

BREWING LOCAL SOLUTION TO COASTAL ISSUES

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INTRODUCTION

Port Salerno is a quaint historic fishing village hidden away on the east coast of Florida, near the mouth of the St. Lucie River and the Atlantic Ocean. Port Salerno was finding it difficult to retain its "fisherman's paradise" identity. The community was in need of revitalization and the commercial fishermen were at risk of losing their docks. However, through several collaborations with the County and the State, the community was able to find a viable solution.

BACKGROUND

The Port Salerno area is ideal for uses that include sport and recreational fishing, offshore charters, marinas, and commercial fishing. Most of these exist today. At one point, Port Salerno had eight working fish houses. However, due to shifting economies, all but one of the fish houses exists today. This fish house has recently been revitalized into a loft, art gallery and café.

For many years, the community had been working diligently on revitalizing Port Salerno and with the establishment of a Community Redevelopment Area and a Florida Working Waterfronts designation the revitalization efforts begun. In 2001, Port Salerno was designated a Working Waterfronts Community by the Florida Department of Community Affairs. This program was launched by the Florida Coastal Management Program in 1997, has been helping to chart a new course for its participating communities. The program was created to provide support, training, innovative technical assistance, and limited financial assistance to communities striving to revitalize and renew interest in their waterfront district.

In 2001 Port Salerno was one of the first Community Redevelopment Areas (CRA) in Martin County. With extensive public participation and with the assistance of the Port Salerno Community Revitalization Committee, the community generated a vision plan. In the process of preparing the vision plan, the CRA expresses concerns regarding public access to the waterfront, retaining the commercial fishing as a historic resource and revitalizing the local economy. The local government adopted the vision plan and has implemented many of the policies within the plan.

This revitalization effort came at a very opportune time for the commercial fishing industry. In 1994, Florida adopted a net ban on all Florida waters, which delivered a severe economic blow to the commercial fishing community. Locally, the commercial fishermen were suffering from a negative perception within the community. Local



Unloading Station

Photo courtesy of Lampl Herbert Consultants

residents felt that the fishermen were harmful to the environment, were hurting the recreational fishing economy and claimed their docks were an eyesore. Furthermore, the commercial fishermen were in a property dispute with the County. The fishermen needed to breathe life into their industry, resolve the dispute with the County and improve their image.

Port Salerno was at a crossroads with their revitalization efforts; the Port Salerno community had created a vision plan that supported the commercial fishing community. However, there appeared to be a disconnect between the CRA vision plan and County policy. Port Salerno needed to find a solution to realize their redevelopment goals.

METHODS

The main method utilized by the Port Salerno community was simply getting organized. The commercial fishermen organized themselves into a non-profit organization. The Port Salerno Revitalization Committee was reinvented to the Port Salerno Neighborhood Advisory Committee, a committee created by the Martin County Community Redevelopment Agency to advise them on redevelopment issues. By all of these methods, the community was able to achieve their goals.

The first issue the community had to resolve was the commercial fishermen dock area. The commercial fishermen were being challenged on the ownership of the dock area. In particular, in the mid-90s, the County discovered that the fifteen commercial fishing docks were actually located on County right-of-way. Because the docks had been located, there for over fifty years the commercial fishermen believed they had a right to continue to use them. The fishermen were struggling with a negative image by some in the community and multiple interests were surfacing amongst the commercial fishermen during the ownership negotiations with the County, which was creating disharmony amongst the fishermen. The Port Salerno Community Revitalization Committee was in support of the commercial fishermen and wanted Martin County to resolve the dispute in a manner that would benefit both the County and the commercial fishing industry. With this local support and attorney negotiations, Martin County came to an amicable agreement to lease the property to the Commercial Fishing Dock Authority. The result was a positive move for everyone involved. The County began the process of retaining a submerged land lease that would formally declare County ownership to the area.

During this time, the commercial fishermen organized themselves into a non-profit called the Commercial Fishing Dock Authority. By organizing themselves, the commercial fishermen were able to lease the property, became a more unified group speaking with one voice, actively work on a positive public relations campaign and establish an agreement with several wholesale seafood distributors. Once the County received the

submerged land lease the County created a lease agreement with the Commercial Fishing Dock Authority. The lease agreement allowed the Commercial Fishing Dock Authority to lease the property from the County for ten years, with three options to renew for additional ten-year increments; the cost of the lease was \$8,055 per year, which is equal to the lease fee of the submerged land lease. The lease agreement also required the commercial fishermen keep their docks clean, well maintained and organized the number of boat slips. This solution proved positive for the fishermen because they resolved the public's concern that the fishermen were out of control by allowing too many boats in the area, leaving the docks dirty and poorly maintained. The fishermen were required to prevent the dock area from becoming an eyesore.



Commercial Fishing Boat

Photo courtesy of Lampl Herbert Consultants

The second issue that was addressed was greater public access to the waterfront. A public boardwalk was a project within the Port Salerno Community Redevelopment Plan. This boardwalk was an integral part of the Waterfronts Florida designation and the Port Salerno CRA utilized the grant to construct the first phase of the boardwalk. The vision plan called for a "Pocket Walk" wrapping around the entire Manatee Pocket, the boardwalk would be accessible to the public, both pedestrians and boaters alike. By 2003, the first phase of this boardwalk

was completed by the CRA. This portion of the boardwalk served as a pedestrian connection within the community, had several temporary mooring slips and had environmental signage that described the Manatee Pocket habitat. Phase 2, which was completed by 2006, was the most extensive connection, creating an eight-foot wide boardwalk between all of the commercial fishing docks as well as a loading station for the commercial fishermen. Although the Pocket Walk was in the community vision plan and initially supported by the commercial fishermen, some of the fishermen had doubts when the final construction drawings were made public. After a series of meetings with the Commercial Dock Authority, the County mitigated the loss of some dock and slip space by extending one of the shortest docks for the fishermen.

With the completion of the Manatee Pocket Walk, the community had access to the waterfront day and night. The CRA installed benches and solar lighting to the boardwalk in order to increase use of the space. In October 2006, the Port Salerno CRA designed the final phase of the Manatee Pocket boardwalk which would include the last County owned properties and some other aesthetic improvements to the boardwalk area.

The final issue was to revitalize the local economy was underway. The main street in Port Salerno was being redesigned to a more pedestrian friendly roadway, including a new fire station and was being constructed, Phase 1 of the Manatee Pocket Walk was

being designed and a new civic center. The community realized that with this public infrastructure it was inevitable that the local economy would improve. In no time, a new restaurant was constructed with assistance of a Community Development Economic Block Grant planning to open, and a new bed and breakfast. Today the Port Salerno community has accomplished many of its CRA projects and the economy is rebounding.



Manatee Pocket Walk Phase I

RESULTS

The results of all of these efforts have proven successful thus far. Recently, the Commercial Fishing Dock Authority hosted the first annual Port Salerno Seafood Fest, which was centered on the commercial fishing docks, and the Manatee Pocket Walk. This event was extremely successful and has been planned to occur annually.

The Port Salerno CRA has completed many of the projects held within the vision plan;



such as, completing a zoning overlay of the Manatee Pocket area, completion of a new Port Salerno Civic Center, the Port Salerno Fire Station, the redesign of A1A, the completion the Manatee Pocket Walk, and other infrastructure projects. Most important, public access to the waterfront has been maintained and enhanced. The community has been supportive of the CRA and has been active participants in the process.

Manatee Pocket Walk Phase II

Port Salerno's economy has been growing, with the opening of new restaurants, a bed and breakfast and the revitalization of several commercial buildings along the main street. The Commercial Fishing Dock Authority has become active in their community, therefore changing the negative perception of some within the community. The commercial fishermen have been financially successful with their new organization. The Commercial Fishing Dock Authority has received state and national recognition for its organization and the innovative method of protecting the commercial fishing industry.

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