

TEAM PUNTA GORDA WATERFRONT DEVELOPMENT MASTER PLAN

PREPARED BY:

TEAM PUNTA GORDA MARITIME DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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- I. **Background:** Punta Gorda is a small, historic, water-oriented community crisscrossed with 57 miles of residential canals and 2.4 miles of river/harbor waterfront. The town is ideally situated to offer residents and visitors a truly unique opportunity to boat, fish, play, shop, dine and entertain themselves. It is a great place to live: small, friendly and lots of water!

Its casual, friendly, small town ambiance and its Old Florida history are powerful components of the promise that can be realized with wise, dedicated planning and commitment.

Our waterfront area, the focus of this plan, is primed and ready to capitalize on its potential because it is not cluttered with industry and is not burdened with rebuilding and associated environmental, political and financial issues. A large portion of the Punta Gorda waterfront is owned by the City with those in private control of waterfront property generally disposed to cooperate with the enhanced development of the waterfront. The City also has right of way for a Harborwalk on almost all the waterfront property and may have the opportunity to obtain additional property east of the Justice Center in the future.

However, while several significant improvements to the waterfront are currently underway or recently completed, the City has not undertaken an organized, funded, long-term development program for the entire waterfront. The City recognizes that such development can be best achieved by community commitment to a cohesive long-term vision to optimize this natural resource for the maximum benefit of all.

The City has agreed that a plan incorporating all interested segments of the community and complimentary to the historical character of our downtown is now in order. It was agreed that

TEAM Punta Gorda is well-positioned to gather the input of interested parties, collect relevant planning and design information from the appropriate sources and recommend a Master Plan for the City to utilize as a blue print for continued development.

- II. **Mission:** TEAM Punta Gorda, through its Maritime Development Committee (MDC), has developed this Master Plan for the Punta Gorda waterfront. It is hoped that the Master Plan will serve as a public road map for the community as the waterfront develops and will insure that all development adheres to a long-term view concerning the importance of this resource to our community.

The Master Plan is meant to be a dynamic document, changing and evolving as time, money and events dictate, but always following a long-term plan with a set of design and venue criteria that will result in the most attractive, compelling waterfront possible.

- III. **Scope:** The MDC solicited input from many interested parties including the City, the Punta Gorda Isles Civic Association, the Chamber of Commerce, The Boaters' Alliance, the City Waterfront Advisory Committee, The Punta Gorda Historical Society, Enterprise Punta Gorda, Main Street Punta Gorda, the four Civic Association boating clubs, the Punta Gorda Chamber of Commerce, the TEAM Punta Gorda Rails-to-Trails Committee, arts groups (TEAM Punta Gorda's Artisans' Village Committee and the Visual Arts Center), The PGI Paddlers, the PGI Fishing Club, the PGI Road Runners, the Burnt Store Isles Boat Club, the Punta Gorda Marina, The Charlotte Harbor Yacht Club, the Isles Yacht Club, the Peace River Sail/Power Squadron and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. The committee is open to hearing from other interested groups that may be using the area in the future.

It is expected that MDC's plan for waterfront development, if adopted, will take several years to complete and, as such, the plan accommodates staged development and the inclusion of both city, county and private enterprise components. The plan perspective encompasses a long-term 25 to 50 year view and does not look for

the quick fix but focuses on quality. In other words, do it right the first time before it becomes more complicated later.

IV. Master Plan Criteria:

- a. Develop the waterfront as an economic engine for the City and Charlotte County by making it a preferred destination for residents and tourists
- b. Solidify and build the City's image as a unique waterfront community
- c. Enhance and improve the quality of life for citizens, near-by visitors and tourists
- d. Become a preferred "port of choice" for boaters and boat clubs
- e. Encourage new business development throughout the City and expand the tax base
- f. Increase the appeal of this area to potential residents
- g. Assure public access throughout the waterfront
- h. Promote the arts, educational and cultural activities
- i. Accommodate long-term, staged waterfront development
- j. Assure government/private enterprise cooperation
- k. Remain sensitive to the historical character of the City
- l. Maintain a spirit of open, collaborative community participation
- m. Create an environmentally sustainable waterfront

V. Core Recommendation: The MDC recommends that the Harborwalk be the initial primary focus for developing a vibrant Punta Gorda waterfront.

- a. The Harborwalk should make a statement that it is the focal point of our town; a promenade – not a sidewalk. Its very presence and appearance should be a draw unto itself. The Harborwalk should be an adventure: wide, heavily landscaped with lighting and appropriate amenities to enhance its appeal to all. It should accommodate young and old, walkers, runners, bike riders, skaters and the disabled in comfortable fashion.
- b. The MDC feels that connecting all waterfront destinations, present and future, is of paramount importance. The waterfront needs a "core" or backbone which serves as the means for visitors to move along the entire waterfront without barriers that

stifle or prohibit travel. Convenience, comfort, safety and fun are primary principles that should guide our planning.

The MDC recommends that this walkway be planned and built with the long-term view that it will be the centerpiece of the Punta Gorda waterfront for years to come. Short cuts are short-sighted.

Design should allow for the comfortable flow of large groups of people between venues and have multiple points of access and plentiful parking. The flow of people between venues will be helpful to businesses located on the Harborwalk itself and to those in nearby downtown.

A primary design objective is to capture the spirit and history of Punta Gorda in a way that is unique to the character of our community, complements our historical district and is pleasing to all our target publics. Every effort should be made to coordinate the private parts of Harborwalk with the public portion. As work is already either underway or eminent in several areas (The Crab House restaurant, the Sheraton hotel, Highway 41 Bridge and the Best Western mooring field), timely communication and collaboration with all involved parties is critical. The Events Center is too far along in construction for any changes to be made to the 400 foot walkway on the waterfront.

For planning purposes, the MDC is recommending a promenade 20' to 30' wide where right of way permits. It should feature lighting along the entire route and also permit electrical connection for street fairs and other events. Electrical connection would be controlled (turned on/off) by the City.

The Harborwalk should be heavily landscaped with plenty of shade, shrubbery and flowers. It would be appropriate if hibiscus, the City flower, could be featured. It should include elevation changes and curves to add visual interest.

The walk is 12,350 feet long (2.4 miles) and runs from Cooper Street to Fisherman's Village.

- c. Because of the obvious expense of such a promenade, the MDC recommends that an overall master design be completed now with construction done in stages as funding is available. A complete master plan will permit full discussion of the entire project and facilitate preliminary budgeting.

It is further suggested that if/when private construction projects are proposed for the waterfront a condition of permitting is their commitment to construction of a Harborwalk consistent with the Master Plan.

- d. Priorities:

Phase One: The MDC recommends that the first finished stage be the area from Laishley Park through the Best Western Hotel as this is currently the center of construction activity.

Because of current construction on the Sheraton hotel, the timing for this phase is immediate and a sense of urgency is needed. The Sheraton is excited about the Harborwalk and has already stated that a promenade with sensitivity to the arts is a priority. Coordination with them should be an immediate priority

As further progress is made on the Best Western mooring field, the Crab House restaurant and other improvements at Laishley, the new design criteria should be followed. Rebuilding the walkways under the bridges can be undertaken in later stages. It is suggested that stairs from the Harborwalk to the bridge be a design component. These stair “towers” could be unique signatures for the City and set the design tone for the walk itself.

Phase Two: The second phase would connect the area from the Best Western through Gilchrist Park to Fisherman’s Village.

Phase Three: The last phase would encompass the area east from Laishley Park to Cooper Street.

- VI. **Harborwalk Amenities:** Plans are already underway for a raised outdoor stage and interactive water fountain in Laishley Park.

Another area at Laishley has been designated for an outdoor market.

The promenade should provide ample seating, picnic and rest areas, bike racks and shelter throughout its length. Runners and exercise enthusiasts might enjoy exercise stations along the route to add variety to their routines. In addition to providing electric power, there should be drinking water fountains, strategically located restrooms and decorative fountains. The design should provide for easy modification, i.e., the addition of statuary, access to new docks and landscaping modifications. Emergency phones may also be desirable. The promenade should also allow for easy access for disabled and for law enforcement and EMS personnel and vehicles.

Importantly, careful consideration should be given by planners to the integration of activity areas and green space. The Project for Public Spaces, a non-profit organization in New York City, suggests that too much of either is not the best use of waterfront space. It is important that visitors have activities to entertain themselves, but optimum design should assure natural space between the activity areas.

VII. Harborwalk Costs: It is not possible to estimate construction costs at this time. Agreement on a master design is necessary first. Additionally, since construction will probably take place in stages, each stage will have to be estimated at the time of construction. The initial need is for sufficient funding to permit the Master Plan design.

VIII. Continuing Development of Attractions and Amenities: There are numerous additional projects that will enhance the Punta Gorda waterfront and which will benefit from the Harborwalk. Some are in the private sector; others are governmental.

The MDC recommends that the governmental amenities be evaluated as part of this Master Plan and incorporated as affordable and based on staging priorities and need. The City Waterfront Advisory Committee (along with other appropriate

entities) should be involved in initially vetting and recommending private sector initiatives.

Among them:

- a. Transportation. With the walk, the mooring fields and the marinas, there will be an increasing need for transportation along the harbor and to various areas which will support these populations: shopping, entertainment, restaurants, medicine/medical care, food, supplies. This is primarily a private sector enterprise but some City assistance may be required.

Non-boating visitors will also need transportation up and down the waterfront and throughout the community.

Marinas may make bike and/or scooter rentals available or have loaner/rental cars.

A water taxi may also be justified to move people between the various harbor venues or as a method of sightseeing.

A trolley line or other alternatives may be possible for either city or private operation to enhance the transportation situation in the larger Punta Gorda shopping area.

Maintaining adequate parking along the Harborwalk should be a mandated requirement of the Master Plan.

- b. Wi-Fi. Attracting transient boaters, boat clubs and supporting events like boat shows, art fairs and fishing tournaments will be enhanced via state of the art Wi-Fi access throughout the waterfront.
- c. The arts/statuary/sculpture: The Harborwalk should promote the arts and high quality sculpture and statuary can play a significant role in enhancing the walk and attracting visitors. Several small “enclave” areas could be designed with seating (and perhaps shelter) to permit small

meetings/lectures/readings/music performances or street entertainers.

- d. Day docks: It is important that boaters have easy access to all areas of the Harborwalk and docking for dinghies and smaller boats should be supported at the various parks as well as at the businesses along the walk. Assuming that the hotels will have dinghy docks, the city should position additional docks at the Events Center, the Gilchrist Park pier and the Laishley Park area. Overnight docking will be prohibited at day docks.

Because the waterfront is generally shallow, all areas are not suitable for water development. As such, the City should undertake a marine engineering study of the waterfront to determine the best areas for development of docks, boat launch areas, dry storage, additional marinas, etc. The results of this study should be incorporated into the long-term plan for locating venues and amenities.

The Peace River Sail and Power Squadron has expressed interest in working with the City to accomplish a marine survey of our waterfront.

- e. Beach: Construction of a large beach area in the Gilchrist Park area near the Best Western may enhance this area, add another traffic-building attraction and broaden appeal to sunbathers and children. A floating breakwater could help limit wave action for users and protect the beach from erosion. Limited watercraft rentals may also be appropriate here. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection has indicated that enlarging this area might be problematic, but the City might want to pursue this opportunity further.
- f. Educational Markers: Placed along the route these markers will point out items of interest regarding the ecology and history of the area.
- g. Boat Storage Condo: Interest has been expressed for a boat storage facility in the area. This is a private sector endeavor and need has not been quantified but such a facility would be

encouraged in the appropriate area (East Marion/Punta Gorda Marina area).

- h. Bayfront Center: The Bayfront Center at the western end of Gilchrist Park is currently occupied by City offices but the offices will be moving to the new City facility when it is ready.

Assuming it is available for use, this building/area could be used for a marine-oriented attraction (sailing center, marine museum, marine research facility/ aquarium with public access) or for other promenade traffic/revenue generators like the Artisans' Village.

- i. Shreve Park/Pittman Park: This site, between Gilchrist Park and Fishermen's Village, appears to be ideal for a Youth Sailing Program and a kayak/small boat rental/wind surfer/canoe marina/launching area. Natural entry areas already exist. Fences with tree/shrub screens could insulate the site from Retta Esplanade and a floating breakwater system could provide security for the boats and shoreline. Revenue from the venture could help fund continuing development/maintenance of the Harborwalk. Based on timing, budget and availability, the Bayfront Center could also be used as it already has a small boat ramp available for use.
- j. Additional Marina: As the community grows and more water activity attracts more boaters, an additional marina with attendant boating amenities like specialty shops and recreational activities may be desirable. This facility could be part of a larger marine complex and conceivably include a dry storage area and boat repair. The Boaters' Alliance envisions this facility on the east side of Punta Gorda separated from Fisherman's Village Marina and Laishley Marina. Obviously this is a private sector project with market demand to be determined and permitting issues to be resolved once a suitable site is identified and available.
- k. Events: As the infrastructure is completed, the foundation for traffic building events will be in place.

Among them:

- a. Boat shows
 - b. An expansion of marine activities including fishing tournaments, sailing racing/events, tour boats, dinner boats, boat rentals
 - c. Foot races and other contests
 - d. The Events Center, Laishley and Gilchrist Parks will attract various events including art and food fairs, concerts, civic and private events
- IX. **Promotion:** As the infrastructure develops and the “brand” promises of Punta Gorda can be delivered, promotion of events and the branding of Punta Gorda as a preferred destination for water-oriented events and entertainment will drive increased traffic and tourism to the area.
- X. **Barriers to Success:** While TEAM Punta Gorda views the development of our waterfront as a sound investment in our community with a real, long-lasting return on investment, there are obstacles and issues that must be addressed.
- a. **Funding:** Grants, federal earmarks and state/local taxes appear to be the primary funding sources for this ambitious endeavor. The current economic environment is problematic and presents potential barriers to obtaining funding near-term. Revenue from some venues like boat rental, art shows, food fairs and the outdoor market may help. Contributions from the business/civic community might also be forthcoming. A continuing effort should be maintained to obtain/develop revenue generating venues. While not always popular, revenue generating opportunities (like the recently enacted boat trailer parking fee) might be necessary. A revenue/tax generating waterfront will increase City revenue over the long term.
 - b. **Establishing Community Commitment:** A sense of urgency among all interested/affected groups (City, County, business,

civic organizations and the general citizenry) is required to take advantage of the current ideal “window” to get something done. Delay will only bring additional barriers.

- c. East Marion: A key component of the optimum development of the waterfront is the continuing acquisition/zoning/protection of the land east of the Justice Center and south of the Harborwalk right of way. Because of our finite waterfront, it is important that this key property have future development primarily focused on marine and tourist/traffic building uses. A mix of green space and attractions would enhance this key area of the City.
- d. Design: Because the walk at the Events Center is already underway and construction will soon be underway at the Sheraton, it is very important to have work beginning with the Sheraton compliant with an approved design. It is important that an approved design meeting the standards of the City and the Master Plan be completed for review/discussion and costing/budgeting purposes as soon as possible and provided to those involved in near-term construction. Delay will only be counter-productive.
- e. Water Depth: The water is quite shallow along most parts of the Harborwalk. Even if desirable venues are identified, the depth of the water or DEP issues may render them impractical. An accurate survey may be necessary, unless reliable charts can be located.

XI. Timeline:

- a. August 2008: Acceptance of Master Plan by City Waterfront Advisory Committee and City Council; fund and initiate design work, continue discussing plan with interest groups and continue with the planning process. Coordinate with the Sheraton Hotel, Best Western and Laishley.
- b. Fall 2008. Complete design, start Phase One construction. Except for the Sheraton and Best Western, funding is an unknown and needs to be addressed. Budget/plan for Stages

Two and Three. Continue work with community interest groups to incorporate their needs. Look for funding, educate public.

- c. 2009 and beyond: Continue construction as affordable, add amenities, schedule/promote events.

XII. Design Extensions:

The Harborwalk design criteria may also be used by other venues such as: the new linear park, Rails to Trails and existing parks.

Fishermen's Village has also expressed an interest in continuing the concept onto their property.

- XIII. **Ponce De Leon Park:** This park is certainly a major part of the City's waterfront and a separate review of development options at this park should also be undertaken to maximize its use and appeal to the public. Issues could include the addition of small boat/kayak rental facility and enhancement of the beach area.

XIV. Maritime Development Committee Members:

Patti Pierrone Allen
George Guttschalk
Frank Mazur
Bill Pantsari
Clarisa Parodi
Nancy Prafke
Rob Sifrit
Frank Wiechec
Mike Wilson
Dorothea Zysko

