

Forward Fernandina (F2)-An Investment in our Community

People are asked all the time – what is your vision for downtown Fernandina and the community? The answers from various groups of citizens over the years have been fairly consistent. They want a charming, uniquely historic downtown where businesses can and do thrive with assets like parks and a solid infrastructure to support them. All these groups have known while working on these plans that downtown Fernandina and the waterfront is an economic driver for this community. Downtown is an attraction to both our residents and tourists and as such is just as critical to our economic future as the mills, the port, beaches and all the hospitality associated businesses we are so fortunate to have here.

What we've all learned either from personal experience or in school, is that without a healthy business environment in a community, the burden of paying for City services that benefit residents, tourists and businesses alike is largely carried by residential property owners. In Fernandina Beach for example, ad valorem taxes support public safety as well as the care and maintenance of 75 miles of public streets, 509 acres of parks and 40 beach accesses. Demographic trends, reflected in the City's Comprehensive Plan, predict an increase in our average median age over the next few years. Logically this means that there will be a smaller number of school children and young families, which translates into a smaller workforce and a larger population of retirees. If our business community cannot function because of either a lack of infrastructure or neglect of important historic resources and our waterfront, which are essential to our historic tourism industry, we will all lose. Our residential property taxes may go up if the businesses choose to go elsewhere.

The City of Fernandina Beach recently developed its first Strategic Plan to address current and future needs of the City. A local not-for profit organization, the Amelia Island-Fernandina Restoration Foundation, worked with the City to facilitate this planning effort, which later became known as Forward Fernandina (F2). During the year-long strategic planning process the City Commission considered current community input in identifying the City's critical strategic needs, while at the same time reaffirming the projects and efforts contained in the previous community visioning and planning exercise, Vision 2000. The F2 process gathered public input through workshops, town hall meetings, and community surveys to obtain critical feedback on the proposed Strategic Plan. The City Commission adopted F2 by Resolution in August and directed the City Manager to proceed with implementation. F2 identified key strategic goals, including:

1. Creation of a Waterfront Park along the Amelia River. While the City of Fernandina Beach has 509 acres of parkland and 40 beach accesses, there is no public park at the riverfront, which is currently dominated by parking lots. The Waterfront Park Plan adopted by the City Commission upon recommendation of

the Waterfronts Committee enhances not only the appearance of the waterfront but adds functionality and usability to one of the City's natural resources. The proposed improvement of the waterfront has been ongoing for 25 years. In the first phase of the F2 plan, the waterfront will become an accessible, inviting green space with appropriate infrastructure for later development. It promises to bring more folks downtown to enjoy special events, a stroll along the water front or just viewing a gorgeous sunset.

2. Rehabilitation of Front Street and Railroad Crossing Improvements. The City has been working for years to improve the traffic circulation, parking, safety and overall appearance of Front Street. The proposed rehabilitation will replace the aging water and sewer system, install a storm water system, develop a new paved roadway, enhance parking, add a new railroad crossing at Alachua, improve the crossings at Ash and Centre Streets, and will provide the necessary safety measures to separate the trains from pedestrians and vehicles. As a prime traffic and commercial artery, Front Street must be improved to allow for improved access to the waterfront for residents, visitors and related business activities.

3. 8th Street and Centre Street Facelifts. For most people, their first impression of Fernandina Beach was formed when they crossed the Shave Bridge and found themselves on A1A/8th Street. Currently, 8th Street reflects a mix of County/City zoning requirements that do not always create a favorable first impression. F2 calls upon the City to develop design guidelines for 8th Street properties in the City, which would take effect only if/when private property owners decide to make changes to their properties. For Centre Street, we need to look at the overall design impact of the street and ensure that all decisions and work done on that street are in keeping with the overall image. We have not made significant investments in downtown in about 40 years. We would never neglect our homes for that long.

4. Stabilization (Restoration) of the Historic Downtown Post Office Building. The US Postal Service is in serious financial trouble and is considering service cutbacks and closures of facilities around the country. When the US Postal Service made the decision to move its main 32034 operation to Sadler Road, its financial situation precluded the level of maintenance needed to preserve the old post office building. The USPS to date has not been successful in attracting tenants to the building to help defray the costs of upkeep. Meanwhile the building continues to reflect the ravages of time and climate in the form of leaks, broken windows, falling exterior plaster and windowsills. Our PO building itself is of iconic value to our downtown area. If the exterior continues to deteriorate, the effect on Centre Street is detrimental – blight is contagious. The City's goal is to keep the building from falling down or deteriorating to the point that it must be demolished. Should the USPS turn over this building to the City, thereby acknowledging its inability to make the necessary repairs, the City will seal and stabilize the exterior. The work needed, along with associated cost estimates (around \$350,000), and has been identified by an outside consultant. A full

restoration of the building, to include interior spaces, is not part of this plan. Discussions regarding future use of the building, should the USPS vacate the premises, must include a wide range of options to return the building to full productive use and finance a complete restoration.

5. Improvement of Downtown Library facility. Last year the Restoration Foundation brought in Ed McMahon, an expert in historic downtown planning from the Urban Institute, to assess Fernandina Beach's historic downtown area and make recommendations. He identified a library as a critical anchor piece to a successful downtown community. The City of Fernandina Beach owns the current library facility, while the library function (staffing, materials, technology, etc.) is provided by Nassau County. The County Librarian and others have declared that the current facility is deficient in many areas and no longer able to meet not only the needs of City residents, but those of county residents and island visitors. The County has set aside six hundred thousand dollars (\$600,000) in reserve to address this issue. The City has been asked by the County to show good faith support to ensure that the library is kept in downtown Fernandina Beach versus being moved elsewhere. Nassau County must and should be the prime mover on this matter; the City continues to support efforts to keep the county library facility downtown, whether in its current location or in an alternative location.

The implementation of this Strategic Plan demonstrates that the community of Fernandina Beach is investing in itself and creating an environment that supports our local economy at a critical time. The cost of borrowing money to finance this plan is at an all-time low and the preferred method of borrowing is both more cost effective and flexible than a General Obligation Bond to allow the City to react quickly and responsibly to unanticipated changes. For example if we receive the grant money we hope to get for part of the waterfront, we can reprogram the borrowed money for other critical infrastructure projects – like fixing storm water problems downtown. The project will be financed in phases up to three (3) draws, when funds are needed. The proposed plan to repay the borrowed funds is to initially increase the monthly electrical franchise fee a small amount, which will be decreased every year as natural gas franchise fees and CRA tax revenues are received.

Keeping Fernandina's downtown healthy is beneficial to the entire community, not just to those who live or work downtown. We all love this City and want it to be here for years to come. This is the time to move forward, Fernandina!