks residents; historical marker development; Historic St. Marks symbol for marketing and branding.

CURRENT CHALLENGES: Recruiting additional volunteers to be members of subcommittees; funding sources for stormwater planning.

FUTURE ENDEAVORS: Evaluation of the goals and objectives associated with the vision; setting priorities; consider organizational options for 2009 including creation of a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization to maintain focus on the waterfront.

FLORIDA ASSESSMENT OF COASTAL TRENDS DATA:

Number of Active Volunteers:	29
Volunteer Hours Contributed:	1,704
Public Dollars Contributed:	\$59,858
Private Dollars Contributed:	\$21,200

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St. Marks lies along a stretch of Florida's coastline, 25 miles south of Florida's capital in Tallahassee, known for sea grass not sand beaches, slow moving rivers, and towns just off the beaten path. With barely 300 inhabitants, the City is one of Florida's smaller municipalities and only one of two incorporated areas in Wakulla County.

Commercial, recreational, and sportfishing boats line the waterfront; some are tied to docks, others are stored in over-water sheds, off-the-water dry stack buildings, or on trailers parked behind chain link fences. Just one waterfront restaurant remains open since Posey's Oyster Bar suffered storm damage in 2005 that led to condemnation of the two-story hotspot. Off-water eateries keep up the coastal tradition, promising shrimp, fish sandwiches, and other seafood to visitors who arrive by road, water, or the Tallahassee–St. Marks Historic Railroad State Trail that ends at the water's edge.

VISIONS OF REVITALIZATION

St. Marks has transitioned from a 16th century Spanish fort and military trading and distribution center, to a 20th century industrial center to more recent decline. From its origin during the period of Spanish settlement in Florida through the Civil War, St. Marks served as an important outpost, as a distribution point for arms and, later, cotton. The fort – San Marcos de Apalache – and a lighthouse constructed in the 1830s are on the National Register of Historic Places. A state park provides interpretive displays on the community's rich history.

Today, an oil refinery and supporting docks are defunct, relics of a time when tugs pushed barges of crude oil from Pascagoula, Mississippi to North Florida. At one time party boats carried tourists out to fish on the river and the Gulf. Now restaurants, bars, marinas, and a general store are the economic engine, dependent on weekend and summer boaters from Tallahassee and South Georgia. The revitalization — now in the start-up phase with help from Waterfronts Florida — reflects the resilience of local folks and a panel of supportive elected officials confronted by a natural disaster named Dennis.

First the disaster, then the response. Nothing in recent memory prepared St. Marks or other coastal communities in Florida's Big Bend for the devastation that rolled in July 2005 on a 10- to 12-foot storm surge linked to Pensacola-bound Hurricane Dennis. Posey's and other waterfront establishments were flooded. By 2007, some 69 percent of the buildings in the waterfront area were vacant, victims of the storm and a sagging regional and national economy.

Yet, the aftermath of Dennis sparked a grassroots initiative that set the citizens on course to revitalize their hometown. Everybody pitched in, including a gentleman known for offering pickup and delivery service to get people to meetings. The visioning paralleled the City's work to develop a master plan and investigate the ins and outs of the Community Redevelopment Area concept, so elected officials endorsed the work and appointed a special committee. The resulting vision is straight-forward and to-the-point:

- People do not want to see St. Marks lose its flavor, the community is laid back and comfortable, it's not a Panama City Beach
- Encourage sportfishing
- Support local business

By 2007, with less than a year under its belt, the St. Marks Waterfronts Florida Partnership set out a strategy to dream big, create foundations for reality, and capture small wins along the way. The Partnership hired a program manager — the individual who was instrumental in launching the Panacea Waterfronts Partnership



in 1999 — and started plans to beautify the local post office.

GETTING THINGS DONE: THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF A STARTUP OPERATION

The Waterfronts Partnership works through a 15-member steering committee, and a program manager handles the day-to-day tasks. The group set up the organizational structure early on, established sub-committees, then wrote and adopted by-laws. Sub-committees are headed by members of the steering group and populated by the community-at-large. The program manager keeps up with the committees, handles the paper work, and makes sure that committee members know about public meetings important to waterfronts — including the regular reports to the City Commission.

One of the biggest challenges to date has been an abundance of ideas and the limitations of the labor pool in a community with less than 300 people. Yet person after person continues to step up and volunteer for hands-on work or serve on ad hoc or standing committees.

The Partnership depends on regular meetings and casual opportunities to talk about ideas, plans, and what needs to be done — to get the word out to the community about what's happening. Each individual knows how to turn a trip to the general store for a bag of ice into a conversation with neighbors who want to know “what's going on with Waterfronts?”

THE DREAM

While the spirit for revitalization started from Hurricane Dennis, the dream for the future followed on the heels of an announcement that a developer planned to build multi-storied condos along the St. Marks riverfront. The Waterfronts Partnership and others in St. Marks opposed the project, saying that such a development would bring in few people, block public access to the water, and conflict with the low-rise character of the St. Marks they know and love. They wanted something everyone would enjoy, not just the few; and it would have been an inefficient use of a community asset—the waterfront.

Then they came up with a better idea — a conference center, hotel, cottages, and a waterfront boardwalk. A Waterfronts board member followed up with



a presentation that was complete with photos, goals, and objectives on how to “brand” St. Marks, distinguish this city from other coastal areas, and, ultimately, tie itself to a network of historic communities including St. Augustine.

So far, few people are saying the idea will be “a piece of cake” or — more importantly — “this isn't going to work.” Instead, the Partnership rolled up its collective sleeves and raised \$20,000 in private funds, issued a request for proposals, and hired a consultant to conduct a study for an off-water “green” conference center. If it comes to pass, the

center will be the focal point of a yet-to-be-created town center and the link to a waterfront plaza that replaces some of the buildings condemned after Dennis. Architecture will be important, people here want a town center that gives the impression that the conference center and other new structures evolved over time, eschewing the more recent trends toward new urbanism and instant planned communities.

Separately, with the step-by-step support of the Waterfronts Florida Partnership Program, the Historical Committee began work to create an historic district within St. Marks. By resolution, the City Commission authorized the Waterfronts Partnership to serve as an advisory committee and to talk directly with the Bureau of Historic Preservation to explore options for formal recognition. The Partnership is also partnering with the Office of Greenways and Trails and a local business sponsor to establish interpretive signs on the Tallahassee-St. Marks Trail.

Tasks for the second year of designation include evaluation of the goals and objectives and setting priorities. The Partnership will also consider organization options and explore potential for creating a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation to maintain focus on the waterfront as it moves into the “graduate” phase of its relationship with the Waterfronts Florida Partnership Program.

The thinking in St. Marks tends toward the positive and the practical. Questions focus on the “what if” of success and the “how to” of constructing and maintaining streets and other public services in a riverfront community where people know the question is not if the City of St. Marks will flood again, but when. The people of St. Marks also have a saying: “We're managing what happens here instead of someone else coming in and telling us what to do.”