

STEINHATCHEE

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FISH



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Community Snapshot

VISION: “Steinhatchee prospers – the north end of the community along River Side Drive, directly on the Steinhatchee River, serves as a town center. A marina complex is located nearby with shops, restaurants, a maritime museum, community fishing pier with charter boats, parks, and green spaces. The height restrictions in place in Steinhatchee since early in the 21st century remain in force; residential development architecture is subject to the ‘Florida Cracker Style’ that retains the look of this coastal community.”

DESIGNATION: 2007

APPLICANT: Taylor County

STATUS: Active; Steering committee and sub-committees meet regularly.

PARTNERS: Steinhatchee Projects Board; Steinhatchee River Chamber of Commerce.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Awarded grant to buy the former waterfront Steinhatchee Fish Market; disaster recovery guide; Fort Steinhatchee project; flushing model feasibility study.

CURRENT CHALLENGES: Fuel costs for boating; current economic downturn; organizational arrangements to sustain the Steinhatchee Waterfronts Partnership after 2009.

FUTURE ENDEAVORS: Trailhead for canoes and kayaks; initiate research on location of Fort Frank Brooke; work with OTTED to conduct research on economic options for Steinhatchee.

FLORIDA ASSESSMENT OF COASTAL TRENDS DATA:

Number of Active Volunteers:	31
Volunteer Hours Contributed:	1,559
Public Dollars Contributed:	\$8.5 million
Private Dollars Contributed:	\$135,100

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Steinhatchee sits atop an ancient dune ridge on the north bank of the Steinhatchee River near the Gulf of Mexico in an unincorporated part of Taylor County. This Big Bend community is a collection of older cottages and low-frame houses, restaurants, marinas, and newer, multi-story brightly colored and sea-gray condos, located some 38 miles southwest of Perry, the county seat.

Like other coastal settlements in North Florida, Steinhatchee's past is linked to commercial fishing and the timber industry. The 21st century economy depends on real estate and recreational and sport fishing, with both sectors weakened in recent years by high prices, tighter lending practices, and now the price of fuel for boats and cars, waterfront communities like Steinhatchee face serious threats to their economic livelihood.

Local jobs depend on the water, yet most of the waterfront is privately owned. Public access was lost as marinas and fish houses were bought and bulldozed in recent years to make way for private marinas, docks, and condo developments - some of which have never been built. Public access is limited to small, upstream creeks, undeveloped street ends with no parking, and two marinas that charge to put boats in the water.

The annual rhythm of life is punctuated by holiday celebrations, fishing tournaments, and summer scallop season. People shop locally at a hardware store, a grocery, and the "Steinhatchee Mall" — local speak for a dollar store. Public buildings include the post office, a community center, and the water company. The nearest neighbors are Keaton and Dekle Beaches to the north in Taylor County and Jena, which borders the river on the south, in Dixie County.

Individuals work on the water as guides or commercial fisherman or in restaurants or motels that cater to people who visit Steinhatchee for boating, scalloping during the summer season, and access to the Gulf. Some people drive back and forth to Perry or beyond to work at a paper mill or a prison: a large-scale timber operation in Cross City to the south has closed down. Construction provided some jobs during the real estate boom, but those jobs are gone, the saws and hammers silenced by the economic downturn.

Steinhatchee is no stranger to rough times — or recovery — so the people here are looking at ideas to showcase the community's number one asset — the water. Yet the history of the hard times bears repeating to see the current situation in the context of events.

Coastal communities are familiar with the vagaries of fishery harvests and disease — a red tide outbreak wiped out the thriving sponging industry along Florida's Gulf Coast for a time in the 1940s — and the 1990s brought a boatload of trouble that seemed to start with the Storm of the Century that rolled in unannounced off the Gulf of Mexico in March in 1993, damaging property and taking lives in the coastal area. Next, Florida voters amended the Constitution to ban the use of nets in state waters in 1994, virtually wiping out the net-dependent commercial fishing industry in Steinhatchee.

Property prices — and property taxes — shot up near the turn of the 21st century; most fishing families and marina owners eventually sold waterfront property to developers in the real estate bubble of 2000-2005 only to see the construction industry collapse with the larger nationwide recession. Fishing tournaments moved in, but with non-local sponsors the money goes to other communities or to private coffers outside Steinhatchee. Charter boat captains and recreational fishermen face increasing regulation and limitations on size and seasons for catch, diminishing the value — and likelihood — of a trip to Steinhatchee and the Gulf for a day of fishing.

THE WATERFRONTS FLORIDA PARTNERSHIP

Steinhatchee spotted an opportunity when it learned about the Waterfronts Florida Partnership Program in 2007, an opportunity to bring attention to its best asset — the waterfront.

With the support of the Board of County Commissioners and the help of the County Grants coordinator, Steinhatchee residents solicited letters of support from local organizations and won designation. They went to Tallahassee for the presentations and felt like they'd gotten long overdue recognition for this coastal community.

Steinhatchee, like St. Marks to the west in Wakulla County, is a startup Waterfronts organization. The first year was spent getting familiar with the kinds of grants available to buy or improve waterfront properties to provide for public access. Three concept drawings, prepared by students from Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, envisioned the renovation of a now defunct fish market and creation of a town center. The Hazard Mitigation Committee is working to identify evacuation routes, generators available for public use, and how to get the community back up and running after any one of the kinds of disasters that might befall a community set among the Gulf of Mexico, sinkholes, and thousands of acres of pine trees.

The Environmental and Cultural Resources group is looking for grants to delve into the history of Fort Frank Brooke, which stood within the present-day footprint of Steinhatchee at the time of the Second Seminole War in Florida, circa 1835 to 1842.

The Economic Development and the Public Access Committees are busy working to provide public access to the waterfront. Everyone realizes that Steinhatchee's economic health is tied to access to the water: no access, no business. Yet the only public boat ramp available is at Jena, across the bridge in Dixie County where boaters may wait for hours for access.

The Steinhatchee properties designated for parks in the 1921–1922 plat are all inland, not on the river, and recent attempts to open County-owned rights-of-way where streets dead end into the river were met with threats

of legal action from adjacent property owners. This added hard feelings to the community that sometimes divides itself along the lines of those who've been there for a while and those who've just arrived, those who want things to stay the same and those who want transformation.

The Partnership — which consists of the County Commission, the Steinhatchee Waterfronts Committee, and the long-standing Community Projects Board — applied for a laundry list of grants to purchase waterfront property for boats and fishing, develop upland trails that would connect Steinhatchee to Dekle and Keaton Beaches to the northwest, and renovate the remnants of the old bridge to provide a fishing pier and off-street parking. So far, the County has been awarded money to refurbish a playground and parking lot at the Community Center, as part of the old bridge project, and ranks high on pending lists.

By tradition, Steinhatchee is a community of independents. When they need something done, they hold a fish fry or special event. With Waterfronts Florida, the community is hoping to expand its funding options. State grants will help, but the Partnership intends to develop a financial relationship with the Taylor County Tourism Development Council, which receives the ten percent tax charged for every bed rented out. The Partnership may investigate the concept of a Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) to capture for the host community some of the tax money that comes from high priced waterfront property.

The Partnership started work in the summer of 2008 on developing its vision for the future, focusing first on a five-year planning horizon. Some talked of creating a town center on the hill or up the river; while others wanted to make sure that whatever happens, Steinhatchee remains a place that's home to people with all sizes of pocketbooks. Others want to clean up alongside CR 51, the entrance to the community. Some individuals are adamant that Steinhatchee should not be

home to tall buildings, certainly nothing greater than the recently built three story condos set atop pilings to meet coastal flood height requirements. In Steinhatchee some folks say they're looking to start over with the waterfront development — they want to buy the waterfront and restore it for public use.

Whatever happens, the people of Steinhatchee know what they need — boat ramps, fishing piers, and docks; they need access for locals and visitors to get to and enjoy the waterfront.

