

City of Fernandina Beach 2045 Comprehensive Plan Draft

Introduction

Introduction

Who We Are

Located on Amelia Island, a 13-mile-long barrier island just off the coast of northeast Florida, Fernandina Beach is a unique, eclectic and diverse community rich in environmental beauty and history. Its history reaches back to the Timucuan civilization and Spanish colonization, and the city has been governed under eight flags, more than any other US city. Fernandina Beach has been home to shrimpers, boat builders, and many other immigrants who came here for a better life. It was also a slave trading center, and some of our citizens have roots extending back to plantation days and escape from slavery. After Manhattan Beach (in Atlantic Beach) was closed to African Americans, a refuge was established by Abraham Lincoln Lewis, America's first black millionaire, in 1935 in American Beach, just south of Fernandina Beach. During the 20th century, as the shrimping industry declined, Fernandina Beach's economy depended largely on the paper and pulp mills and the port. Many families in this community have roots that extend back to these periods of time. Old Town, the architecture of the historic district, Bosque Bello Cemetery, historic homes in American Beach and our canopy of old Live Oaks keep this history alive.

In recent years, Fernandina Beach has been a destination for people who have chosen to live here or visit. During the past twenty years, both young and old in our country have been leaving cities for the quality of life, safety and tempo of smaller towns. Small towns have been the destination for tourists as well. Hence, the dramatic rise in the role of the tourist industry in Fernandina Beach and Nassau County. Like many of the historical residents, these people have chosen this location because of its diversity and character.

Visitors and residents alike enjoy our beaches, our tree canopy and the many ways they can enjoy and be in nature here--surfing, fishing, kayaking, hiking on the Greenway or in Ft. Clinch, bicycling or relaxing. They also appreciate the charming character of this small town that is a safe place to raise or bring children.

Fernandina Beach is an artsy community with many musicians, artists and theater people. It is easy to find excellent theater, art exhibits, and live music in bars, restaurants and concerts. We have a star-studded jazz festival and chamber music festival, quilt shows and many other creative events. Fernandina Beach is also a bit quirky. We have Dickens on Center at Christmas, an annual Shrimp Festival, a Shrimp Drop on New Year's Eve, a Black Friday Pajama Day downtown, and a number of us dress as pirates for parades and events. And the community has embraced pickle ball and Petanque, with an annual international Petanque tournament.

City of Fernandina Beach 2045 Comprehensive Plan Draft

Introduction

In other words, Fernandina Beach has a strong and unique character, or “sense of place,” that attracts residents as well as tourists. According to Edward T. McMahon, who holds the Charles E. Fraser Chair on Sustainable Development at the Urban Land Institute in Washington, DC, sense of place is most important to the economic sustainability of a community:

A sense of place is a unique collection of qualities and characteristics – visual, cultural, social, and environmental – that provide meaning to a location. Sense of place is what makes one city or town different from another, but sense of place is also what makes our physical surroundings worth caring about.

Although there has been little local research to document this, it is obvious that the environment and character of Fernandina Beach are the most important drivers in our current economy. Focusing on retaining and improving features that enhance the city’s sense of place and fit with 21st century culture can sustain the economy without growth in size or density—in other words, without destroying quality of life or sense of place.

Our Context

Fernandina Beach is the largest municipality and the county seat of Nassau County. Together with the unincorporated portion of the island, it provides much of the county’s revenue, primarily from tourism. The City operates a municipal airport, golf club and marina as well as offering a variety of programs through its parks, community centers and recreation centers. Fernandina Beach is largely built out and not expected to expand other than through infill and redevelopment or annexation of additional County parcels on the island for water and sewer connection.

Today, our social, economic and environmental sustainability are under threat from global warming, changing weather patterns and sea level rise. These are concrete changes we see all over the planet. These changes pose a **devastating** threat to a barrier island, as demonstrated in the recent Nassau County Vulnerability Assessment: Phase II, conducted by the Balmoral Group and presented on April 3, 2020. This necessitates aggressive land conservation and a change in our understanding of growth and development from expansion of parcel development and growth in size to a focus on retaining and enhancing quality of life in the community. Just as we need to plan for environmental sustainability and resiliency, we also need to be planning on economic sustainability and resiliency, based on industry diversity and local innovation. It is essential for Fernandina Beach and Nassau County to focus on optimizing sustainability and resiliency on Amelia Island. Thus, the major theme in this Comprehensive Plan needs to be sustainability and resiliency. This entails:

- Land conservation
- Protection of primary and secondary dunes as well as relic dunes within proximity of creeks and wetlands
- Protection of wetlands, marshes and creeks

City of Fernandina Beach 2045 Comprehensive Plan Draft

Introduction

- Protection and expansion of our green infrastructure
- Protection of the historic district from flooding
- Habitat conservation and planning of wildlife corridors
- Effective stormwater management
- Updating of building standards to meet current needs
- Creation of a position combining the roles of Floodplain Manager and Chief Resiliency Officer to provide leadership in planning for sustainability and resiliency
- Rethinking development to focus on economic resiliency based on diversity and local innovation

On a barrier island, Fernandina Beach does not have the luxury of unlimited expansion. Roads are constrained and cannot be increased in number or size and we cannot simply add undeveloped land to our jurisdiction. Perhaps more importantly, parcel development must be limited to what our environment can support without eroding sustainability and resiliency. We also need to be able to evacuate the island safely, and resident and visitor populations pose finite limitations for safe evacuation. We must be aware of the carrying capacities of the island and manage growth within those limitations. Thus, updating our knowledge base and long-term planning are critical for the future of the island, as are strategies for maintaining our environment and controlling development.

Another concern in recent years has been a decline in public trust of city government and staff, a trend that is not unique to Fernandina Beach. This has been demonstrated in surveys conducted by the National Research Center in 2017 and 2019. There are also significant sectors of our population that are no longer sufficiently engaged in most aspects of city governance. This affects much of our African-American population as well as socioeconomic groups that are the foundation of our economy, yet cannot find affordable housing on the island or even in the County. Explicit efforts need to be made to build public trust and social justice in our community, integrating all elements of the society into decision making and implementation. Specific measures to increase standards of integrity and performance, standards of social justice and transparency can improve public trust.

One of the approaches to restoring public trust that evolved in the course of our study is a recommendation for hiring a Chief Financial Officer. This position would provide leadership in long-term planning for capital improvements. It would also provide the expertise to analyze our economy based on a 21st-century perspective, reflecting changes that have developed in the economy over the past few decades and which are particularly relevant in our barrier island community. This expertise could provide forward-looking leadership for all departments. Finally, a credentialed and experienced Chief Financial Officer would build trust among those who are constantly critical of fiscal decision making in the City.

City of Fernandina Beach 2045 Comprehensive Plan Draft

Introduction

EAR Public Input

Each municipality in Florida is required to develop a Comprehensive Plan and to update it periodically with citizen input. Through the Evaluation and Review (EAR) public input sessions held April 24, 24, 28 and 30, 2019, citizens have already begun formal comment on the current comprehensive plan, which was approved in 2011 and due for update in 2020. The sessions were run by Northeast Florida Regional Council (NFRC) staff, who solicited input, took notes and developed subsequent lists and reports. Public attendance was high and participation was robust. As is often the case in reports, the specificity and urgency of public concerns became increasingly muted in the sequence of reports (from actual language to list of key points, to summaries, to the final oral and written reports). Participants were concerned about the unenforceability of the Plan due to the failure to update the Land Development Code to match the Comprehensive Plan and the aspirational approach. Among the most dominant concerns were the need for management of development and the serious impact of development on quality of life and environmental sustainability. Participants were also highly concerned regarding the capacities of the island and the limitations on the ability for residents to evacuate safely in an emergency, as well as the failure of City, County and State government to exhibit any concern or strategies for managing development. Resulting traffic issues were a related concern. Other dominant concerns included maintaining the character of the city, affordable housing, inadequacy of long-term planning, lack of transparency, failure of the City and County to coordinate sufficiently, County and City pursuit of inappropriate targets for economic development and the impact of truck traffic on small businesses.

Priorities

Thus, the community has identified the following priorities:

- Meeting the challenge of the future: changes in weather patterns and sea level rise
 - Resiliency: Ability to respond to climate event, terrorism, hazardous materials, pandemic (US Dept of Transportation 2016)
 - Directing populations from flood areas; relevant changes in the FLUM
 - Sustainability: Protecting our environment--dunes, green infrastructure & wildlife habitat
 - Land conservation
 - Utilizing tools like Adaptation Action Areas and grants to support our effort
 - Protecting the island for future generations (not compromising their ability to meet their own needs)
- Effective & efficient city government in a strong mutually-supportive relationship with the community
 - A government focused on the best interests of its citizens
 - Long-term planning
 - A fiscally responsible & resilient government
 - Innovation & transparency

City of Fernandina Beach 2045 Comprehensive Plan Draft

Introduction

- Effective coordination with county, regional and state government as well as with nonprofits and volunteers that can contribute to the effort (volunteers are one of our major assets)
- Inclusivity (omission of housing and transportation eliminates a significant part of the population)
- Accountability & responsibility
- Economic resiliency: development that builds on our current economic drivers and builds on the needs of the 21st century through industry diversity and local innovation
 - Understanding the variables in our economy: conducting the research to better understand the roles of small businesses, medical and service industries, growing remote employment and individual, home-based businesses in our economy
 - Planning for economic resiliency by diversifying our fiscal and employment dependency and promoting local innovation
 - Recognizing our economic drivers that can support resiliency: our environment and the unique small-town character of the city; parks; walkability & bikability; we need to maintain and enhance these features
 - Developing a multi-modal approach to transportation that fits our unique context
 - Recognizing and utilizing the Interrelationships among transportation, housing, public facilities and schools.

The Plan

It is important that the Comprehensive Plan be viewed as a whole for two reasons: 1) **All of the elements interrelate and overlap**. It is the interaction of these elements that constitute our reality. Also, all elements contain material related to other elements. 2) Because of this relationship, addressing only a few elements could well result in a contradictory or unenforceable Comprehensive Plan. We are currently in that situation because the Land Development Code was not revised to match the current 2030 Comprehensive Plan.

Although all elements should be updated at the same time, the Comp Plan/LDC Working Group decided not to address the School Facilities element because it relates only to facilities. We also did not address the Port element because that element should be done by the Port and staff. This has become a highly complex legal matter. However, the Working Group is recommending that material citizens shared at the EAR about the Port and School Facilities Elements be acknowledged and reflected in the final product. Finally, we felt that the intergovernmental coordination goal should be left for a later stage in the process.

We understand that the theme of the Comprehensive Plan will be much the same as that of the current plan. This makes sense in that the new plan should build on the old one. However, **our reality has changed considerably during the past decade:**

City of Fernandina Beach 2045 Comprehensive Plan Draft

Introduction

- We are now at a point where we are currently implementing measures to ensure sustainability and community resilience, and we realize that we need to be proactive and advance these efforts as soon as possible.
- The nature of our economy has changed, and is changing. Even before COVID, many younger people were moving here because they were able to work remotely from their location of choice. Some are working for companies remotely while others have developed their own businesses. Also, we have seen considerable economic development that has resulted organically to serve the larger population we now have. Thus, we now need a more thorough understanding of the diverse elements of our current economy to help us achieve a **diverse and sustainable, resilient economy**.
- Our need to preserve the character of the city and our spatial capacity are now pitted against the pressure to grow.
 - The character of this city gives us great quality of life, but it is also a major driving force in our local economy.
 - We are living at a time when people are bailing out of cities. City and County growth has created transportation and parking pressures in a barrier island environment, where we have nowhere to expand. Our limited capacity needs to drive a great deal of planning at this point.

As a result of these changes and the need to adjust priorities, the Comp Plan/LDC Working Group is using and recommending the following reorganization of the Comprehensive Plan. We have added a new first element, Public Trust, because we feel these issues need to be addressed and can be overcome. We have moved the items that primarily focus on environmental sustainability and resilience to the front of the document because of their importance as the underlying foundation for all of our goals. Furthermore, in our view, Goals 1-11 below should drive Future Land Use, rather than Future Land Use driving the entire plan, as may have been appropriate a decade ago.

1. Public Trust
2. Coastal Management & Conservation
3. Recreation & Open Space
4. Historic Preservation
5. Housing
6. Mobility
7. Public Facilities
8. School Facilities (not revised by Comp Plan/LDC Working Group)
9. Economic Development
10. Port (not revised by Comp Plan/LDC Working Group)
11. Capital improvements
12. Future land use

City of Fernandina Beach 2045 Comprehensive Plan Draft

Introduction

13. Intergovernmental Coordination (not included at this early stage of the process)

Comprehensive Plan/LDC Working Group

The Comprehensive Plan/LDC Working Group (Comp Plan/LDC Working Group) is a group of citizens who are working together to provide input on the Fernandina Beach Comprehensive Plan and Land Development Code and then on the Nassau County Comprehensive Plan and Land Development Code. These documents are critical for the future, and even the existence, of Amelia Island. This group was formed by Amelia Tree Conservancy; however, its composition is broader and it represents a far broader scope of concerns. Our core goal is to contribute to the future of Amelia Island, our home. We are hoping to stimulate and participate in the discussion. One of our primary goals is to carry forward the concerns of the many citizens who participated in the EAR Public Input sessions in April 2019.

The Comp Plan/LDC Working Group does not perceive this current document to be a final product, but rather a working draft that can provide input and spark discussion and study. Development of the Comprehensive Plan must be a process that brings together the world views of our diverse community of stakeholders. We represent some of these perspectives, but certainly not all. We look forward to discussing what we have developed thus far.

Comp Plan/LDC Working Group

Beth Foster

Margaret Kirkland

Pam Green

Alexandra Lajoux

Lauree Hemke

Lyn Pannone

Betsie Huben

Helen Perry

Christine Joblon

Shameera Wiest

Ann Kemp