

The Eight Street Corridor – A “Revisioning” Project

Dear Fellow Fernandinans,

We serve in a *pro bono* capacity on the City’s Land Development Code and Economic Development Advisory Group. Our first mission is to study the 8th Street Corridor, from Centre Street to Lime Street, and provide recommended changes to the City’s Land Development Code to spur economic development and improve the aesthetic character of this important “gateway” into our City. To that end we are proposing a “revisioning” of the 8th Street Corridor to include increased mixed use development with a particular focus on increasing residential uses within the subject area.

The predominant zoning categories in the Corridor are C-2 (General Commercial) and MU-1 (Mixed Use). These zoning classifications vary in allowable uses, setbacks and building height limits, but the common thread between the zoning categories is their limitations on residential uses. If the City of Fernandina Beach and its residents want to see redevelopment along the 8th Street corridor, it is logical to consider all redevelopment options, including residential uses.

Historically, Fernandina Beach was developed with mixed-use in mind – residential uses were typically located on 2nd and 3rd floors above commercial/business uses at the ground floor. As time has progressed and modern planning principles were implemented, the City began separating its uses into different zoning classifications. For example, undesirable uses (factories, warehouses etc.) were limited to industrially-zoned areas and residential zones were “sanitized” to limit or reduce commercial or business uses. This was the general planning model throughout the country. Citizens were to live in one area (a residential district) and commute or travel to another area for work (a business district).

This planning model is no longer economically nor environmentally viable in our City. In the 21st century successful cities need to be more efficient – making the most of their available land area while making these areas more livable/usable. One of the most successful strategies toward this goal is increasing density coupled with implementation of sustainable design principles.

Unfortunately, the City’s Comprehensive Plan does not have sufficient residential density to incentivize this strategy in a meaningful way. The maximum density allowed by the City is 10 units per acre, meaning 10 individual residential units on one acre of land. On the surface, this sounds like a very high number, but there is a reason it doesn’t work within developed areas. It hasn’t even worked in our own downtown district which promotes residential uses (note the lack of residential units along Centre Street).

As an example, if a landowner owns a 100 foot wide x 100 foot deep lot on a City roadway, this equates to 0.23 acres of land (10,000 square feet/43,560 square feet/acre). When you consider a right of way bonus that the City gives you for density calculations, this bumps the acreage up to just shy of 0.3 acres (0.298 acres to be exact). When multiplying 10 units /acre x 0.298 acres this yields 2.98 units or 2 units (when calculating, the fractional units do not count toward the overall unit count). Consequently, as it stands today, a duplex (2 units) is all that can be built on a 100 foot wide x 100 foot deep lot at maximum density within the City. Duplexes hardly fill the need for much-needed multifamily housing.

It has been voiced by residents that multi-family housing is needed within the City to provide housing diversity and allow for redevelopment. Mixed use (commercial and residential in this case) has also been mentioned along the 8th Street corridor. If mixed use redevelopment is to be achieved, a density increase is vital to creating multi-family development. The 8th Street corridor is mostly comprised of 100 foot wide x 100 foot deep lots and it is highly unlikely any meaningful mixed use development will occur until someone can build enough residential units to justify the expense and effort for redevelopment.

Government is not going to redevelop and clean up 8th Street...only the private sector can solve the problem and mixed use redevelopment can be the answer. If the City were to double the density in this area, this could allow for a 100 x 100 lot to have ground floor commercial and 4 total residential units on the second and third floor. This could in turn increase property values, since there now can be a commercial end user and 4 separate residential users on one small piece of property. When you apply this formula across dozens of lots, this is meaningful enough to the private sector to interest entrepreneurs to invest in this corridor and make a change in a positive direction.

Additionally, implementation of sustainable design strategies coupled with incentives for their use can increase the economic viability of mixed-use development. To City staff's credit over the past few years they have added language in the LDC's incentivizing sustainable design, ie., parking count reductions for certain zoning categories including credits for saving existing trees. But we need to go further. Generally speaking the City's parking space requirements are suburban in nature. Current parking standards favor new buildings within an island of parking. Couple this with requirements for on-site water retention and landscaping and a mixed-use project suddenly becomes non-viable very quickly.

In summary, there are no easy answers. Any "re-visioning" of the 8th Street Corridor will take effort and more importantly courage. If we truly care about the future of our City then our development codes need to adapt to our ever-changing needs. They should not be an impediment to development but should serve as incentive for new, successful development which reflects our citizen's goals and aspirations.

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