

Vision

Land development regulations, programs and capital projects should be consistent with the following long-term goals or vision:

Vision for Downtown LaBelle:

- Destination for Residents and Visitors
- Family Friendly
- Beautiful, Vibrant, and Walkable
- Appealing to New Businesses
- Alluring Waterfront Tied to Park and Downtown
- Safe Environment to Work, Shop, Walk, Play, and Relax

Summary of Recommended Actions

- Appoint an Implementation Committee to assist with prioritizing and maintaining focus and energy in the downtown redevelopment process. Specific focus should be given on whether to establish a Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA).
- Obtain professional marketing assistance to help develop and implement a theme or brand. A leading concept would be to refer to the area as the Walking District with a distinct logo.
- Amend the Comprehensive Plan to implement the Downtown Plan. Subsequently amend the Land Development Code accordingly.
- Direct new construction towards underutilized and vacant sites, while endeavoring to preserve historically and architecturally significant landmarks that contribute to the downtown's unique character.
- Tie history to the present by locating historical markers or kiosks that include photographs and written history to be placed in key locations.
- Adopt architectural design standards that are mandatory for new construction or major redevelopment. Provide incentives for existing development to comply with said standards. Allow for varied architectural styles with preference for Old Florida.
- Establish a pilot streetscape project to apply recommended improvements.
- Establish Veteran's Memorial Park to serve as a gateway feature into the downtown area.
- In coordination with the Barron Park Plan, implement the Wharf Grant to upgrade and improve the dock and wharf area.
- Organize and schedule community gatherings and events at regular intervals.
- Seek funding mechanisms from all sources available.
- Prioritize impact projects to energize redevelopment process.
- Establish consensus regarding the future of SR 29. Coordinate with FDOT regarding the SR 29 PD&E. Seek public/private partnerships (P3) to maximize funding of road improvements.
- Establish linkages and appropriate signage (wayfinding) to connect downtown with significant natural, recreational, and cultural amenities.

Introduction

Like a trusted friend, the historic center of LaBelle has maintained integrity and familiarity since its beginnings.



Florida Memory Project

Royal Palm Hotel, Bridge Street, ca. 1925



Florida Memory Project

Bridge St. looking south, ca. 1928

Though its treasures and depth may not be apparent to those who have been recently introduced, we have discovered that it remains the heartbeat of the City. Our job has been to learn about LaBelle and craft a plan based on the unique characteristics of both place and context.

Unlike many downtowns across America, LaBelle has not been surpassed or replaced by development that favors the automobile. While there are significant challenges, Downtown LaBelle has most of the components of an idyllic place: historic buildings, parks, waterfront, street grid that encourages walking, pedestrian scale, housing in close proximity, accessibility to major road corridors, and people that are active and engaged.

In some ways, however, Downtown LaBelle is like a photograph that is out of focus. While the elements are in place, the current vision is not quite clear enough to appreciate. Although there are historic buildings, many remain underutilized and although there is a street grid, the sidewalk network lacks continuity. The right elements are there, but need to be brought into focus.

Economic hardships have closed the doors of some businesses, while others have been lured from the downtown area by newer developments and more convenient locations. Costs associated with trying to make older buildings adaptable to modern business needs have forced many businesses to move to newer locations with fewer associated problems. Some of these buildings remain unoccupied and are not regularly maintained.

The Downtown Plan for the City of LaBelle is the culmination of efforts by the Mayor, City Commission and the Downtown LaBelle Committee and the residents and property owners, to chart a course for its future.

The citizens who live and work in LaBelle are concerned about the future of their downtown. Oak-canopied streets and small town charm evoke a sense of love, loyalty and desire to honor the heart of their town.

The Downtown Plan for the City of LaBelle is the culmination of efforts by the Mayor, City Commission, the Downtown LaBelle Committee and the residents and property owners, to chart a course for its future.

EnSite was hired to assist in developing and facilitating a community vision for Downtown LaBelle, and to create a plan with which to implement that vision.

The City was also awarded a visioning grant from Visit Florida through which they received additional plans, layouts and ideas for the development of a successful downtown.

This plan intends to achieve the vision set forth by providing a framework under which the downtown area can begin to rebuild. The plan includes a series of recommendations that incorporate financial strategies, design guidelines and illustrative samples that will guide the City through its redevelopment efforts.



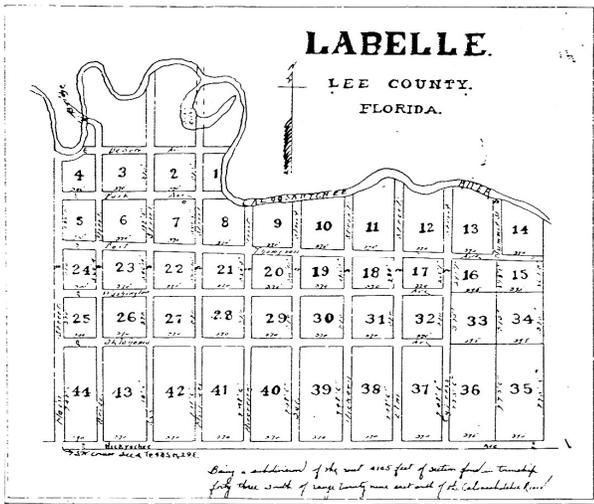
Visioning Exercise for the Redevelopment of Fort Thompson Avenue

Context

The story of LaBelle is a great adventure hugging the banks of the Caloosahatchee River. Like the Caloosahatchee River, much has changed, but the essence remains. Providing the context helps us understand and to respect from whence we came and to where we are going.

Beginnings

LaBelle was first inhabited by the Calusa Indians and eventually the Seminole Indians. In the latter part of the 1800's it became a community for hunting, fishing and trapping. First part of Monroe County, then Lee County, LaBelle was originally platted in the 1890's by Captain Francis Asbury Hendry, a well-known cattleman, political figure and statesman.



Florida Memory Project

On November 1, 1909 Goodno filed the first plat on record for the city of LaBelle. This first plat was for land north of Hickpochee Avenue to the Caloosahatchee. While Hendry was credited with originally platting the town, there is no official record of it.

It is reported that Hendry named LaBelle for his two daughters, Laura and Belle. However, because LaBelle also means “beautiful” in French, it is thought that Pierre Denaud, a French-Indian trader who had a trading post in the area, may have been responsible for the name. The Hendry cattle ranch was located in

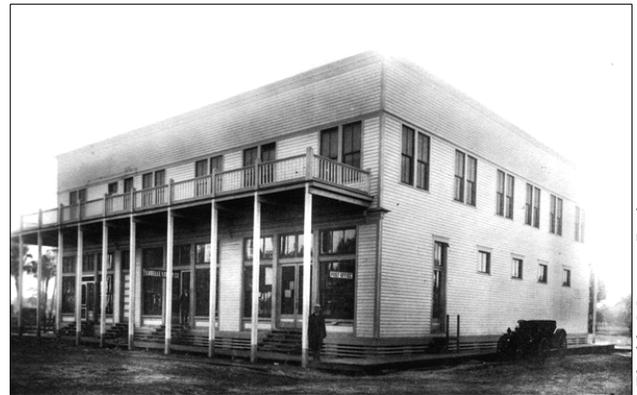
the Fort Thompson area, which is now no more than a memory.

By the turn of the century, the Hendry's sold their holdings to Edgar Everett Goodno. While Hendry is given the distinction of founding LaBelle, it is Goodno who is credited with the development of LaBelle into an actual city. The community of LaBelle had become largely cattle ranching by this time, and was incorporated into a town in 1911 in order to keep the livestock off the streets.



Florida Memory Project

Hendry Cattle Ranch, Fort Thompson, ca.1907



Florida Memory Project

Everett Hotel served as both Post Office and Hendry County Courthouse, ca.1912

Goodno went on to build two first-class hotels: the Fort Thompson Park Hotel, which had originally been Hendry's ranch house, and the Everett Hotel in LaBelle, which stood on the site where Barron Library now stands. These ventures suddenly brought LaBelle to the attention of hundreds of potential citizens.

Goodno was also responsible for adding more of his own land to LaBelle, and created both residential and business districts within the town. He had roads constructed and an ice plant was built in order to sell ice to local fishermen. A power plant was built on the Caloosahatchee River to supply electricity to Goodno's ice plant. This plant also supplied electricity to the City of LaBelle. When the

When the shift was over for the power plant operator somewhere between 9:30 and 10:00 at night, the lights for the city went out for the night "because no self-respecting citizen should be up past this hour anyway."

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Because of the efforts made by Mr. Goodno, all at his own expense, the area was able to grow as a town and as a community. Hendry County was formed in 1923; LaBelle was incorporated into a city in 1925.



Aerial view of Downtown LaBelle, ca. 1959

Florida Memory Project

1960's. As the City grew and matured, road improvements allowed for better travel times between LaBelle and the surrounding cities. While it was necessary to improve roads in order for goods and services to be brought into the area and so people could travel more efficiently, the ability to go elsewhere for goods caused Downtown LaBelle to wane, and businesses began to close. The widening of SR 80 and the commercial intensification along

that route further contributed to the loss of businesses in the downtown area. But even with this decline, Downtown LaBelle has always kept its character and heart.

Evolution of the City

Once LaBelle was established as a City, the area began to grow. Businesses began to fill the downtown area along Bridge and Main Streets, as well as the cross streets. Since travel to other cities was time consuming and tedious due to the conditions of early roads, the City relied upon itself to supply the citizens' needs. Downtown LaBelle remained a thriving commerce area until the end of the



View of Bridge Street, celebrating the "birth" of Hendry County, ca. 1923

Florida Memory Project

Classic Grid

When Captain Francis Asbury Hendry created the original plat for the LaBelle City, as it was called during that time, the design was based

on the classic American small-town, characterized by a grid street pattern, a central business /civic core, parks and green spaces.

The pattern of development facilitated walking, on-street parking and buildings oriented to the street. Many newer planned communities are going back to or reinventing this classic model in order to establish character and pedestrian scale.

Waterfront

In the early years of LaBelle, the Caloosahatchee River was a meandering waterway, with gently sloping banks and scenic shores. Early maps of the city show a very different relationship of the river to the town than currently exists.

During periods of increased rain, the Caloosahatchee was prone to flooding due to the water's inability to move along its crooked channel fast enough to accommodate the increased volume of water. Some of the most significant floods occurred in 1873, 1878, 1908, 1910, 1912, 1922, 1924, 1929, 1930, and 1936.

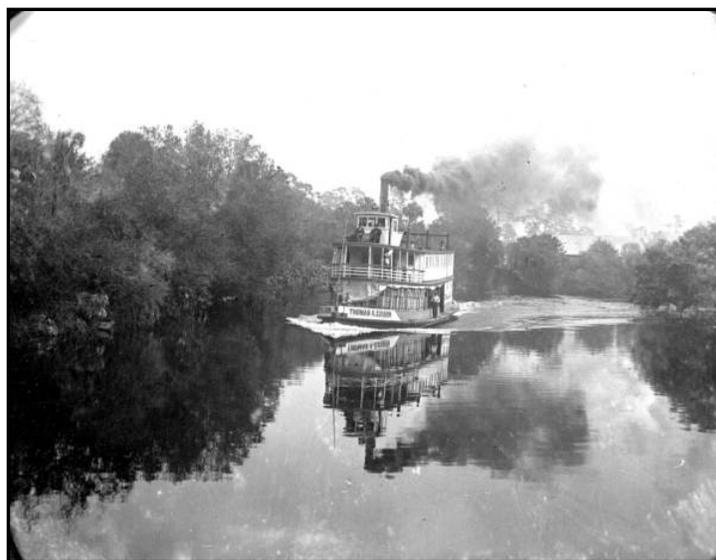
Throughout the early 1900's, many people relied on the River as a source of income, mainly through fishing and moving goods. The Caloosahatchee River was also a significant means of travel. It allowed passengers and products to move across the state from coast to coast. It was especially noted for bringing visitors from Fort Myers to the central part of the state. Many people traveled by steamboat to view the scenic beauty along the river between Fort Myers and LaBelle, and to spend a few days in one of LaBelle's first-class hotels. However, because of the tight bends in the Caloosahatchee's channel, river travel was challenging, especially for large vessels. At times of extremely low water or at times of flood, there were sections of the river that were completely impassible.

Early efforts to control the Caloosahatchee include the construction of locks. Most of these locks were dynamited in the aftermath of the 1928 Hurricane to help drain flood waters.



Caloosahatchee River at LaBelle, ca. 1923

Florida Memory Project



The "Thomas A. Edison" carried passengers between Fort Myers and LaBelle

Florida Memory Project



Bridge St. during the 1922 flood

Florida Memory Project

In 1936, to aid in moving people and products more efficiently across the state, and to offer relief from the constant flooding and the resulting hardship caused by it, the Federal Government ordered more substantial flood control measures be applied to the Caloosahatchee River.

The River was dredged, channelized, and deepened to control water levels and locks were reintroduced. The initial channelization of the River was completed in 1938. In the 1960's the River was widened and deepened to further regulate and control the River.

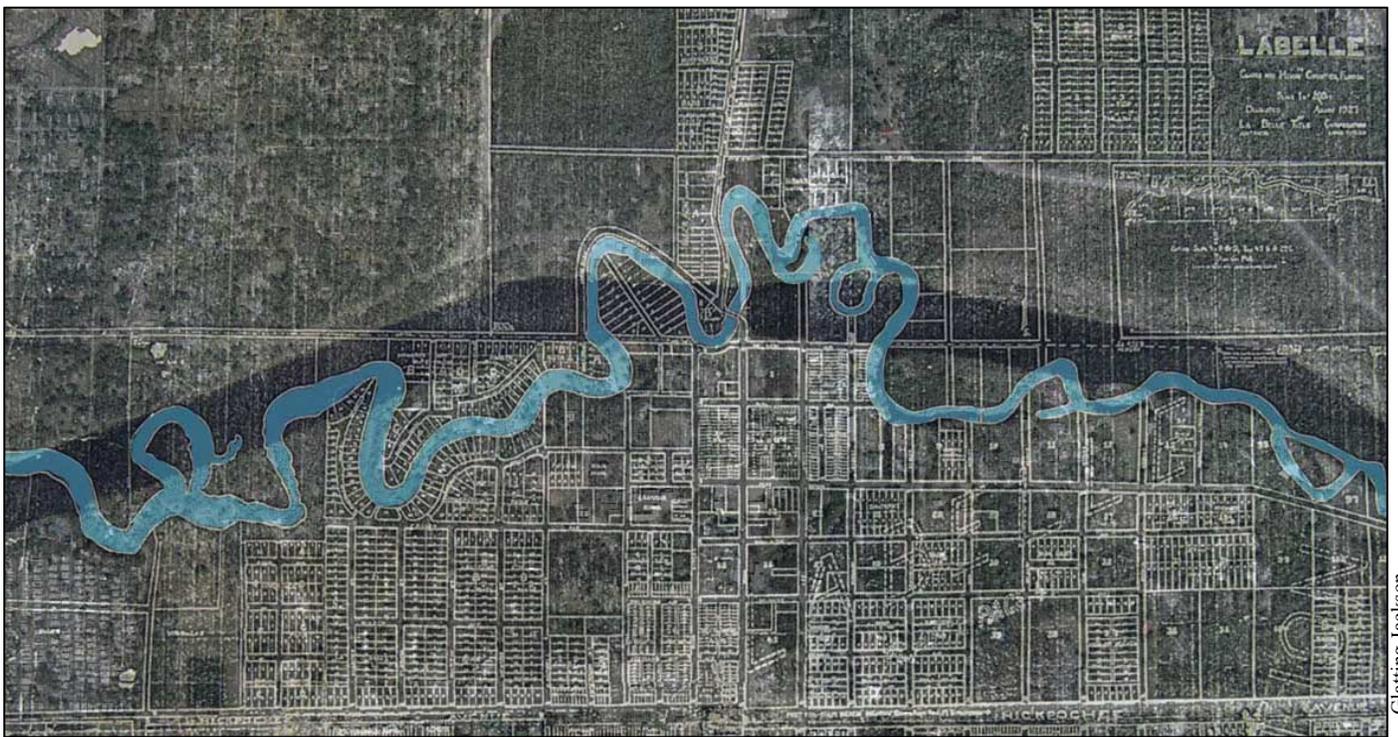


View from Barron Park Looking East

The Caloosahatchee remains an attractive and alluring waterway, but the beauty of the gentle meandering river is no more. However, the classic splendor of this river has been captured by the many remnant oxbows, including one located directly adjacent to the downtown.

The song of the river ends not at her banks, but in the hearts of those who have loved her.

- Buffalo- Joe



Glattig Jackson

Original plat showing historic Caloosahatchee River course overlaid on a current aerial showing channelized river.

Widening of SR 80 and Commercial Intensification

Prior to the widening of SR 80, the character of LaBelle along this corridor included older buildings and large oaks. While the widening of SR 80 improved travel times to and from



View of SR 80 Today

LaBelle, many of the trees and structures that gave LaBelle its charm were lost in the process. With the widening of

SR 80 came new commercial businesses that were willing to locate in LaBelle because of the increased road frontage and traffic along this route.

Once commercial chains began to locate themselves in the area, development along SR 80 began to increase. Fast food restaurants, banks and other development began to spread along this corridor, eager to serve the traffic on this highway. As new development sought these road-frontage areas, competition from



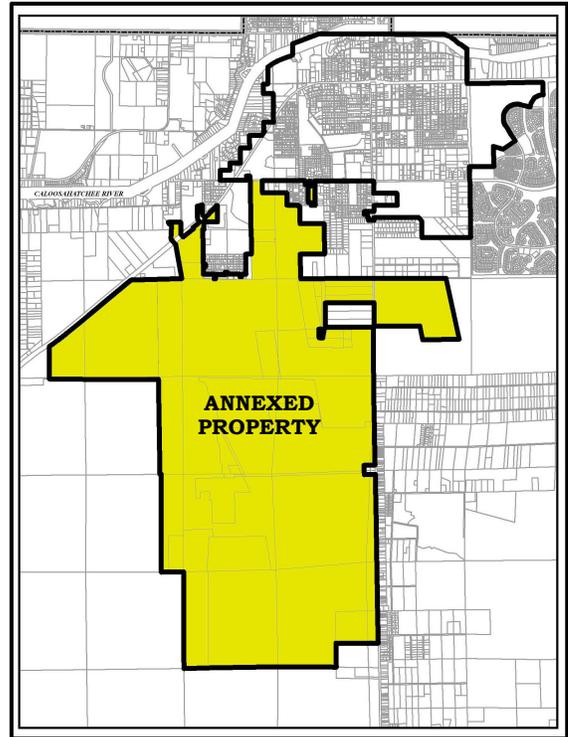
Example of Existing Building on Bridge Street

the newer businesses put a strain on the smaller existing businesses located downtown. Some businesses in the downtown

area were forced to close while others opted to move to the newer, more visible developments along SR 80.

Annexations

Over the past several years, the City of LaBelle has grown substantially, primarily to the south. Most significant has been the addition of the Paul Property totaling +/- 4,700 acres.

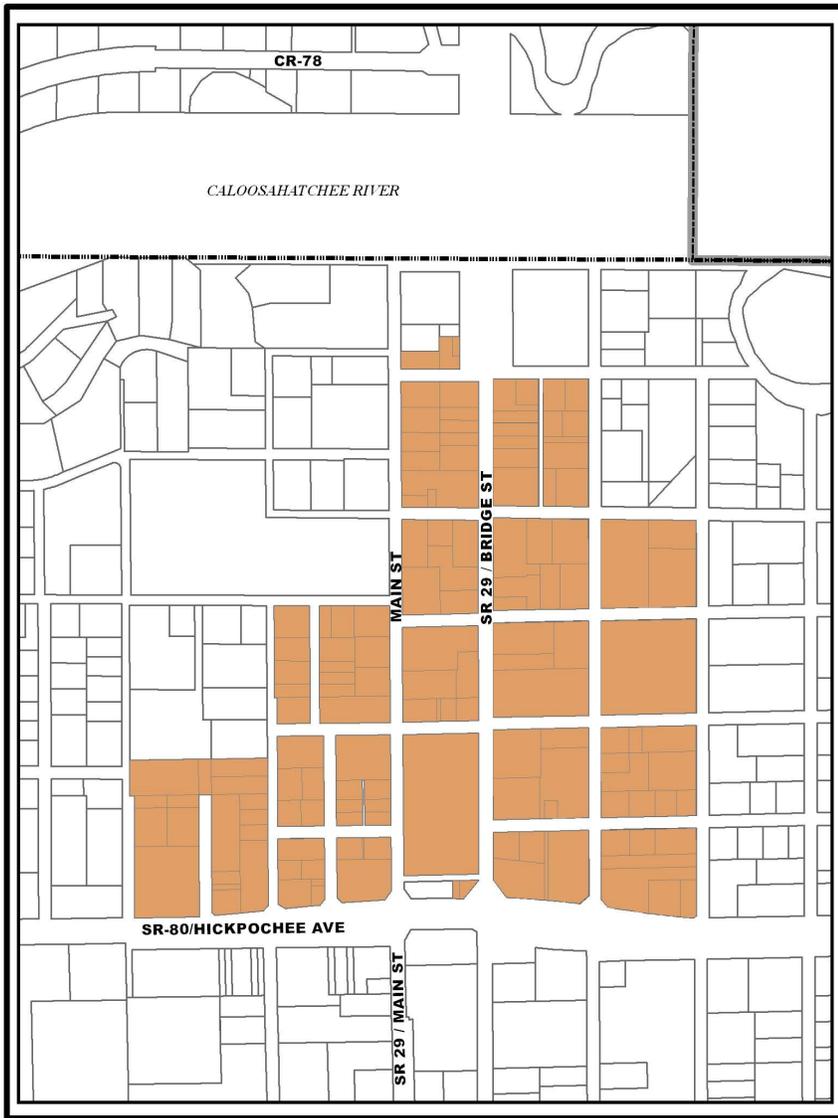


City Annexed Property

Plans for this area include a maximum of 15,000 homes along with stores, a public park and a trade school campus.

Downtown LaBelle Walking District

In 2004, the City of LaBelle established the Downtown LaBelle Walking District Future Land Use designation which is now part of the City's Comprehensive Plan. The Downtown LaBelle Walking District includes those properties located north of SR 80 from Main Street east to Riverview Street. The purpose of this District is to identify the downtown area as a unique area of the City that requires special treatment and recognition.



Existing Downtown LaBelle Walking District Future Land Use Area

The adoption of this Future Land Use designation was truly a first step to achieving the goal of identifying the downtown as an area requiring special treatment and preservation of character.

With physical and economic decline occurring in this area, civic leaders saw the need to preserve, enhance and rebuild the downtown area to the thriving business center it had once been.

The goal of this District is to preserve the historic nature of the downtown area and to encourage the integration of a mix of uses, including office, commercial and residential, that will incentivize the redevelopment of the area by encouraging higher density in a pedestrian friendly context.

Community Visioning

The key element or ingredient of a successful community visioning project is involvement from the community's residents and business owners.

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Through participation in committee meetings, attendance at community-based activities and hosting workshops to involve residents, every effort has been made to enlist the desires of the community and earn their trust.

Downtown LaBelle Committee Meetings

The Downtown LaBelle Committee was formed to represent the interests of the community and to provide guidance throughout the visioning process. The



Downtown LaBelle Committee Meeting

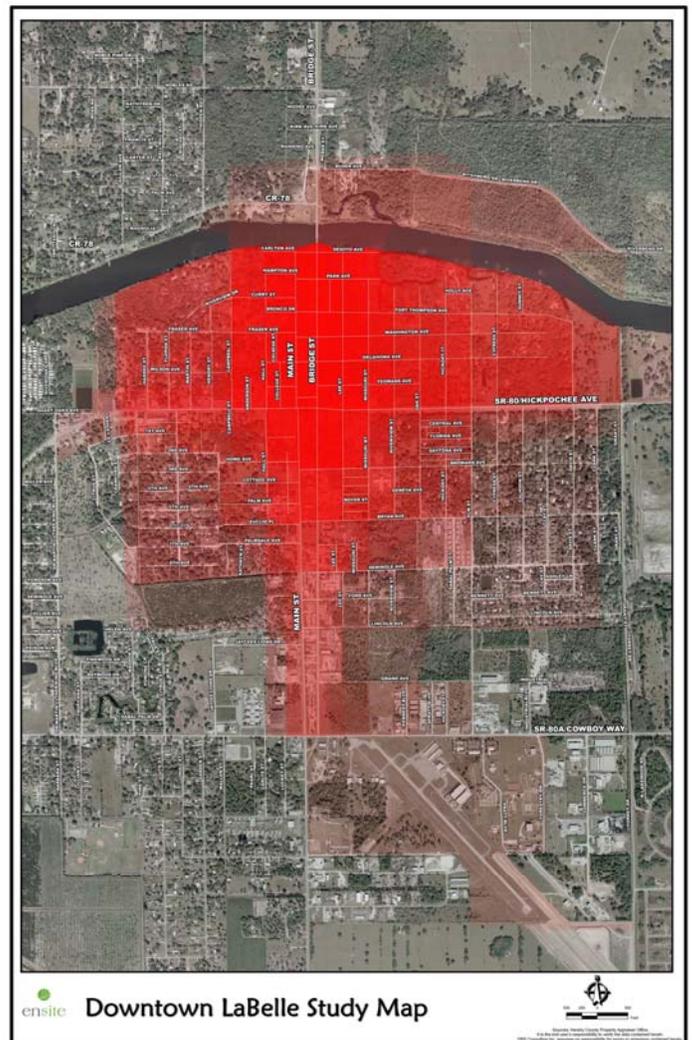
Downtown LaBelle Committee was key to the success of this planning effort. To kick off the visioning process, the Committee

held a public workshop attended by residents, local elected officials and business owners to help define the vision for LaBelle and its

downtown area. Potential areas of focus were identified, as well as areas of concern. The Committee has been meeting once a month (since June 2007) to provide direction and assistance with communication to concerned citizens. The Committee also held joint meetings with the Code Review Board to seek input and coordination.

Stakeholder Interviews

The next step in the visioning process was to conduct stakeholder interviews. Stakeholders are citizens, business owners, elected officials and interested parties that are directly affected by the out come of a decision or event. Stakeholder interviews are crucial in gathering a cross-section of the community's ideas and



The area in red represents a layering of where each stakeholder was asked to identify the boundary of Downtown LaBelle.

opinions as to areas of greatest concern and potential improvement. A list of key stakeholders was compiled and individual interviews were held.

Thirty-five interviews were conducted, most lasting between one-half and one full hour. During the interviews, stakeholders were asked a series of twelve questions to help identify opportunities and constraints.

When asked in what direction LaBelle was headed, stakeholder opinions were evenly split. Those with a positive view felt that as long as the city and community were actively involved in the City’s growth, things would continue to move in the right direction. Those with a negative view felt that the downtown was stagnant and if future “big box” development came to LaBelle, it would be extremely detrimental to the viability of current businesses in the downtown area.

and entertainment. It should also be the link for all future development activity. Most important to the stakeholders is renovation of



Downtown LaBelle Committee

Example of Pedestrian Friendly Business

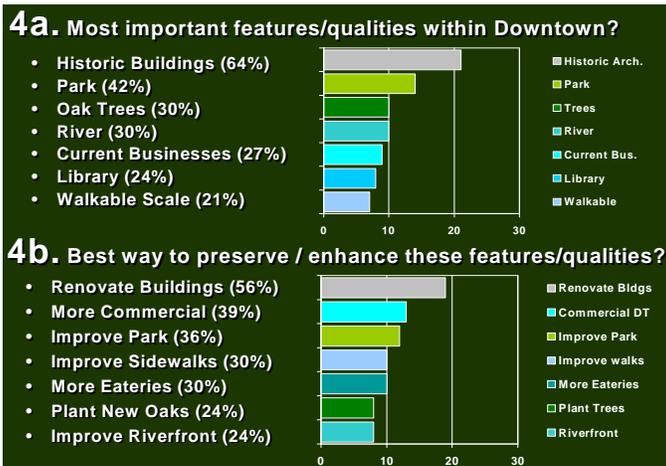
historic buildings and improvements to the park. Providing a more pedestrian-friendly feel by improving sidewalks and solving current traffic issues on both SR 29 and SR 80, was also identified. They would like to see current businesses kept downtown and new businesses brought in to fill in gaps and create a draw to the area. Examples include eateries, shops and professional offices. Cleanliness and appearance were considered very important, as well as preservation of existing oak trees.

The majority of stakeholders believe there should be controls in place to limit the type of architecture allowed in the downtown area. It was also the majority consensus that existing structures should be improved and required to adapt to these new standards for older buildings. However, it was strongly suggested that business owners be given incentives to make such improvements.



Downtown LaBelle Committee

Pedestrian Friendly Walkway



Stakeholder Responses

Several stakeholders also recognized the challenges to the downtown revitalization effort due to uncertainty regarding the bridge on SR 29.

When stakeholders were asked what role the downtown should serve, it was nearly unanimous that the Walking District should be the destination and focal point of the community. It should be the city’s center and include commerce, essential services, culture



Several stakeholders believe maintaining residential areas within the Walking District would be of value since the older homes contribute greatly to the history and character of the city.

It is clear that area residents and business owners want improvements. Some stakeholders placed a greater emphasis on the repair and extension of existing sidewalks and parking.



Downtown LaBelle Committee

Example of Aesthetic Bridge Improvements

Others mentioned the desire for more aesthetic improvements including landscaping in the form of planted medians and roadsides, streetscape improvements, such as lighting around the oak trees, coordinating benches and planters, light poles with banners or baskets, as well as paved crosswalks to provide clearer pedestrian crossings, which would also serve as traffic-calming measures.



Downtown LaBelle Committee

Example of an Interactive Fountain

The river is considered an important character element to the downtown. Incorporating a restaurant on the river with a boardwalk was viewed favorably, as well as a larger dock, and pedestrian connections. A kids' park and an interactive fountain also received a positive response. There was also interest in providing connection to the proposed park on the north side of the river.

8. Development in Downtown LaBelle:

Desirable

- Small businesses
- Specialty shops
 - Clothing
 - Bookstore
 - Ice cream
 - Artisan shops
- Restaurants/cafes
- Professional offices
- Government offices
- Lodging
 - Hotel
 - B & B
- Mixed use
- Large meeting/events venue

Undesirable

- Big chains/big box
- Convenience stores
- Gas stations
- High rise
- Steel buildings
- Bars/nightclubs
- Liquor stores
- Pawn shops
- Heavy commercial/industrial
- Parking structures
- Low-income housing

Stakeholder Responses

Small businesses, specialty shops and restaurants would be of greatest benefit to the downtown. Some felt that there was a need for lodging and space for events.

When asked concerning their goals and/or vision for the Walking District, all those interviewed want to see Downtown LaBelle as a destination for both locals and tourists. They want a beautiful city that is vibrant and appealing to potential new businesses. They would like to see an alluring waterfront that ties to the park and the city, and provides a safe environment to walk through and spend time in. Through this process, they would like to adopt a plan, coordinate funding and establish community support in order to achieve the intended goal – revitalize the charm and create a more desirable location to live, work and play.



Downtown LaBelle Committee

Example of a Waterfront with Decorative Railing and Low-Level Pedestrian Lighting

Visit Florida Workshop

"It's About the Oaks"

A visioning workshop was awarded to LaBelle by Visit Florida, the official tourism marketing corporation for the State of Florida. This workshop, held November 14-16, 2007, was



Visit Florida Workshop

conducted by the community planning and design firm of Glatting Jackson, Kercher and Anglin (GJ) of Orlando, Florida, and covered the Land Use

District, Bridge Street Corridor, Gateways, Native Landscape Restoration, LaBelle Heritage Trail, Barron Park and the Riverwalk.



Visit Florida Workshop

The workshop culminated in a presentation that offered suggestions on land use designations, provided gateway entry features and signage, presented streetscape designs, traffic calming ideas, and roadway sections for Bridge and Main Streets. The final

presentation also provided a plan to restore native plantings, a walking and biking trail with interpretive signage, as well as three waterfront park designs.



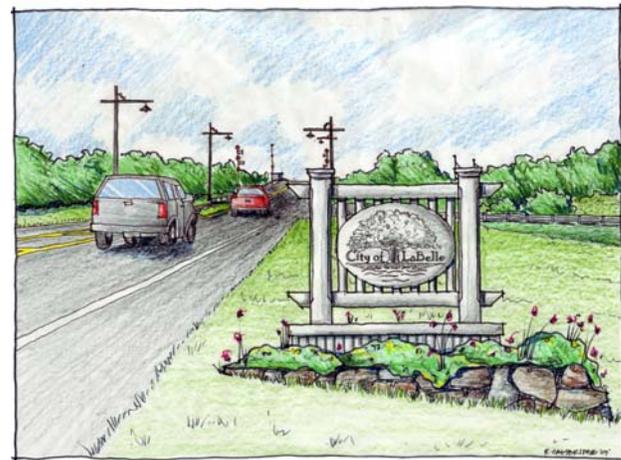
Possible Streetscape Enhancements

Glatting Jackson



Possible Biking and Walking Trail

Glatting Jackson



Possible Entrance Signage

Glatting Jackson

Bridge and Traffic/Pedestrian Circulation “A planning exercise that will lead to an engineering solution”

Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) and URS Corporation are conducting a Project Development and Environmental Study (PD&E) of SR 29 from Cowboy Way in Hendry County to its intersection with SR 27 in Glades County.

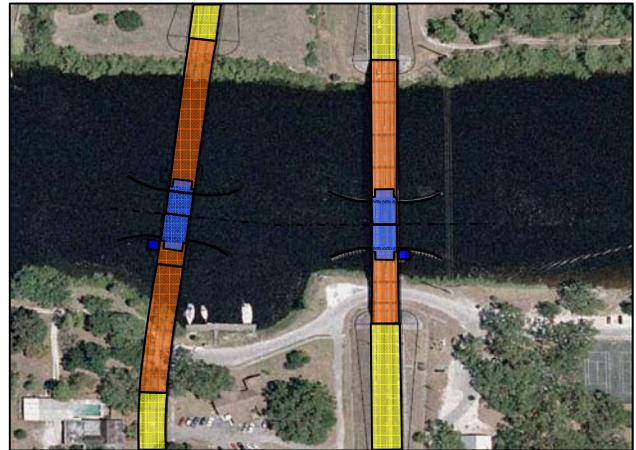


Five Steps of the Highway Development Process

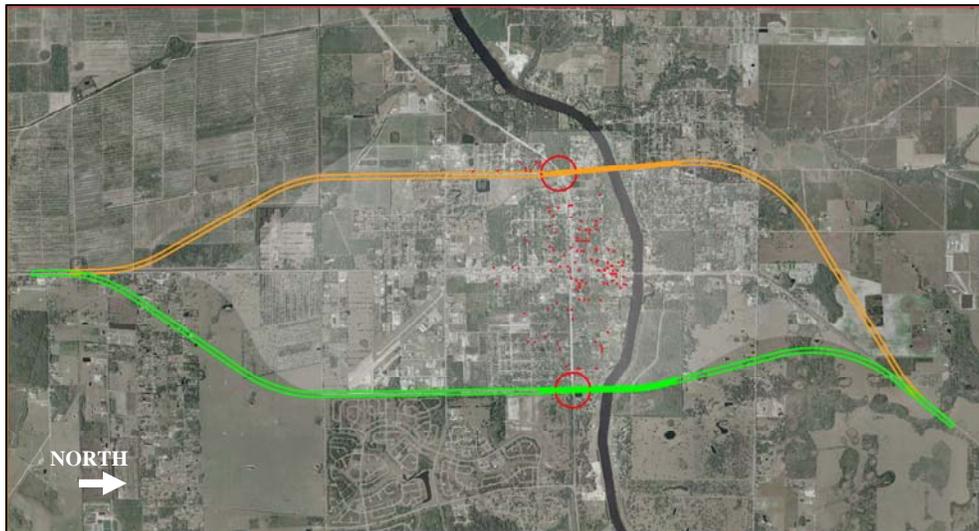
Part of the scope of this study is to determine the fate of the drawbridge that currently crosses the Caloosahatchee River at LaBelle. A joint workshop with FDOT and URS was held on January 17, 2008 with the express intent of addressing citizen concerns regarding the future of the bridge and how that outcome will relate to development and revitalization efforts in the downtown area.



FDOT / URS



FDOT / URS



FDOT / URS

Above: Conceptual dual span bridges on Bridge Street and Main Street, oblique view and plan view.

Left: Proposed bypass bridge locations

Funding Sources

- Federal Matching
- State Funds
- Developer Funding via Transportation Concurrency Requirements
- Public Private Partnership (P3)

The workshop also focused on interim projects the City could do while waiting for the results of the PD&E and completion of any subsequent work on the bridge. The general consensus supports keeping the bridge alignment downtown.

Some of the interim projects suggested were: strengthen side streets by providing on-street parking which would make these areas more attractive for future development, rewrite existing codes so that future development is required to have broader setbacks, thereby creating wider walkways and allowing areas to be used for sidewalk dining and seating.

It is critical that the City of LaBelle continue to work with FDOT and their consultant throughout the entire PD&E process to ensure the goals of the City are met.

*Left: Sequence of streetscape for Yeomans Avenue.
Below: Options for enhancing the existing SR 29 Bridge and tender house over the Caloosahatchee River.*



FDOT / URS



FDOT / URS

Barron Park and the Waterfront "The Caloosahatchee Runs Through It"

On March 11, 2008, a workshop focusing on Barron Park and the waterfront was held at the Barron Library. The focus area was from Main Street to the western edge of the park property, and from Park Avenue to the Caloosahatchee River.



Clockwise from left: Examples of a riverside restaurant, interactive fountain, and two types of play areas



www.barbarabautler.com



Barron Park Concept 1



Barron Park Concept 2 - Winner

featured a central gazebo/bandstand structure, a splash pad on the waterfront, a community center located on the river, and a kayak and canoe launch. Design II featured an amphitheater on the waterfront, a play area incorporated into the trees, and a waterfront restaurant.

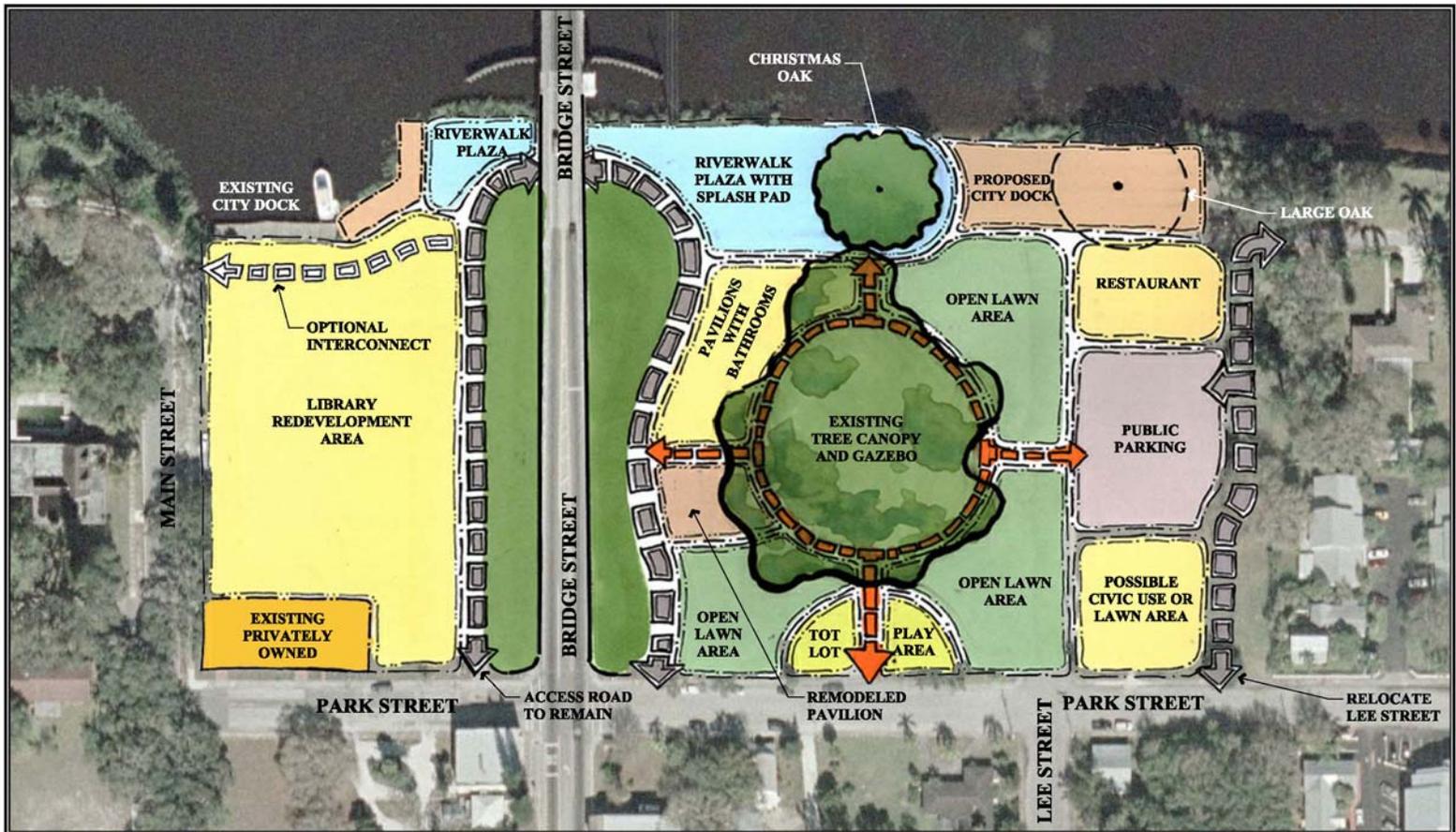
The two concepts and the ballot box were left at the library for several weeks to allow residents and library patron who were unable to attend the workshop to vote on their preferred design.

From 46 ballots submitted, the tally showed that overall, the desired elements for the park were a splash pad, an amphitheater on the water, a restaurant or community center on

the water, a larger and relocated docking facility, a tot lot, open lawns, a riverwalk, more pavilions, additional public parking, and the removal of Lee Street through the park.

Keeping the existing Christmas oak was also the clear consensus.

Based on this input, the following composite plan has been provided.



Barron Park Composite Plan

Existing Community Character

LaBelle is a special place with a rich history and unique character.

Commercial Character Pedestrian Scale and Grid

Currently, the Walking District spans approximately ±70 acres. The district encompasses the area from SR 80 north to the Caloosahatchee River along both sides of Bridge Street, and then begins to expand outward to include the area between Lee and Missouri Streets from SR 80 to Fort Thompson Road to the east; and from the intersection of Hampton Avenue and Main Street southwest to the intersection of Campbell Street and SR 80 to the west.

Within this area there are a multitude of uses that contribute to the pedestrian nature of the downtown area: retail shops, offices, civic areas, restaurants, single and multi-family residences. This walkable character is reinforced by the existing vehicular grid system. The grid creates an ease of movement for both pedestrians and vehicles and opens up opportunities throughout Downtown LaBelle for redevelopment, infill development and future development where businesses can be easily accessed by foot or by car.

Downtown LaBelle is anchored by three major focal features:

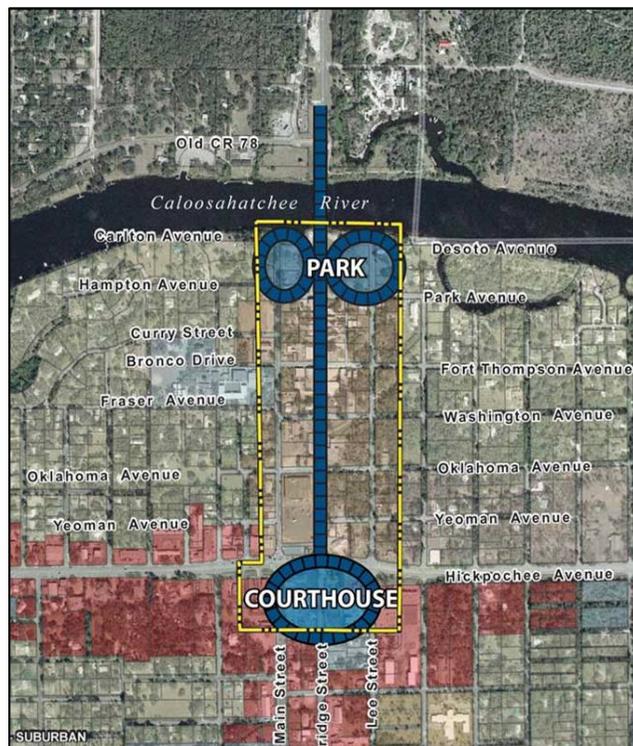
- Barron Park
- Caloosahatchee River
- Hendry County Courthouse.

Currently there is limited public parking in and around the downtown area, and no on-street parking on Bridge and Main Streets, although provisions for parking on these streets are viewed as desirable. Due to the unknown future of the bridge and the current Strategic Intermodal System (SIS) designation for SR 29, the inclusion of such facilities will most likely be a significant challenge. Although clear delineation does not exist, many of the cross streets throughout the downtown area are used for

on-street parking. For example, Bronco Drive between Bridge Street and Main Street has adequate width for parallel on-street parking and is utilized in this manner.

Focal Points
Downtown LaBelle is anchored by three major focal features: Barron Park and the Caloosahatchee River to the north, and the Hendry County Courthouse to the

south. This historic landmark was built in 1925, and is situated on the southeast corner of SR 80 and SR 29. These features help to delineate the Walking District both north and south.



Focal Points

Varied Architectural Styles

The existing commercial structures found throughout the downtown area are a mix of architectural styles. The styles include Old Florida, Spanish Revival, Colonial Revival, Mission, and Modern; Old Florida or Florida Cracker is the most common.



Old Florida or Cracker



Spanish Revival

Mix of Uses

The grid system and its pedestrian and vehicular circulation contribute to the mix of uses that are located within the downtown. While these uses include commercial, institutional and professional businesses, a significant portion of the area is comprised of vacant lots.

Residential Character

Predominantly Single Family

The residential component of the downtown consists primarily of single family development. The majority of this housing is located along the east and west edges of the downtown. There are two multi-family housing developments, one located just east of Barron Park and the other at the northern end of Hickory Street. The downtown also includes two mobile home parks, one located on Lee Street and the other along the Caloosahatchee River.



Business from Converted Residential

Between the commercial core area along Bridge Street and the residential edges of the downtown, the land use pattern reflects a mix of land uses to create what might be considered a transition area. Within this transition area, it is not uncommon to see residential houses that have been converted to offices or businesses. This transitional area works well as a buffer between the more dedicated residential areas east and west and the true commercial area along Bridge Street.

Links and Walkability

Due to the nature of the City's grid pattern, there are established links to downtown that provide either pedestrian or vehicular access to services such as schools, churches, restaurants, professional services and the public library.

Downtown Park & Waterfront

Barron Park and the Caloosahatchee River is one of the most prominent and historically important focal points for the City of LaBelle and its community. In the same location since the formation of the city, Barron Park contains approximately 4.5 acres and is situated at the northern end of the Walking District, with the Caloosahatchee River along the north and Park Avenue to the south. Access to the park and the waterfront extends west beyond



View of Existing Wharf



Existing Barron Park Gazebo

Barron Park under the bridge to the intersection of Carlton Avenue and Main Street. This area includes a public boat dock facility that allows for overnight guests; however the size of the docking area is limited.



News Press, February 23, 2008

42nd annual Swamp Cabbage Festival

Barron Park serves mostly as a passive recreation area where people come to view the river, eat lunch, fish or sit and chat. There are also tennis courts and a basketball court for more active pursuits. In addition, it serves as a community gathering space, and historically has done so since the City's beginnings.

Weddings, fund raising activities, Christmas in the Park and various other community social events are but a sampling of how the park is used.

Since 1967, Barron Park has been known best as the home of the Swamp Cabbage Festival, an annual event held on the last weekend in February, which welcomes over 30,000 festival goers to LaBelle each year.



Existing Tree Canopy

Oak Canopy

LaBelle, known as the City of Oaks, has many large, mature oak trees that grace the lawns and streets of the community and dot the landscapes of public spaces such as the library, courthouse and park. While graceful and beautiful, some trees are beginning to show signs of decline. A maintenance and replanting program should be considered to ensure continued existence of the oak canopy for years to come.

Constraints

Constraints:

- Bridge on SR 29
- Traffic on Bridge Street
- Minor Ponding on Roadways
- Competition with Development Outside of the Downtown
- School Traffic on Main Street
- Sidewalks
- Limited Outdoor Furniture
- Lack of Coordinated Signage
- Overhead Power lines
- Limited Street Lighting

Bridge on SR 29

The uncertainty regarding the location and timing of the future SR 29 Bridge represents a challenge and an opportunity to the revitalization of Downtown LaBelle. Since SR 29 is a Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) roadway, the City of LaBelle and Hendry County do not have direct control over the future of this important facility.

Many options are on the table as part of the SR 29 Project Development and Environment study currently underway. One option is to keep

an expanded facility through downtown via one-way pairs utilizing both Bridge Street and Main Street. The FDOT must also study whether the bridge ends up being moved outside of town, which will bypass the downtown area altogether.

A third option is to simply re-deck the existing bridge. This would mean that in order to accommodate the present level of traffic, the bridge and Bridge Street will have to become four-lanes. This option goes against the City's desire to make the area

more pedestrian-friendly, and could require more right-of-way, which would restrict the ability to widen sidewalks.

The possibility of twin roadway pairs has residents and business owners concerned, as well. If this happens, then Bridge Street will become a one-way northbound route and Main Street will become the southbound counterpart. Although it was suggested during the Visit Florida



Truck Traffic on the Existing SR 29 Bridge

Workshop that creating one-way traffic through downtown could be a detriment, the consensus was that this would not be the case since there are many east-west cross streets linking the two roads which could provide for adequate circulation and movement. If the bridge is relocated and Downtown LaBelle is bypassed, it is feared that the downtown area, no longer having the benefit of through traffic, will be negatively impacted.

The SR 29 PD&E will be completed sometime in 2010 and it will likely be many years before work on a new bridge is actually started.



View of Bridge from Barron Library

Traffic on Bridge Street

SR 29, which is known as Bridge Street in LaBelle, is the main north/south route through the town. Traffic on SR 29, especially in the downtown portion of the city, has been identified by area residents and business owners as an ongoing concern.

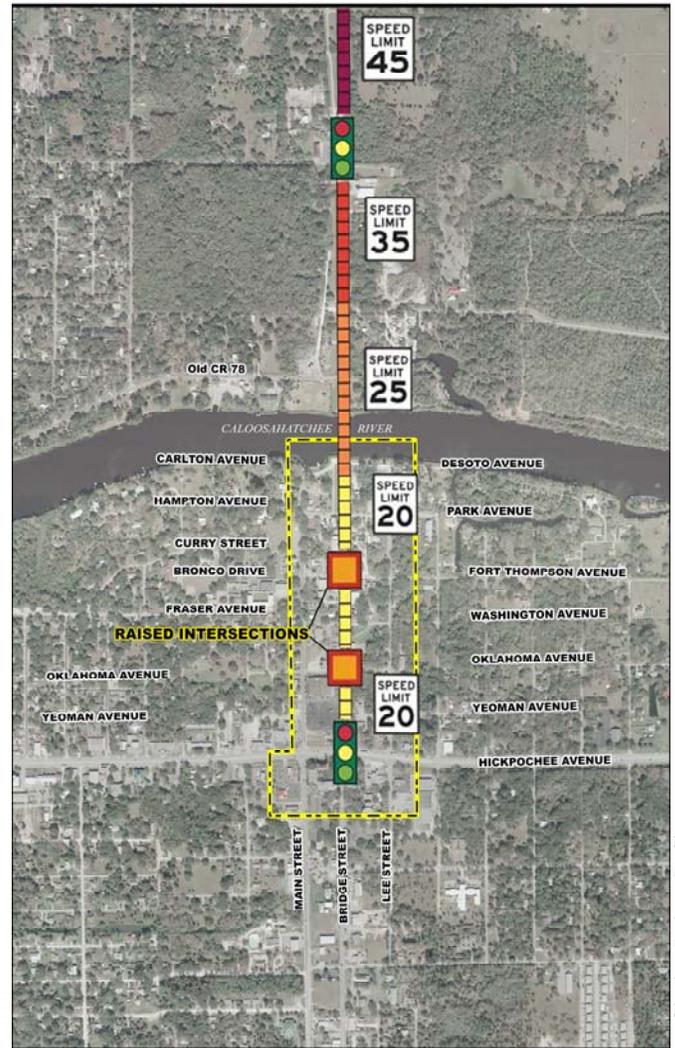
Presently, SR 29 is identified by FDOT as part of the Strategic Intermodal System (SIS), which means that it is a major means by which people, goods and services are moved through the state. SR 29 is a significant north/south route for truck traffic in South Florida. The current amount of traffic utilizing the SR 29 Bridge exceeds its existing level of service (LOS). This is further complicated by the noise created by the high number of large trucks, as well as overall traffic speeds, which by the SIS designation, are presently at their minimum.

Coming into the city from the north, the speed reduces from 55 mph to 35 mph as traffic approaches the SR 29 Bridge. However, there are limited traffic calming measures in place that encourage vehicles to adhere to the posted traffic speeds, and currently there is very little in place to let motorists know they are approaching the downtown area. At the point that this is made evident, large vehicles and other traffic are already coming off of the bridge into the downtown area, often at speeds exceeding the posted 35 mph speed limit.

There is no median to offer protection and relief from the passing traffic, and since there are no stop signs or traffic lights until traffic reaches the intersection with SR 80, pedestrians trying to cross Bridge Street are not given much time or protection when crossing the street.



Approaching LaBelle from North of the River



Glatting Jackson/EnSite

Traffic calming measures that include reduced speeds and raised intersections should be incorporated into the redevelopment plan.

Another traffic-related issue is the noise created by the large number of trucks that pass through the vicinity. The noise is created not only by the size of these vehicles, but also by their rumblings and vibrations that often

shake walls and windows of businesses along Bridge Street. Slowing the truck traffic and adding traffic calming measures should substantially address this concern.

Glatting Jackson

Minor Ponding on Roadways

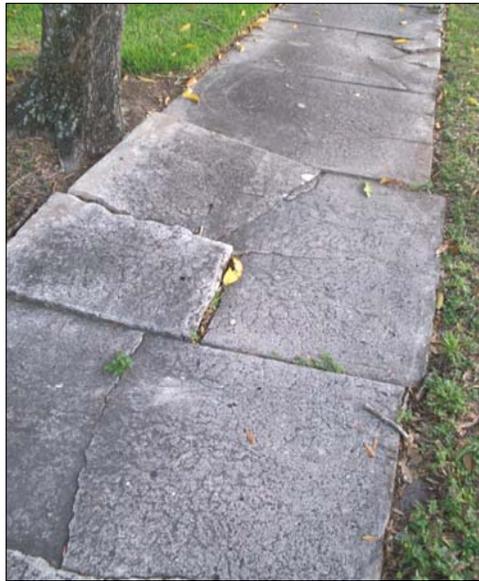
Although flooding is no longer a major issue, ponding on roadways does occur in the downtown area after a hard rain. Minimal ponding should be expected given the frequency and intensity of storms, but the City of LaBelle should investigate the cause and incorporate a strategy to address this issue. The City should also coordinate with FDOT since they will also be addressing this issue as part of the SR 29 PD&E.

Competition with Development Outside of the Downtown

Much of the new development in LaBelle has been occurring on SR 80. The widening of SR 80 to four-lanes, the availability of vacant parcels, and the ability to provide ample parking, has facilitated this trend. The downtown has a predominance of small parcels, inadequate parking and older historic buildings—some of which need repair. In addition, bringing structures up to meet modern business needs, as well as current building codes, creates costs and issues that many business owners would rather avoid.



Lack of Connecting Sidewalks



Buckled Sidewalks due to Tree Roots



Example of existing street furniture: future furniture placement should include shade to encourage use.

School Traffic on Main Street

Traffic during school drop off and pick up can back up along Main Street. There is less of an impact in the morning, because parents drop off their children at varying times. In the afternoon, however, people arrive early to get in line to pick up their children, and tie up traffic in this vicinity for an extended period of time. This issue should be coordinated with the Hendry County School District.

Sidewalks

While the configuration of the downtown promotes walkability, there lacks a comprehensive network of sidewalks. The existing walkways, in their present condition, do not provide the necessary width to be comfortable for two people to stroll side by side if others are approaching. In addition, the pavement in many areas is in poor condition. Some of this is due to the proximity of large trees which cause the walks to buckle and crack. There is also a lack of connectivity.

Limited Outdoor Furniture

Currently there are no benches in front of shops or along the sidewalks of Downtown LaBelle. Nor are there many places to sit within the park, along the river or around the river side of the library.

Lack of Coordinated Signage

At the present time, there is no special signage that identifies the downtown area or Walking District nor is there any coordinated theme for signage in general.



Power Line Conflict with Existing Tree Canopy

Overhead Power Lines

The overhead power lines create a cause for concern and a potential for danger due to their proximity to the large trees that line the streets of Downtown LaBelle. Large limbs that are close to power lines could cause electrical outages and possibly fires.

Tree trimming, while necessary for safety, is not done with aesthetics or health of the tree in mind, resulting in trees trimmed that are unsightly and further damaged. In addition, the power lines could limit the potential for further street tree plantings. In order to avoid interference with overhead lines, trees are restricted in size, eliminating the ability to plant new oaks to replace those lost or declining.

Limited Street Lighting

There is need for additional street lighting in the downtown area. Existing lighting is not pedestrian in scale, but geared more for the road than sidewalks.



Existing tree pruned for power lines; future coordination encouraged to develop better methods to prune trees for safety and aesthetics.

Opportunities

Waterfront

The northern boundary of the downtown is framed by the Caloosahatchee River offering vistas,

Opportunities:

- Waterfront
- Historic Grid
- Historical Structure
- Culture
- Public Spaces
- Infill
- Tree Canopy
- Traffic on Bridge Street
- Niche Development
- Linkages
- Urban Center / County Seat
- Major Crossroads

commerce, recreation and travel. Any plan to improve the downtown should start at the river's edge. The only business or entity that fronts the river in the downtown area is Barron Library located on the west side of the

SR 29 Bridge. Barron Park runs along the river on the east side of the bridge, but is not fully integrated with the River.



Public Boat Dock

Historical Grid

Since LaBelle is laid out on a classic grid which is composed of relatively small blocks, it gives the town the advantage of being a very walkable scale. The downtown core is comprised of a total of six to eight city blocks. Residents living nearby can bike or walk downtown, then shop, get a cup of coffee or meet a friend at the park. Visitors can park their cars and easily walk to all of their destinations without the need to move their cars again until they are ready to leave. Every effort should be made to enhance the improvements that encourage walkability.



Curtis Honey House

Historical Structures

Many historically significant structures, dating back as far as the late 1800's and early 1900's, exist in LaBelle.



Forrey Building

The downtown area has been designated a Historical District by the State of Florida. Historic buildings

present a unique opportunity to glimpse a bit of the town's history. They also provide an occasion to showcase LaBelle's past by locating interesting shops and attractions in these older structures. Some notable structures include the Forrey Building, the Curtis Honey House, the Hendry County Courthouse, and the Bank of LaBelle building.

Culture

Downtown LaBelle has many cultural attractions and events, including concerts, parades and festivals, the most significant of which is the Swamp Cabbage Festival. The downtown is also home to Barron Library and the Firehouse Cultural Center.



Firehouse Cultural Center



Barron Park



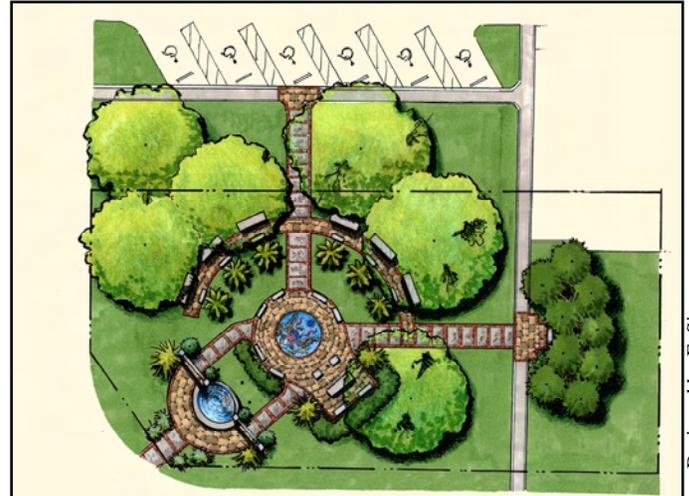
Barron Library

Public Spaces

LaBelle is fortunate to have parks and open space in the downtown. Barron Park is the most substantial and utilized public space and dates back to the original plat of the City.

Although owned by a private foundation, Barron Library and its environs provide a very well utilized public space also located on the

edge of the River adjacent to the City Dock. The library becomes an extension of the park during the Swamp Cabbage Festival. With its prime location, the Library has significant potential to become a more significant feature that could potentially house other civic features and functions.

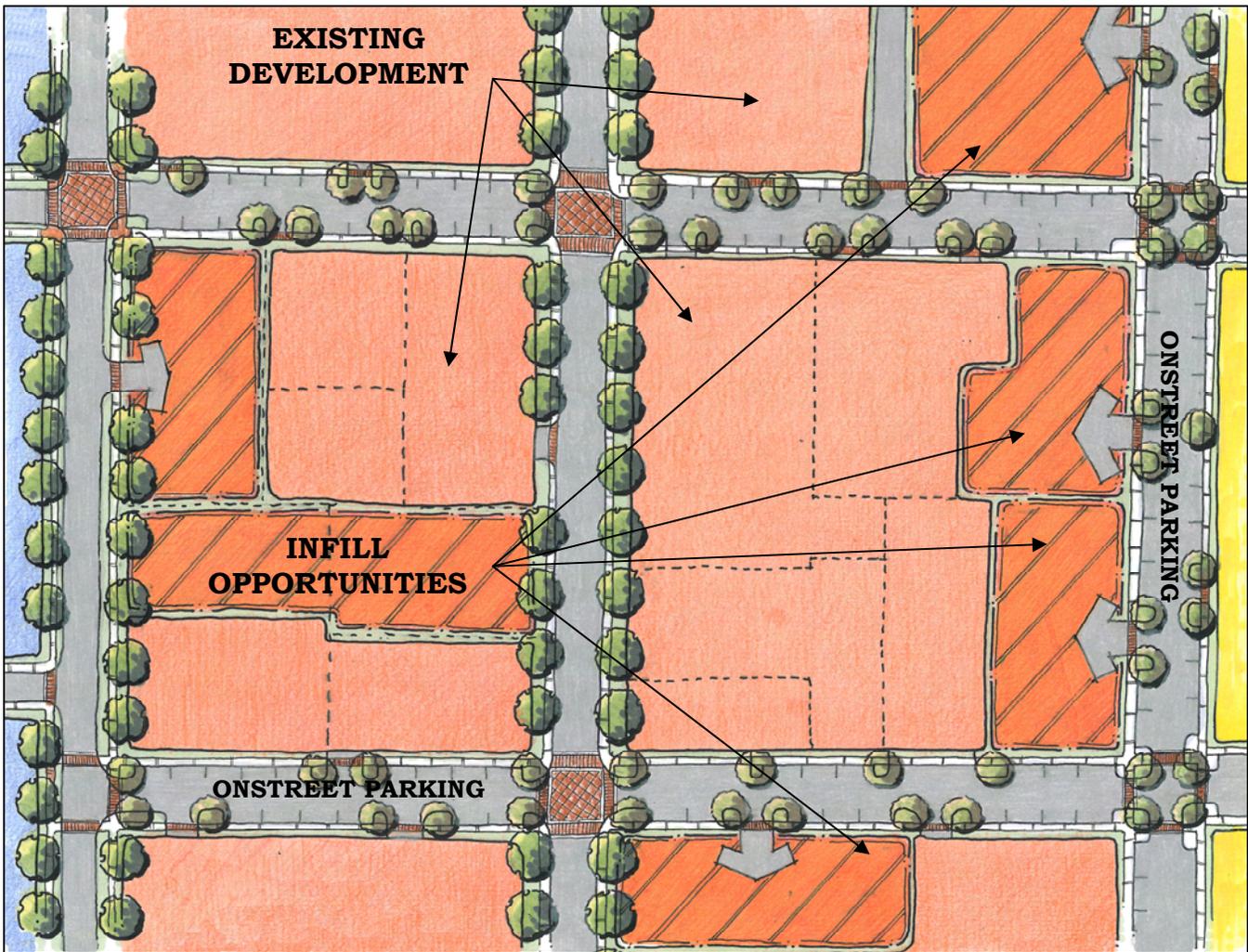


Future Veteran's Memorial Park

Designed by EnSite

The area along the north side of the Caloosahatchee River could be a prime location for more public space. Currently there is a riverfront park with boat access and a small hotel that front the river to the northwest, however there is vacant property on either side of the bridge facing the Library and Barron Park. These areas could be developed and improved to become northern extensions of the existing open space across the river. This would provide a distinct opportunity to not only increase public space, but to include the river as part of it.

Across the street from the Courthouse is a vacant piece of property owned by the City of LaBelle and the existing U-Save Shopping Center. The City has been provided with a vision of a Veterans Memorial Park to be located on this vacant piece of property. Once this park is established, it will help supply the downtown area with additional public open space, and will serve as a gateway into Downtown LaBelle.



Infill

Unfortunately, many of the older buildings in Downtown LaBelle have been lost. However, this also allows for infill opportunities. Vacant lots along Bridge Street, Main Street and Lee Street would be prime locations for new development.

Tree Canopy

The oak tree canopy in LaBelle can be viewed as both current and future opportunities. The current canopy provides design possibilities as well as shade and cooling. It also provides the benefit of mature growth.

Other opportunities include tree planting programs that will ensure the canopy is maintained for future generations, and that will place trees in locations that will allow them to grow unrestricted.

Traffic on Bridge Street

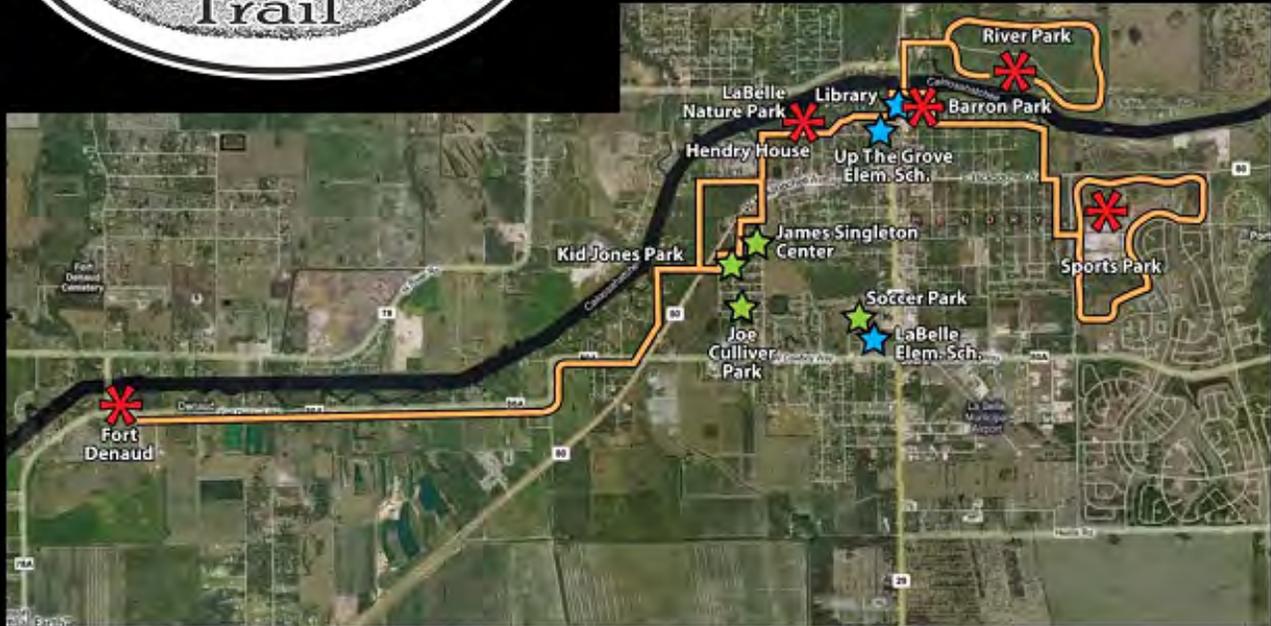
While often a constraint, the traffic along Bridge Street can also be seen as an opportunity because stores and shops are provided with constant visibility. Also, a street with an abundance of traffic is viewed as bustling and vibrant.

Niche Development

Certain business owners have the ability to create a niche for themselves in Downtown LaBelle, where they can provide specialized services for local citizens and business owners while also providing places of interest for those traveling through. This type of development should be encouraged.



LINKAGES



Glattig Jackson

Linkages

Because of its centralized location and grid layout, the downtown area presents excellent opportunities to create linkages to other points of interest within the LaBelle area. Linkages could be established between Barron Park and other parks nearby, such as the LaBelle Nature Park, the sports park to the south and the proposed 176 acre park located on the north side of the Caloosahatchee River.

Urban Center/County Seat

The fact that LaBelle is and has historically been the County Seat of Hendry County gives LaBelle an exclusive advantage in that the majority of County Governmental services have to be directed from the County Court-house in LaBelle.

Major Crossroads

LaBelle, and more specifically the southern edge of the downtown core, is located right at the crossroads of SR 80, a significant East/West access road, and SR 29 which is a major North/South transportation route.



LaBelle is at the crossroads of two major highways.

Downtown Plan

Plan Elements

Pedestrian Scale

A successful streetscape plan is based on creating places that are comfortable for people to walk, shop, play, and interact (i.e. pedestrian scale). All aspects of the master plan area are geared towards this goal. Street-level activity should be encouraged to include art, music, sidewalk cafes, retail sales and other similar attractions.



Existing Conditions on Fort Thompson Avenue show overhead power lines, narrow sidewalks, a lack of street furniture, and no discernable plantings or streetscaping. While cars presently park along the street, onstreet parking has not been formally designated.



Fort Thompson Avenue after the proposed streetscape improvements: street trees and landscaping have been added, sidewalks have been widened and improved, café seating has been added under covered walkways, and onstreet parking has been clearly designated along the sides of the streets.

Master Plan Elements:

- Pedestrian Scale
- Landscape
- Traffic Calming/Streets
- Circulation
- Parking
- Wayfinding/Signage
- Boundaries
- Lighting
- Street Furnishings
- Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design

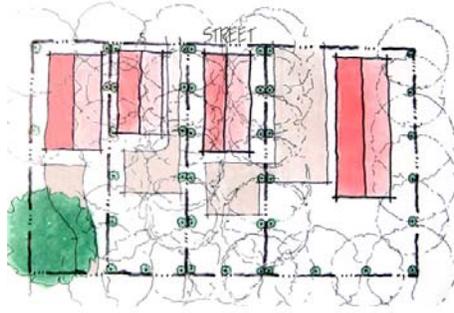
Landscape

As signified in its new logo, the City of LaBelle Walking District already has a well established tree canopy - mostly of oaks. Not only do these trees provide needed relief from the hot summer sun, they reinforce much of LaBelle's character and charm.

Landscape recommendations include:

- Add or maintain canopy trees minimum average 50 foot on-center spacing for Lee Street and Main Street
- Add canopy trees along Bridge Street
- Initiate a tree replanting program for Barron Park for future generations

The image to the right represents how trees would be planted under LaBelle's current landscape code. The current landscape code requires trees to be planted between properties for buffering, creating the potential for overcrowded vegetation.



By changing the landscape code to require plantings at appropriate spacing within lot interiors, overcrowding is eliminated, resulting in a mature canopy that reflects the plant's true habit, and minimizes conflicts with elements such as utility lines, sidewalks, and fences.



Glattig Jackson

Species Composition:

- Live oaks should be planted in lot interiors; however the location for placement should be based on site-specific conditions. Live Oaks should be the dominant species; however in cases where space may be limited, the use of Cabbage Palms, Crepe Myrtles and Native Holly trees may be a better alternative.
- Cypress, cabbage palm, crape myrtles and native holly trees should be planted in road right-of-ways or confined planting areas (avoid use of laurel oak, water oak and non-natives).

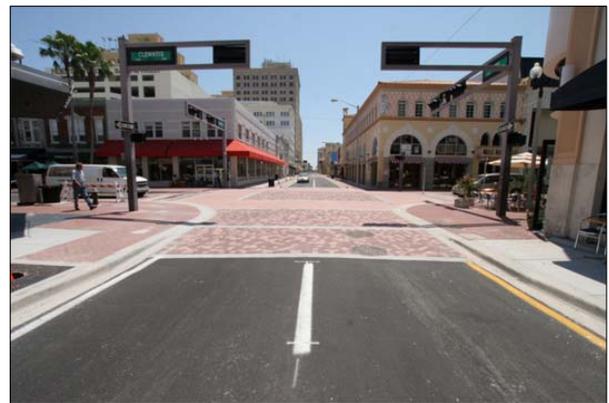
Invasive/ Nuisance Control:

- Strangler fig on oaks
- Brazilian pepper and invasive exotics on riverfront slopes

Traffic Calming/Streets

Although the future of Bridge Street and Main Street are less than certain due to the prospect that the current bridge may be redecked, or of the possibility that an additional bridge may be built over the Caloosahatchee River, every effort should be made to make these streets as friendly as possible to pedestrians in the interim. The City should work diligently with FDOT to slow the traffic on Bridge Street and to implement traffic calming measures.

Crosswalks should be delineated at all intersections. Stamped concrete or pavers, as well as elevating the grade of the road, should be considered at the intersections with Bridge Street. Traffic calming should start north of the bridge and continue through the downtown, with Park Avenue as the first intersection to be equipped with traffic calming measures.



Glattig Jackson

Raised intersections provide traffic calming and clearly identified pedestrian crossings

Circulation

Ensure the creation of a connected circulation system that allows travel by car, foot, or bicycle.

Parking

Public and private parking lots are not pedestrian friendly but are necessary features within a downtown area. They should be oriented away from the street. Build multiple, small parking areas rather than one large area so that parking becomes visually less obtrusive. Proposed and existing parking should be screened with vegetation including a low hedge and trees. This does not include on-street parking facilities.

Mechanical equipment and other visually intrusive uses should also be screened with streetscape elements such as trees, hedges, walls, or decorative fencing.

Wayfinding/Signage

The City logo could be modified to include,

Downtown Walking District. A special sign code should be considered for the Walking District to ensure a consistent theme and pedestrian scale.

Boundaries

Entrance features give a place dignity and significance by announcing the transition from one

type of place to another. Landscaping and signage, including banners, are the most efficient way to define boundaries. Up-lighting or festival lighting of the existing oaks can also add charm and vibrancy. Artwork, especially if it is crafted locally or has local meaning, can also be used to define a place. Appropriate materials are metal, stone, and brick. Inappropriate materials are split rail, treated or unpainted wood, chain link, plastic and wire.



Lighting in trees adds charm while also enhancing safety.

www.kimlighting.com



Lighting

The style, height and location of street lights are important to the appearance and function of the Walking District. Outdoor lighting should create and encourage a pedestrian friendly environment. Consistent well lit public spaces encourage usage and enhance safety. Except at intersections, lampposts should not exceed 15-feet in height. Banners or signage can be incorporated on the light posts to add interest and direction.

Street Furnishings

Benches, trash receptacles and newspaper kiosks should be placed at key locations to encourage activity in the Walking District.

Seating should be placed so that users face activity and can watch other people. Seasonal plantings and flower boxes (both publicly and privately maintained) add interest, color and a sense that the district is well cared for.

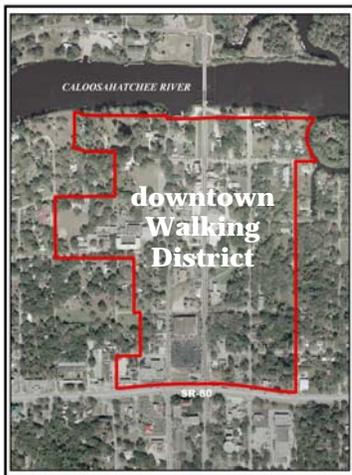


Keystone Ridge

Examples of street furniture including a bench and trash receptacle



Keystone Ridge



The concepts of CPTED include:

- Increasing natural surveillance
- Creating territorial reinforcement
- Involving the community

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)

Crime Prevention through Environmental Design is the process of incorporating security and safety into the planning and urban design process. The goal of this approach is to reduce the opportunity and the fear of predatory crime.

Where crime prevention focuses on restricting access to a crime target with barriers such as locks, alarms or fences, CPTED uses natural access control, surveillance and territorial reinforcement such as building design, signage, plantings and circulation control in addition to the mechanical strategies such as locks and alarms. CPTED also includes the use of organizational strategies such as community watch groups, guards or doormen.

The concepts of CPTED include:

- *Increasing natural surveillance* – This is achieved by promoting features that maximize visibility of people, parking areas, and building entrances. Examples include doors and windows that look out onto the street, front porches and adequate lighting.
- *Creating territorial reinforcement* – Physical design can create a sense of territorial control that discourages criminal

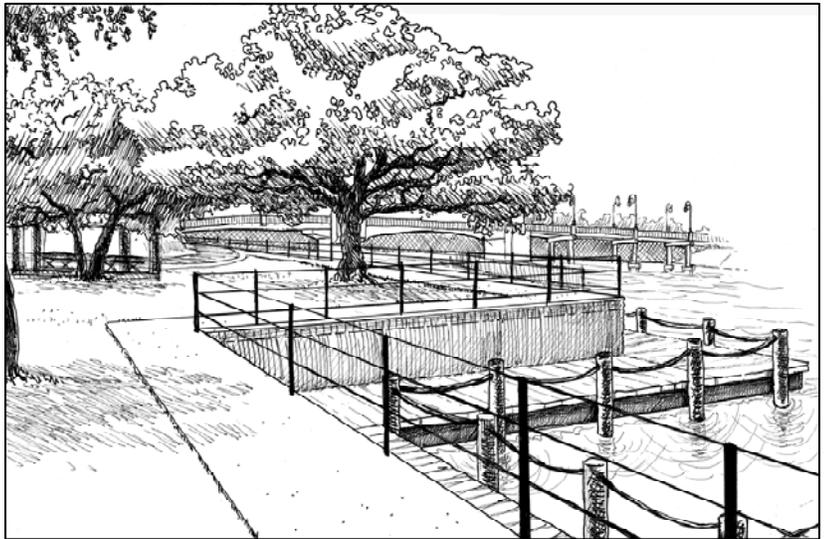
intentions. Features that define property lines and distinguish private space from public space such as landscape plantings, pavement design or gateway treatments are examples of territorial reinforcement.

- *Involving the community* – The creation of neighborhood watch groups or community organizations can dispel crime through the sense of ownership that these organizations establish. A community with a sense of pride and care discourages crime as neighbors get to know one another and can quickly identify something unusual or out of the ordinary.

Barron Park and Waterfront Master Plan

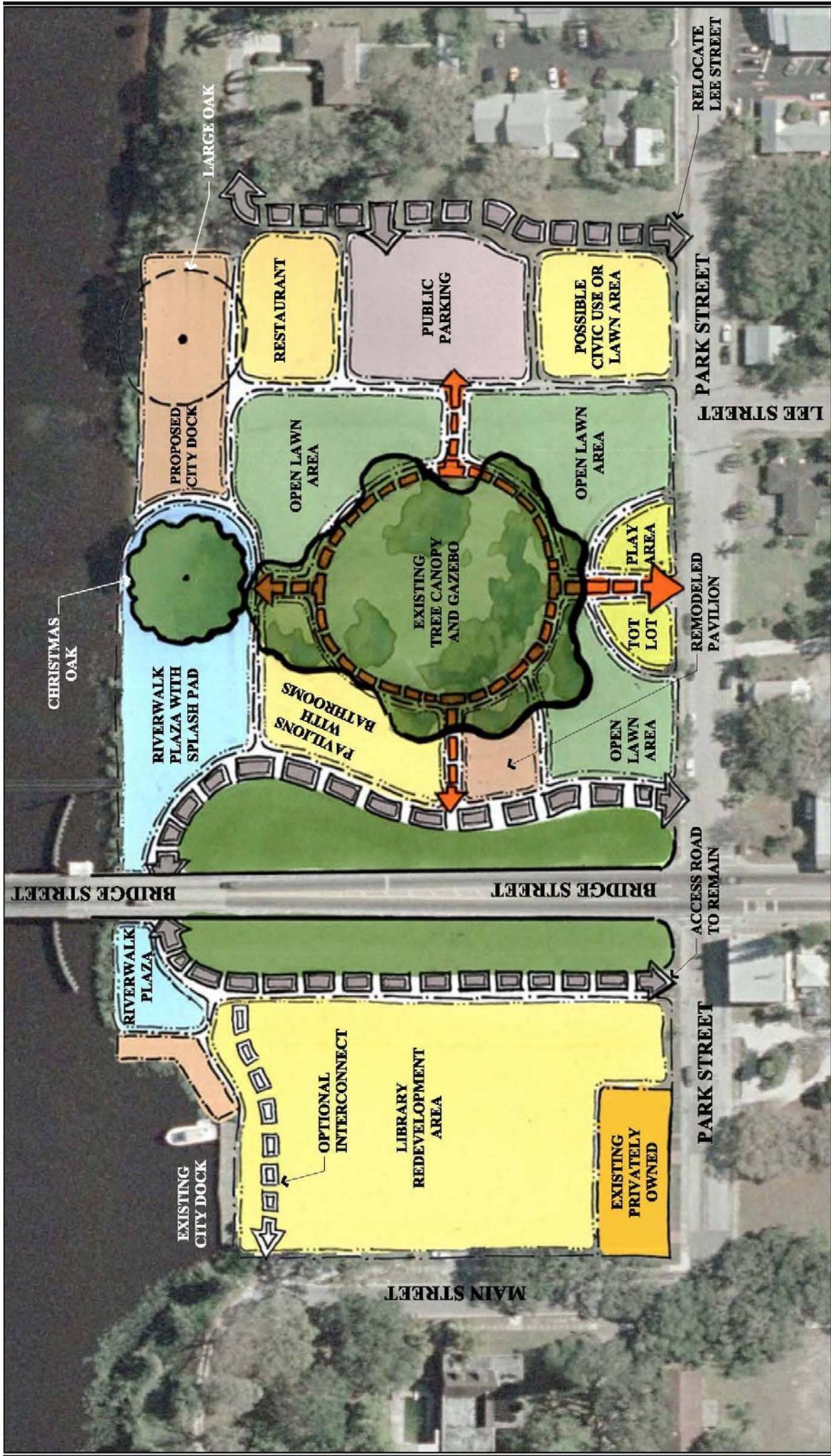
Based on public input from the workshop and information collected, the desired elements for the park are a splash pad, an amphitheater on the water, a restaurant or community center on the water, a larger and relocated docking facility, a tot lot, open lawns, a riverwalk, more pavilions, additional public parking, and the removal of Lee Street through the park. Keeping the existing Christmas oak is also a priority.

The image on the next page represents a composite plan compiled from public workshops and public participation.



The picture to the above right shows Barron Park and the riverfront as it presently appears. The following images depict the transformation of Barron Park with a proposed riverwalk and relocated dock feature in place.





Barron Park Composite Plan

Downtown LaBelle



Land Use Plan and Implementation

Downtown Walking District

The City's Comprehensive Plan has established a special Land Use category for the downtown area known as the Downtown LaBelle Walking District. Based on existing land use patterns, zoning and the culmination of information that has been obtained through these redevelopment planning efforts, this report suggests modifying the boundary area that is currently identified as the Downtown LaBelle Walking District to accomplish the following:

- Align the area's boundary edge with commercial and transitional land use patterns that currently exist;
- Reduce the size of the core for purposes of organization and implementation of the redevelopment efforts; and
- Maximize the redevelopment effort by concentrating both energy and funding toward developing a core downtown area as quickly as possible.

It is important to keep in mind that the boundary of the Downtown Walking District can be modified as needed over time. It will be less overwhelming to start small and enlarge the area in the future, if it becomes necessary.

Uses and Design Standards

The standards and other requirements that will be established for the Downtown Walking District should apply to all proposed development and new land uses, and to all properties located within the established Downtown Walking District. All development and new land uses should comply with the urban and use standards that apply to a specific site, unless otherwise noted.

The following three sub-areas will form the basis for developing regulations, including zoning, sign control, lighting, street design, and architectural design for Downtown LaBelle:

- 1) Waterfront/River
- 2) Town Core
- 3) Neighborhood Transition

There are three sub-areas that will make up the Downtown Walking District. These districts represent the varying level of intensity uses from the center core area of the downtown to its edges. The zoning regulations should be developed to address the progression of intensity of uses within the established District. The following three sub-areas will form the basis for developing regulations, including zoning, sign control, lighting, street design, and architectural design for Downtown LaBelle.

- 1) Waterfront/River
- 2) Town Core
- 3) Neighborhood Transition

Waterfront/River Overlay Area

This overlay area includes the parcels within the Downtown Walking District that are adjacent to the Caloosahatchee River. This overlay area should be considered the most public area of the downtown and should include parks, plazas, squares and civic uses that enhance views of and access to the River.



Great Designed Communities

Example of a waterfront that encourages interaction with the river, Waterfront/River Overlay Area



Downtown LaBelle Committee

Example Streetscape, Town Core Sub-Area

Neighborhood Transition Sub-Area
 This sub-area is less intense than the Town Core Sub-Area, but should still include uses such as civic, retail, office, lodging and residential. These smaller scaled, local uses form the core of neighborhood activities that serve the surrounding residential areas. Retail uses should be limited, with careful consideration for compatibility. Desired uses include attached housing, live/work units and housing above retail and office, mixed with single family development along the outer edges. This area serves as a transition between the more intense Town Core Sub-Area and the nearby single family residential neighborhoods lying outside of the Downtown Walking District. This area should encourage on-street parking and may also be appropriate for a public parking facility.



Downtown LaBelle Committee

Example Infill Housing, Neighborhood Transition Sub-Area

Town Core Sub-Area

This is the most intense location of the Downtown Walking District. It is the location for civic, retail, office, lodging and mixed use. This area should also encourage pedestrian circulation to reduce vehicular traffic. Public parking facilities should be considered in this area.

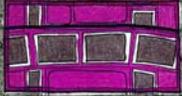
LEGEND



GATEWAY FEATURES
IDENTIFICATION SIGNAGE
AND TRAFFIC CALMING



TRAFFIC CALMING
FEATURES



SR 80 / SR 29 INTERFACE
TRAFFIC CALMING AND
GATEWAY TO DOWNTOWN



DOWNTOWN WALKING DISTRICT
"CORE" AREA



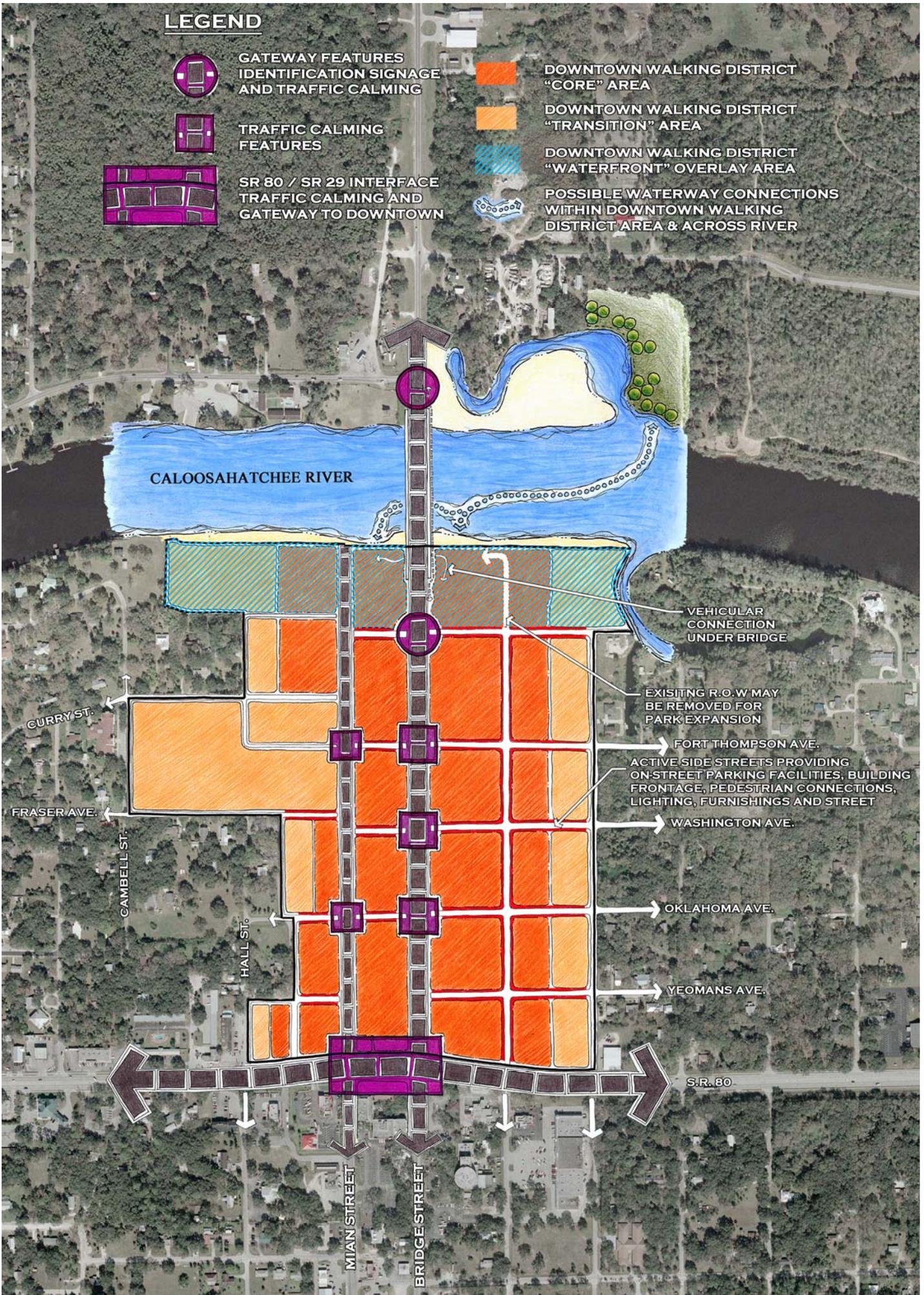
DOWNTOWN WALKING DISTRICT
"TRANSITION" AREA

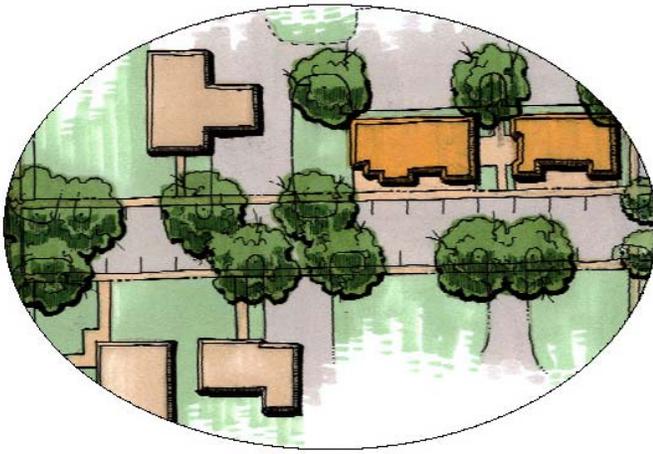


DOWNTOWN WALKING DISTRICT
"WATERFRONT" OVERLAY AREA

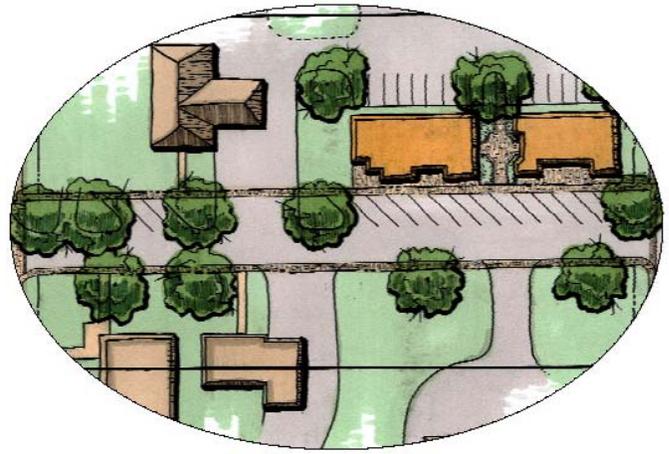


POSSIBLE WATERWAY CONNECTIONS
WITHIN DOWNTOWN WALKING
DISTRICT AREA & ACROSS RIVER





Proposed cross street improvements showing parallel onstreet parking and improvements to pedestrian corridors and connections.

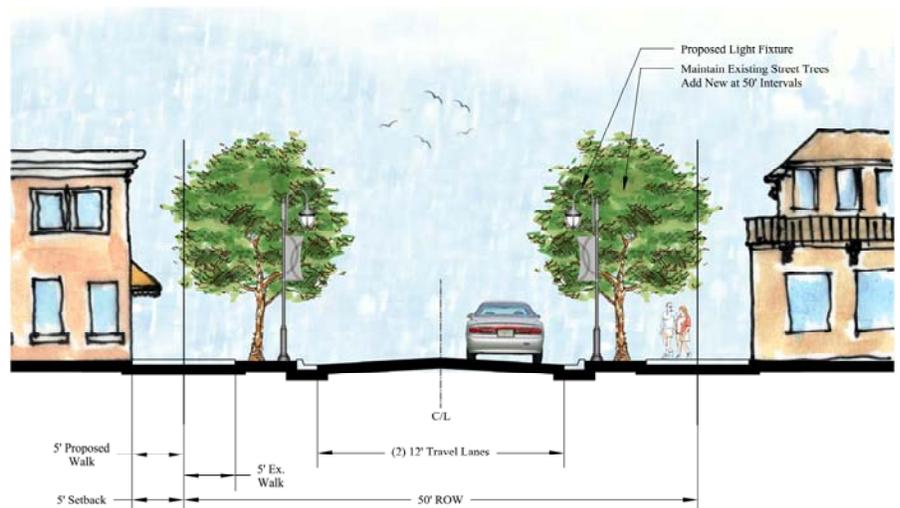


Proposed cross street improvements showing angled onstreet parking on one side, as well as improved pedestrian connections.

This typical cross-section for Bridge Street is a guideline for future development and redevelopment. Building setbacks will allow for wider sidewalks to accommodate more pedestrian activity, and will include landscaping, street furniture and lighting.

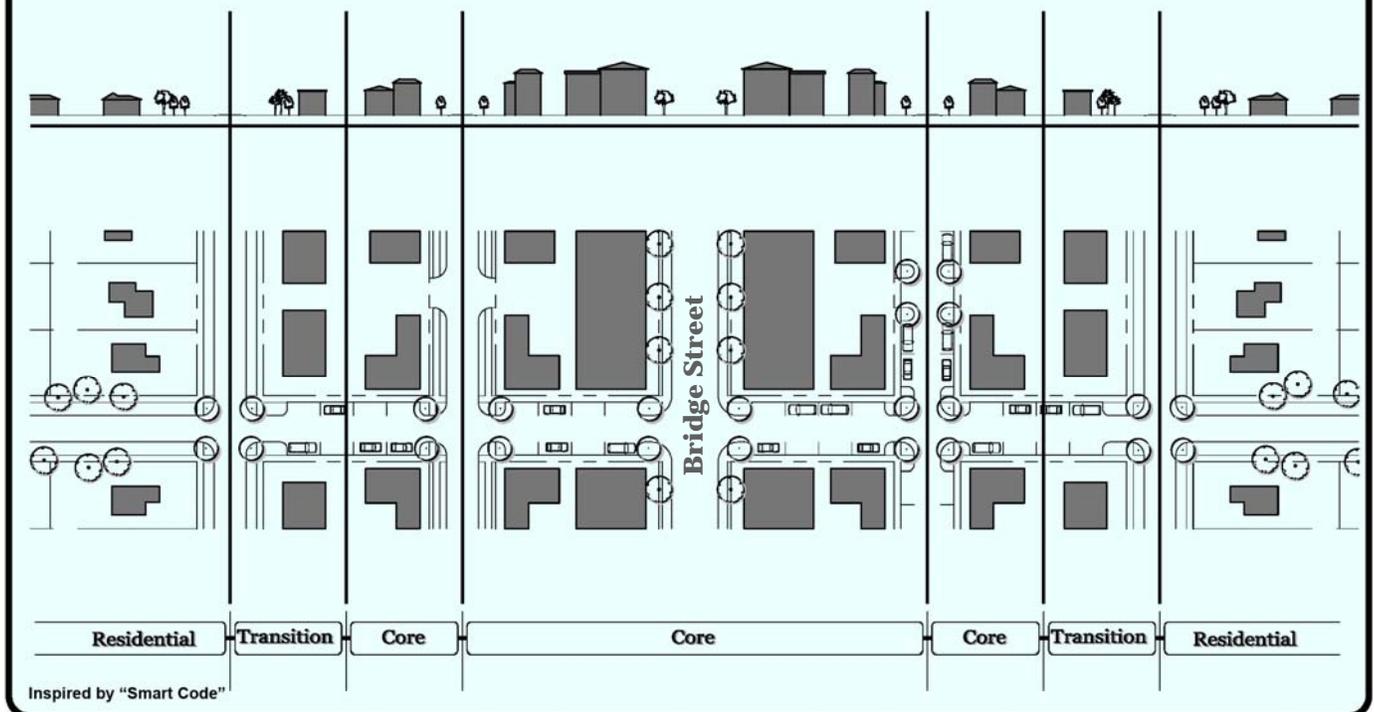


This typical cross-section for Main Street is much like the one for Bridge Street. It too will include setbacks to allow for wider sidewalks, landscape, street furniture and lighting.





LaBelle Walking District Transect



Other Elements of a Regulatory Code for the Downtown Walking District *Streetscape Design*

A successful streetscape helps create a unique identity for the downtown while providing opportunities for small businesses to become established. Downtown LaBelle is fortunate to have an existing network of streets that form a grid for redevelopment and provide short, walkable blocks. The existing right-of-way widths are adequate for accommodating two-way vehicular traffic, on-street parking, and sidewalks and in some cases, bicycle paths. The primary need for improvement to the existing area is in the renovation of sidewalks and on-street parking that incorporates elements of safety, protection from weather elements and encourages an overall pleasant experience for the business and consumer community.

A successful streetscape should include the following design elements:

- Street trees to help define the downtown area and provide shade and aesthetic appeal.
- Lighting at the pedestrian scale. For maximum effect with regard to illumination and safety, lampposts should be between 10 and 12 feet tall.
- Signage should be regulated to ensure architectural compatibility
- Open space such as pocket parks or sitting areas that are adjacent to the sidewalk, highly visible, provide shade and weather protection and offer a focal point, such as the proposed Veterans Memorial Park.
- Wayfinding mechanisms such as directional signs, special flags or banners;

- Adequate parking, particularly on-street parking that is regulated to encourage customer turnover while protecting the character of the area.
 - Limit on-street parking to two hours or less to encourage rapid turnover and provide quick parking for customers making short trips.
 - Parking lots accommodate long-term parking and should be located behind the main streets of downtown. If parking lots at the street are necessary, keep them small and continue the street wall by providing a vertical element such as an attractive fence or hedge.
 - Structured parking facilities are a better option than surface parking because they accommodate more vehicles and they continue the vertical street wall. Encourage the use of liner storefronts around their perimeter and/or residential uses on the upper floors.
- Pedestrian connections, including sidewalks, should be at least 5 feet wide. A network of walkways from rear parking areas that are well-lit and marked should be included.

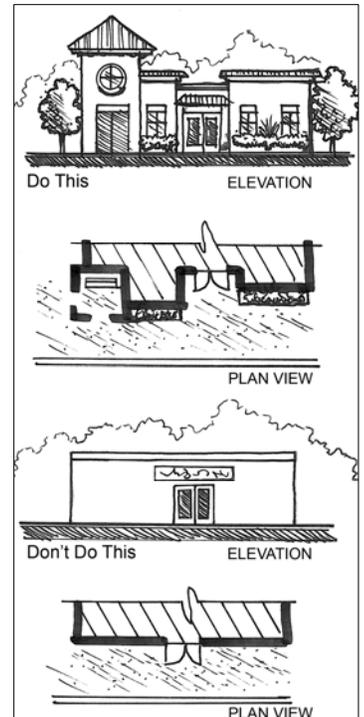
Architectural Guidelines

The existing commercial structures found throughout the downtown area are a mix of architectural styles. New construction in the Walking District should be required to:

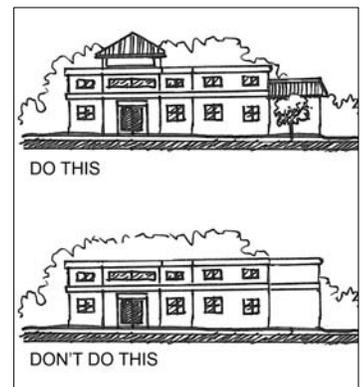
- Demonstrate consistency with the existing styles. This can include a more modern approach that is based on the fundamental elements of the existing architectural styles.
- Provide a maximum building height of three stories.
- Avoid large blank exterior walls. Building facades along a street frontage should be visually broken by

articulation divided into modules every 30 feet.

- Include special treatment to the primary building entrance. Recessed entries are encouraged to provide safe entry and exit, and will focus slower-moving pedestrian traffic off of sidewalks.
- Provide larger windows at street level with smaller windows at upper stories. Provide roof elevation changes to create visual interest.
- Encourage awnings and overhangs to provide shade and protection from rain showers. No portion of an awning or overhang should be lower than nine feet above grade.
- Awnings and overhangs should be at least three feet from the face of the street curb and should preferably be mounted to a building or alternatively supported by columns or posts.
- Avoid artificial building elements or add-ons that are not a true part of the architectural form of the buildings.



Derived from Lee County LDC



Derived from Lee County LDC

Lighting and Signage

Lighting

The placement and orientation of lighting is critical in creating an inviting and safe downtown environment. Downtown lighting should be:

- Architecturally integrated with building style, color and material.
- Controlled for lighting intensity to avoid light spillage and glare.
- Used to illuminate building entryways at the pedestrian scale.
- Used to illuminate portions of buildings to accentuate a feature.
- Provide for safety.

Signage

A wayfinding signage system is a vital part of the redevelopment effort for downtown. This signage should provide organized information in a user friendly format that includes both vehicular and pedestrian information. Wayfinding signage should direct pedestrians and motorists to downtown's cultural destinations, government buildings and public parking.

The wayfinding signage system should be aesthetically pleasing and reflect the character and identity of the community. The signage should incorporate a brand identity for the City that establishes its uniqueness as compared to other business signs of the downtown area.

A wayfinding signage system is an ideal short term implementation project that will quickly define the downtown as a special place in LaBelle.

General Signage

Signs are a secondary element to a building. The design of signage should fit within the downtown environment and should be used to enhance the qualities of building architecture. downtown signage should:

- Enhance the pedestrian character of the downtown by being at a pedestrian scale.
- Be individually styled to distinguish different business establishments, as well as architecturally appropriate.
- Relate to the architectural details of a building. The size of a sign should not destroy the continuity of the building. It should complement the building through material, shape and color.
- Only one projecting sign per business or storefront should be allowed.



Wayfinding Signage

Downtown LaBelle Committee

Landscape Codes

LaBelle is the City of Oaks and every effort should be made to sustain these trees as they form the basis for the unique character of the community.

The landscape codes for the Downtown Walking District should preserve and promote the aesthetic character and value of Downtown LaBelle. The landscape code can achieve this by:

- Defining, unifying and enhancing the public realm while at the same time offering cooling in the summer through filtered sunlight.
- Consist primarily of plant materials that are indigenous to the area, which can then be enhanced by other plant material that is similar in character and habitat to these indigenous materials.
- Through the use of plant material, street space should be defined to promote a safe environment for vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians and should be used to incorporate the concepts of CPTED.

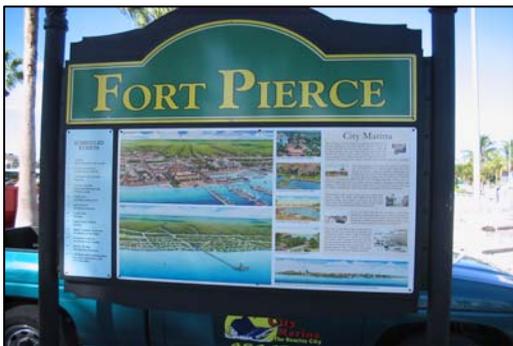
In addition to developing landscape codes that promote a safe and green environment for the downtown, the City should implement an historical oak replacement program to address the declining health of existing trees. This program can be based on a master replacement program that identifies current inventory, health, replacement location and a schedule for replacement or supplementation of the existing trees.

Impact Projects / Activities

To seize the momentum, it is important that a short-term project be undertaken. The following are a list of possible impact projects or actions.

Establishment of Implementation Committee

The City of LaBelle should form an Implementation Committee that would assist in maintaining focus and energy in the downtown redevelopment process. This Committee would be appointed by the Mayor and City Commission and have support of City Staff. The Committee should help the Mayor and Commission to organize and implement the goals and objectives of the plan. The Committee should coordinate with the Hendry County Economic Development Council and



Informational kiosks should be used to convey the theme and history of downtown

the Greater LaBelle Chamber of Commerce. The primary task of the Implementation Committee should be to make a recommendation regarding a CRA.

Promote a Theme

Impact Projects:

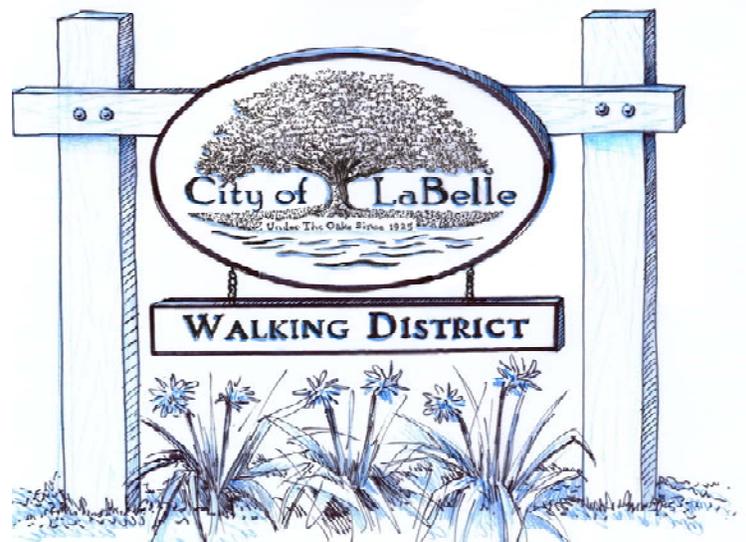
- Establish an Oversight Committee
- Promote a Theme
- Tie Yesterday to Today
- Preserve Downtown Character
- Create a Logo
- Obtain Professional Assistance
- Establish a Pilot Program
- Organize Community Gatherings

In order to better promote Downtown LaBelle as a separate and unique place, a theme should be developed. As Clewiston calls itself the “Sweetest City” or Downtown Fort Myers is known as the “River District”, LaBelle should develop a theme for their downtown area that sets it apart from the rest of the city. A leading concept would be to refer to this area as the “Walking District.”

Tie Yesterday to Today

It is important to acknowledge LaBelle’s past and

to preserve its historical context and places. Historical markers or kiosks that include historical photographs and a written history should be placed in key locations. The first location can be in the park overlooking the Caloosahatchee River.



Preserve Downtown Character

To preserve the character of the downtown, our intention is to respect the built environment while improving and enhancing the hardscape and landscape of this area. This can be accomplished by creating development standards for Downtown LaBelle that will encourage development that is consistent with what is currently there.

Development of Downtown Logo

While the City of LaBelle has a newly established logo, it is believed that the downtown area should create a slightly modified version; something that sets it apart as a distinctly special, and separate district from the rest of the city.

Obtain Professional Marketing Assistance

It is recommended that LaBelle obtain professional marketing assistance to help implement the vision.



Sidewalk Improvements

Downtown LaBelle Committee

Kick Off Projects

A list of “kick off” projects has been created to get the ball rolling and to continue the momentum created by the visioning process. These

projects are to establish a pilot streetscape program, create identification and signage that sets the downtown apart as a special place, create a veterans’ memorial park, and implement the wharf grant.



Street Beautification

Downtown LaBelle Committee

Establish Pilot Streetscape Program

As a result of the Transportation Workshop held

in January of 2008, it is believed that LaBelle can establish a pilot streetscape project. The city should pick an east/west side street location in Downtown LaBelle in which to apply all streetscape designs and improvement recommendations. In this location, streetlights, landscaping, seating and everything that the city wishes to incorporate into its streetscape design would be employed. The purpose of this program is to create not only a sense of moving forward with the downtown revitalization efforts, but to create in one place, that special look desired for downtown.

The completion of this project will facilitate the desire to move on to another street, and so on, and will allow improvement efforts to be approached in a more cost-effective manner. It is thought that the best way in which to employ this program is to start at a prominent location either on the north or south end of the downtown core. When this area is complete, another street can be chosen along the opposite end of the downtown core. This same process would continue, working toward the center of downtown until the entire area is complete.



Seating Encourages Street Activity

Downtown LaBelle Committee

Identification/Signage

As mentioned previously, with the establishment of a separate logo, and as a part of the effort to give the downtown core its own identity, it is recommended that signage with a unique character and design be developed for wayfinding and for markers within this area.



Special gateway features establish the entrance to the downtown

Downtown LaBelle Committee



Veterans Memorial Park

A veteran’s memorial park has been designed for a parcel on the corner of SR 80 and Main Street, in front of the U-Save Grocery Store.

Not only will this park honor the memories of those who have lost their lives while defending our country, it will also serve as both additional open space for the City of LaBelle and as a gateway feature into the downtown area. Monuments to commemorate each significant war fought and the LaBelle citizens who fought in them, as well as landscaping, benches and a reflection pool have been included in the design.

Implementation of Wharf Grant

LaBelle has been awarded a grant to upgrade and improve their dock and wharf area.



Implementation of this grant in coordination with the park plan would allow this feature to easily tie into the overall park concept and design.

Establishment of Periodic Community Gatherings

To promote the revitalization of the downtown area, a schedule of community gatherings and events should be developed so that events are offered at regular intervals.

Not only will such gatherings strengthen community ties, they will also create an attraction and a reason to go downtown. Hopefully, as word gets out, people from all around the area as well as tourists will come to Downtown LaBelle to enjoy the restaurants and shops in addition to these events.

Farmer’s Market

One idea to bring life and activity to the downtown area of LaBelle is to create a farmers’ market.



Not only would this create an additional draw to the downtown area, this activity would also give area farmers and local growers a chance to showcase their goods.

Arts and Crafts Fairs

Other types of event that will draw people into Downtown LaBelle are arts and craft fairs. Specific streets can be blocked off between Bridge Street and Main Street so that passersby will see the event and will want to stop and browse. Arts and craft fairs will also bring culture into downtown. Local shops and vendors can plan for these events, and offer to set up booths or opt to stay open later.

River-Based Entertainment

River-based entertainment, such as fishing contests, water ski shows or boat shows would also encourage people to come downtown.



Cardboard Boat Races

www.braddockheritage.org

Car and Motorcycle Clubs

Area car and motorcycle clubs would attract interest from local enthusiasts by holding shows in Downtown LaBelle.



www.SwampCabbageFestival.org

Bikers meet at the Swamp Cabbage Festival



www.SwampCabbageFestival.org

Live Entertainment at Barron Park

Concerts

An excellent way to bring people into the downtown is to offer music in the park or a concert series featuring local and regional bands and talent.

Encourage Local Participation and Talent

Encouraging local talent strengthens community bonds and allows local artists and musicians to let their talents be known. Talent shows or plays could be a means for good entertainment and a way for the community to come together in a fun and light-hearted environment.

Concurrent Projects / Activities

Strong sustainable partnerships between public and private resources are the foundation upon which effective revitalization will thrive.

Facade Improvements

Building facade improvements are an important ingredient in the revitalization of the downtown. A facade improvement program should be initiated to encourage

- Design
- Organize
- Promote
- Invest

private property owners to rehabilitate and enhance their buildings. One option is to seek funding from a grant program whereby private owners petition for funds to make

improvements. If grant funds are unavailable, assistance can be sought from local financial institutions to pool resources for a low interest revolving loan fund. A successful loan fund program should include the following elements:

- Participation by local lenders;
- Establishment of clear and concise guidelines for project eligibility;
- Availability of “sketch designs” to show property owners and tenants how they can make attractive facade improvements at modest costs, including technical assistance on cost estimates; and
- Intensive promotion of the program by the City.

Coordination with FDOT

The City of LaBelle should continue to work with the FDOT and their consultant regarding the SR 29 PD&E, which will determine the

alignment of SR 29 and the Bridge. This effort should be coordinated with Hendry County.



Public, private, partnerships (P3) should also be sought to enhance the City’s position with FDOT with regard to design

and the timing of improvements.

Phased Streetscape Improvement Program

The City of LaBelle should adopt a phase program for streetscape improvements. If funds allow, an initial effort should include a pilot streetscape project whereby an east/west street is chosen to make landscape, signage and parking improvements. Other efforts, including unified signage and landscaping, should be sought at the onset to help set the stage and create energy and participation.



Conceptual Streetscape

Comprehensive Plan and Ordinance Amendments

The City of LaBelle should amend its Comprehensive Plan to implement this Downtown Plan. Specific items relate to redefining the Walking District and adopting codes that implement the Master Plan.

Seek Funding Mechanisms

The City should seek funding at all levels and from all sources in order to implement the Downtown Plan.

Ongoing Marketing / Promotion

Promoting the downtown will be as important as the improvements or programs themselves. The promotion should emphasize the elements of downtown that make it the special place, such as walkability, riverfront recreation, history and culture.



*LaBelle Chamber of Commerce and
Hendry County Economic Development Council*

Although every effort should be made to bring in as many existing organizations as possible, such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Development Council, these efforts will need to be centrally managed to maximize their effectiveness and continuity. The Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) is the typical organization that has been used to manage these types of activities.

Options for Organizational Setup

Upon adoption of the Downtown Plan, it will be important for the City to make a concerted effort to keep the community engaged and to build excitement for the revitalization efforts. It is the responsibility of the City (both staff and elected officials) to provide the leadership and support that will be necessary to take the

Plan from a vision to reality. Private sector leaders will also play an important role in the redevelopment efforts, but the City needs to take the lead.



There are several options that the City can consider for organization of a downtown entity that will manage, monitor and promote the ongoing redevelopment efforts. A discussion of these options follows.

Downtown Business Association (DBA)

A Downtown Business Association is an association created, managed, and sometimes funded by a group of downtown merchants, restaurants, and other interested businesses. The DBA is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to supporting and promoting commerce and events downtown and can serve as a political advocate, striving to maintain open communication with city government and community organizations. The goal of this association is to raise

recognition to the wide variety of commerce opportunities that the downtown has to offer. The association provides marketing and support, and coordinates and plans festivals and holiday events through collaboration. A DBA is typically staffed with volunteers that represent the downtown community.

Main Street

The National Trust Main Street Program is a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The purpose of this program is to assist in the restoration of downtowns and neighborhood business districts. The program is an effort in combining historic preservation of traditional business districts with programming for economic development. Efforts are focused at the grassroots level, requiring community dedication and organization as the basis of its success.

The goal of the Main Street program is to provide revitalization strategies to keep the heart of the community healthy through preservation of its historic buildings, revitalization of its commercial core and preserving the sense of place and community life in the downtown.

Community Foundation

Community Foundations are tax-exempt charities that share the common interest of improving quality of life in their area. Individuals, families, businesses and organizations create charitable funds that help the downtown meet the challenges of change. The foundation invests and administers funds.

Community Foundations are overseen by a voluntary board made up of community leaders and professionals that offer various types of expertise in identifying community needs, and share the common interest of improving their community.



Downtown Committee

A downtown committee serves as an advisory group to the City Commission. These committees are made up of members of the community that represent the interests of the downtown redevelopment area. A downtown committee suggests programs, projects and policies to encourage economic development. Its responsibilities include making policy recommendations related to downtown, business outreach efforts, encouragement of and recommendations for downtown economic development.

Community Redevelopment Area (CRA)

A final organizational effort for consideration in initiating the revitalization efforts of downtown is the establishment of a Community Redevelopment Area.

The establishment of a CRA will have the potential of immediately opening opportunities for funding, organization and management support.

Create a Community Redevelopment Agency

By state law, the Community Redevelopment Area must be managed by a Community Redevelopment Agency. The governing body has three options for establishing this Agency. The governing body may:

1. Appoint a board from the community to serve as the Agency;
2. Appoint a pre-existing body as the Agency, or
3. Appoint itself as the Agency.

Because of the high level of community involvement in the downtown redevelopment effort to date, it is recommended that the City Commission appoint an Advisory Board that consists of members from the community. There is clearly a level of commitment within the community and this delegation of community leaders will help sustain the momentum for the redevelopment effort.

The Advisory Board should be comprised of 5-7 members that include a combination of City Commissioners, stakeholders, civic and private sector leaders. City staff's primary function with the Agency is to administer and coordinate the redevelopment program. Staff will carry out the policies and advise the Agency and Advisory Board with policy options and constraints. Staff should also assist in seeking out grant funding and provide any needed inter-agency coordination.

Civic leaders bring corporate history to the Agency and play a vital role in the strategic planning process. Civic leaders provide involvement through public outreach. It is important to keep in mind that a vibrant downtown will bring positive change to the entire LaBelle community. Civic leaders play a critical role in "spreading the word".

Private property owners, developers and tenants are also critical to the success of the City's redevelopment effort. The private sector brings entrepreneurial spirit and vision to the process. The involvement of local banks can provide funding opportunities for private development.

It is essential that the downtown merchants support the redevelopment efforts of the community and work with the Agency to improve, maintain and promote the Redevelopment Area. The City of LaBelle and its civic and private associations can bring improvements to downtown such as street and sidewalk renovation, but without the cooperation and support of the downtown

business owners, economic success will be severely hindered.

Powers of the Community Redevelopment Agency

Florida Statute 163.358 delegates powers to the Community Redevelopment Agency such as identifying slum or blighted areas, authorizing issuance of revenue bonds or approving acquisition, demolition or disposal of property.

Florida Statute 163.340 of The Community Redevelopment Act defines “slum area” as:

“an area having physical or economic conditions conducive to disease, infant mortality, juvenile delinquency, poverty, or crime because there is a predominance of buildings or improvements, whether residential or nonresidential, which are impaired by reason of dilapidation, deterioration, age, or obsolescence, and exhibiting one or more of the following factors:

- a) Inadequate provision for ventilation, light, air, sanitation, or open spaces;
- b) High density of population, compared to the population density of adjacent areas within the county or municipality; and overcrowding, as indicated by government-maintained statistics or other studies and the requirements of the Florida Building Code; or
- c) The existence of conditions that endanger life or property by fire or other causes.”

This statute also defines “blighted area” is defined as:

- 1) “an area in which there are a substantial number of deteriorated, or deteriorating structures, in which conditions, as indicated by government-maintained statistics or other studies, are leading to economic distress or endanger life or property,

and in which two or more of the following factors are present:

- a. Predominance of defective or inadequate street layout, parking facilities, roadways, bridges, or public transportation facilities;
- b. Aggregate assessed values of real property in the area for ad valorem tax purposes have failed to show any appreciable increase over the 5 years prior to the finding of such conditions;
- c. Faulty lot layout in relation to size, adequacy, accessibility, or usefulness;
- d. Unsanitary or unsafe conditions;
- e. Deterioration of site or other improvements;
- f. Inadequate and outdated building density patterns;
- g. Falling lease rates per square foot of office, commercial, or industrial space compared to the remainder of the county or municipality;
- h. Tax or special assessment delinquency exceeding the fair value of the land;
- i. Residential and commercial vacancy rates higher in the area than in the remainder of the county or municipality;
- j. Incidence of crime in the area higher than in the remainder of the county or municipality;
- k. Fire and emergency medical service calls to the area proportionately higher than in the remainder of the county or municipality;
- l. A greater number of violations of the Florida Building Code in the area than the number of violations recorded in the remainder of the county or municipality;

- m. Diversity of ownership or defective or unusual conditions of title which prevent the free alienability of land within the deteriorated or hazardous area; or
 - n. Governmentally owned property with adverse environmental conditions caused by a public or private entity”; or
- 2) “Any area in which at least one of the factors identified in paragraphs (a) through (n) are present and all taxing authorities subject to 163.387(2)(a) agree, either by interlocal agreement or agreements with the agency or by resolution, that the area is blighted. Such agreement or resolution shall only determine that the area is blighted. For purposes of qualifying for the tax credits authorized in chapter 220, "blighted area" means an area as defined in this subsection.”

In 2006, the Community Redevelopment Act (163.370, F.S.) was amended so that the Community Redevelopment Agency can no longer exercise the power of eminent domain to rehabilitate blighted or slum areas. Chapter 73, Florida Statutes, was also amended, stating that the taking of private property for the elimination of a nuisance or a slum or blight condition does not satisfy the “public purpose” requirement of the Florida Constitution.

The coordinating functions of the CRA that will enable the Agency to exercise these powers include program elements such as tax increment financing (TIF’s), grants and loans, public/private partnerships (P3’s), requests for proposals (RFP’s), land exchanges, development review, marketing, retaining expertise as needed, and implementing, monitoring and amending the Redevelopment Plan.

Funding the Community Redevelopment Agency

Redevelopment program funding and accounting is administered through a Redevelopment Trust Fund, created by an ordinance by the City Commission. The trust fund provides for the collection of tax increment revenues to finance capital improvements. The trust fund can also be used as collateral for loans, leverage for grants, operating capital or in general, to accomplish the needs of the Plan that require capital input.

Tax increment funds cannot be collected or spent until the trust fund is established. The trust fund is funded by no less than 50% and no more than 95% of the ad valorem incremental taxes within the community redevelopment area. Once a year, the taxing authority appropriates the incremental revenues to the fund.



Establish a Redevelopment Plan

Once an Agency and the CRA are established, the Agency must prepare a community redevelopment plan. The development of the plan is subject to specific regulations and procedures that are outlined in the Community Redevelopment Act.

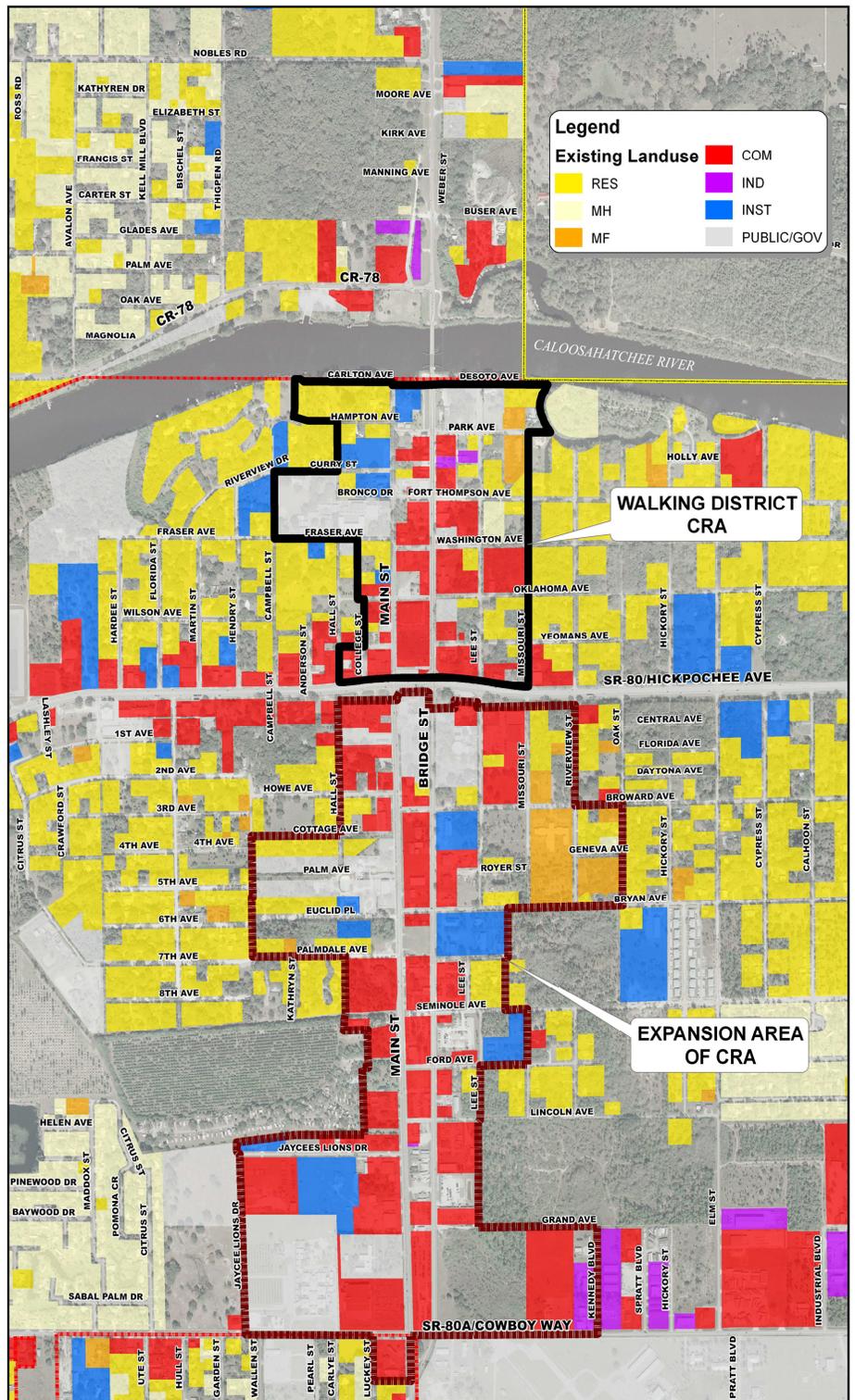
This report and its associated analysis and community input provide the basis for establishing a formal Redevelopment Plan, as required by state statute. However, further review of the required contents of the redevelopment plan will be needed to ensure compliance.

Tax increment financing is the primary tool used by a Community Redevelopment Agency to generate revenue for improvements. Therefore, analysis of the boundaries of the CRA should be carefully evaluated. The larger the redevelopment area, the greater potential there is for generating revenue. However, consideration should be given in determining appropriate boundaries to be included as a part of the CRA. Tax increment financing is not the only mechanism that can generate funding and may not accumulate quickly enough to allow for implementation of significant Plan actions.

The redevelopment map for LaBelle shows two boundary alternatives for the CRA. The first focuses on limiting the CRA to include that area of LaBelle considered the Walking District. This area reflects the focus area intended for redevelopment and represents approximately 102 acres. The second exhibit expands the CRA to the south, to include land between Bridge Street and Main Street, south of State Road 80, terminating at Cowboy Way. This area is comprised of approximately 207 acres, providing for a potential redevelopment area of approximately 309 acres.

While an increase in geographical area of the CRA can be beneficial in terms of potential revenue, there are other considerations that should be evaluated in the

process of establishing the CRA boundary to maximize the effort involved in the redevelopment process.



Redevelopment map showing existing land use, with primary CRA and secondary CRA overlay.

The boundary of the CRA should be carefully crafted to avoid diluting the resources of the CRA. Including portions of the community where there is no interest in redevelopment or which include a majority of property owners that oppose a CRA is not in the best interest of the redevelopment effort. Also, keep in mind that CRA boundaries can be expanded by future amendment.

The redevelopment plan must conform to the City's Comprehensive Plan and must contain a legal description of the CRA boundary, a map of the CRA, and must identify the structures, housing and infrastructure that are part of the CRA. Much of the required research and analysis has been completed through this study, including a master plan, which can be used to finalize the requirements of the redevelopment plan.

Other Types of Funding

The CRA can be used as the organizational tool for implementing other types of funding methods. For example, it is not uncommon for local governments to finance capital improvements, authorized by the redevelopment plan, through revenue bonds. The Agency is authorized to issue such bonds. Under the Redevelopment Act, these bonds are not construed as debt within any constitutional or statutory debt limitation, which means that the bonds are exempt from local ordinances or charters that require referenda on local debt. The issuance of these bonds is declared for an essential public purpose and is therefore exempt from all state taxes except corporate income tax. The bond debt is payable from tax increment revenues and must mature within 40 years of the fiscal year in which the revenues were deposited into the trust fund.

Given these broad powers over the right to collect and spend tax increment revenue, the CRA, its plan and bond issuance have often been subject to challenge by local citizens, governments and the state. The need for careful documentation of each step of the

CRA process and strict adherence to the requirements of the Community Redevelopment Act is especially critical.

Amending the Redevelopment Plan

The redevelopment plan may be amended to address changing needs of the community. The amendment process can be used to establish a phasing program of an existing plan or it can be used to adopt an entirely new CRA when the goals of the existing CRA have been achieved. If the City of LaBelle chooses to limit the initial redevelopment area to the Walking District, the amendment process could be used later to expand this area south as previously discussed in this section. Amending the plan requires a recommendation by the Community Redevelopment Agency and a public hearing by the City Commission.

In summary, the establishment of a Community Redevelopment Area for Downtown LaBelle can provide opportunity to restore, enhance and redevelop the heart of the City. If properly established, the CRA can gain tax increment revenues and grants from the state for capital improvements. Just as important, the establishment of a CRA can bring community interests together, creating a vision and the commitment for a successful downtown. To avoid legal challenge, the redevelopment effort should always include adequate information to support the findings of necessity for establishing the redevelopment area, including data and analysis.

Sources:
Florida Statute 163
Oregon Downtown Development Association
University of Florida, Levin College of Law, Center for Governmental Responsibility
Florida Redevelopment Association, Carol Westmoreland.

Funding and Programming Sources



use for CDBG funds, the program is also an important catalyst for economic development activities. This program is targeted

Organization is the key to a successful downtown revitalization program. A strong, viable organization provides the stability to build and maintain a long-term effort. Developing a management program that is well-structured, well-funded and committed to the future is the only way to make revitalization last. There are several possible funding mechanisms that can assist in supporting the redevelopment effort. This section outlines some of the more prominent programs. Funding for public projects is a dynamic process that needs a systematic approach to ensure every opportunity is evaluated. LaBelle has done a good job seeking funding of important

primarily for low and moderate income persons.

Through this federal program, the government has established the State Administered CDBG, which allows each state to administer CDBG funds to rural cities and towns of less than 50,000 people and rural counties of less than 200,000 people. The Florida legislature decides how these funds will be allocated, and the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) makes all of the grant decisions. Currently, the legislature has allocated funding as follows:

- 20% Housing
- 40% Neighborhood Revitalization
- 10% Commercial Revitalization
- 30% Economic Development

Local governments have the responsibility to consider local needs, prepare grant applications and carry out the funded community activities. These funds can be used for projects such as acquisition of property for public purpose, construction or reconstruction of infrastructure, planning activities, and assistance to nonprofit or for profit entities that are carrying out redevelopment activities. The primary criteria for projects under this funding mechanism is that they must benefit low to moderate income individuals, prevent or eliminate slums, blight or deteriorating conditions, or meet other urgent community development needs. LaBelle has taken advantage of this program and should continue to do so in the future.

The Downtown Redevelopment Plan should be implemented through the establishment of downtown goals, objectives, policies and design guidelines, public strategies, private incentives and capital improvements.

projects and this effort should continue.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)

The Community Development Block Grant program is a federally funded grant program designed to help communities provide decent housing and suitable living environments by expanding economic opportunities. While rehabilitation of housing has been the largest

Front Porch Florida Initiative

The Front Porch Florida Initiative was created to assist in the revitalization of underserved communities, where residents are dedicated to making their community a better place to live. This program is managed through the Office of Urban Opportunity within the Florida Department of Community Affairs and provides education and technical assistance to implement projects that will make long-term changes to a community. This program provides grant opportunities through the “Small Matching” Historic Preservation Grant. This grant program assists in the identification, excavation, protection and rehabilitation of historic and archaeological sites with an emphasis on encouraging historic preservation in smaller cities. These grants are issued through the Florida Main Street Program.

The maximum grant amount is \$50,000, however most grant awards range from \$5,000 to \$25,000. As an Area of Rural Economic Concern, the City of LaBelle is eligible to receive a complete waiver of the match requirements.

It is our understanding that at this time, there is no funding available through this program. However, it is important to be aware of the program as funding may become available again in the future.

Florida Department of Environmental Protection

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection administers grants to local governments through the Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program (FRDAP) and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). These are competitive programs which provide grants for acquisition or development of land for public outdoor recreation. All county governments and municipalities in Florida with the legal

responsibility to provide for public outdoor recreational sites and facilities are eligible for this grant program.

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

The City of LaBelle has been awarded a grant from the FWC for a Florida Boating Improvement Program (FBIP) for the Barron Park Warf Project. Grant opportunities related to the waterfront should continue to be pursued.

The City of LaBelle would be considered a Rural Enterprise Zone.

Florida Enterprise Zone

An Enterprise Zone is a specific geographic area that is targeted for economic revitalization.

These zones encourage investment by offering tax advantages and incentives to businesses that are located, or are considering locating, within the boundaries of an Enterprise Zone. The Florida Governor’s Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development is the administrator of this program. The Enterprise Zone Agency will assign a local coordinator that maintains the daily operation of the zone.

Enterprise Zones are designed to accommodate both rural and urban areas. Because the types of businesses that might be attracted and retained in rural areas are different than in urban areas, Rural Enterprise Zones are given different tax credits through various incentives.

As a municipality located in a county with a population less than 75,000 and a designation as a Rural Area of Economic Concern, the City of LaBelle would be considered a Rural Enterprise Zone.

Enterprise Zone programs operate at both the state and federal levels, with each state and the federal government having its own set of

incentives to offer. The program provides funding to the Zone for a period of up to ten years.

Small Business Administration/ Florida Heartland Regional Economic Development Initiative (FHREDI)

The Florida Heartland Rural Economic Development Initiative functions under the umbrella of an Enterprise Zone. This program offers the following assistance:

- Customized work force training
- Demographic and market analysis
- Infrastructure funding
- Financial and tax abatement programs
- Regional coordination for relocation

The Heartland program for Hendry County and municipalities therein is hosted by the University of South Florida Small Business Development Center. This agency provides free counseling and business training seminars for current and potential entrepreneurs.

Below are some examples of incentives that are available for communities in a Rural Enterprise Zone:

- Jobs Tax Credit (Sales Tax) – allow a business to take a sales and use tax credit for 30-45 percent of wages paid to new employees who live within a rural county.
- Jobs Tax Credit (Corporate Income Tax) – allows a business to take a corporate income tax credit for 15-20 percent of wages paid to new employees who reside within an Enterprise Zone.
- Building Materials Sales Tax Refund – available for taxes paid on the purchase of building materials used to rehabilitate property within an Enterprise Zone.

- Property Tax Credit – New or expanded businesses within an Enterprise Zone are allowed a credit against Florida income tax equal to 96% of ad valorem taxes paid on such property.

National Trust Main Street Program

The Main Street Program is based on a four-step strategy that is a combined approach of design, economic restructuring, promotion and organization to ensure that all of the redevelopment area needs are addressed. This

A four-step strategy that is a combined approach of design, economic restructuring, promotion and organization...

approach is incremental – it is not designed to produce immediate change, but rather gradual, planned change, that takes into consideration all aspects of a successful redevelopment effort. Long-term dedication by the community is critical to the success of this program. In order to be eligible for the Main Street Program, a full-time staff person to oversee the redevelopment efforts is required.

Through the National Trust Preservation Fund, funding is available to assist with the restoration of historic buildings and homes. The preservation funds provide two types of assistance, matching funds and intervention funds. The matching funds are awarded annually in three competitive grant rounds and may be used to obtain professional assistance in disciplines such as architecture, engineering, fund raising and organizational development. The intervention funds are awarded to non-profit or public agencies in emergency situations. Each year, more than 200 grants are issued totaling more than \$650,000. Grants range from \$500 to \$5,000.

Special Assessment Districts (SAD)

A Special Assessment District is a specific geographic area that can be designated for government to assess a special charge to assist with certain public projects. A Special Assessment can only be levied against parcels of real estate that have been identified as having received direct benefit from the public project. Typical public improvements associated with Special Assessment Districts are street lighting, sidewalk construction, road paving and infrastructure such as sanitary sewer, water mains and storm drains. The SAD can be established by resolution passed by the local government or it may be initiated at the request of certain property owners that would be included in the district.

The distribution of project costs can be accomplished by two methods; the Unit Cost Method and the Front Foot Method.

The Unit Cost Method distributes the assessment of the project cost equally between each property within the SAD. With the Front Foot Method, the assessment per property is determined by the amount of road frontage or side yard exposure that a property has along a right-of-way.

Tax Increment Financing (TIF)

The Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is a method to pay for redevelopment of a slum or blighted area through increased ad valorem tax revenue resulting from that redevelopment. The dollar value of all real property within the redevelopment area is determined as a fixed rate and is then “frozen”. The taxing authority continues to receive property tax based on the frozen value, however as property value increases, the additional revenues, above and beyond the frozen rate are deposited into a CRA trust fund and are dedicated to the redevelopment area. These funds can be used immediately or can

be saved for a particular project, or they can be bonded to maximize the funds that are available.

The Florida Redevelopment Act allows Community Redevelopment Agencies to use TIF. In this sense, the property tax revenue goes to the local government and is then appropriated to the trust fund of the CRA. This program does not involve any state participation or oversight.

A redevelopment area must be identified for application of the TIF. A CRA Redevelopment Plan is required that demonstrates linkages to the local Comprehensive Plan.

Revenue Bonds

Revenue bonds are a special type of municipal bond. They are distinguished from a general obligation bond in that repayment of the bond can only come from the revenues generated by a specific revenue-generated entity that is associated with the purpose of the bonds. For example, construction of a sewer plant could be financed by revenue bonds which would then be repaid by the revenue the plant generates by its usage. These types of bonds are considered one of the most secure types of municipal bonds.

Community Donations

The City should seek community donations such as what is being done with the Veterans Memorial Park. Establishing a Community Foundation would provide the framework to seek community donations.

Public/Private Partnerships (P3's)

Public-private partnerships refer to contractual agreements formed between a public agency and private sector entity that allow for greater private sector participation in the planning and implementation of public projects. Through this agreement, the skills and assets of each sector (public and private)

are shared in delivering a service or facility for the use of the general public. In addition to the sharing of resources, each party shares in the risks and rewards potential in the delivery of the service and/or facility.

Some of the primary reasons that public agencies enter into these partnerships are:

- Public/private partnerships enable faster implementation of projects by increasing the ways of procuring services;
- The private sector can provide specialized management that may not be available within the public sector;
- The private sector offers new technology and expertise in accessing various financial resources; and
- The partnership encourages positive public/private relationships and can be used to spearhead a redevelopment effort.

It must be emphasized that a comprehensive redevelopment program cannot be undertaken without managerial and administrative assistance. Additional professional assistance may be required from time to time in the areas of promotions, special events, advertising and long-range planning. The costs associated with administrative or support staff can be partially subsidized by various State and Federal employment and job training grants.

The Downtown Redevelopment Plan should be implemented through a mix of applications that include establishment of downtown goals, objectives, policies and design guidelines, public strategies, private incentives and capital improvements. The public strategies are the actions that will be taken to implement the goals, objectives and policies of the Plan.

The Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) establishes the major improvements that are needed in the redevelopment area and establishes potential funding sources, estimated costs and the fiscal year in which construction might commence. The private

incentives might include incentives such as tax abatement programs.

In summary, there are many opportunities to seek funding and management assistance for the downtown redevelopment effort. It is recommended that the City of LaBelle consider assigning a staff person to the task of researching and managing the redevelopment effort, as organization and commitment are key to the success of not only acquiring assistance but implementing these various programs. A central contact that can serve as a liaison between the community, agencies and private developers will show a serious commitment by the City in its efforts to revitalize downtown.

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ensite

*The Downtown Plan has been prepared by EnSite.
This report is also available on our website:
www.en-site.com*