

VIEWPOINT: A City Planner's Opinion on Updating 8th Street – We Need YOU!

By Adrienne Burke, Kelly Gibson, and Scott Schultz

Adrienne, Kelly, and Scott are members of the Planning Department with the City of Fernandina Beach and have studied planning at the University of Florida, Florida State, and Florida Atlantic University, respectively.

It's no secret that just about everyone has an opinion about 8th Street coming into downtown Fernandina Beach. A community survey this summer returned words like "depressing, ugly, and run-down." The positive news is that when asked how 8th Street COULD be, people used words such as "vibrant, welcoming, and attractive." That's all well and good, but how do you get from one to the other?

Part of the job of being a city planner is to help the community determine what they would like to see for the future of their city. In Florida, the official way that city planners accomplish this is through the City's Comprehensive Plan, a document required under state law that addresses a variety of topics. Our City Comprehensive Plan has chapters on future land use, transportation, housing, public facilities, conservation and coastal management, recreation and open space, intergovernmental coordination, capital improvements, port planning, public schools, historic preservation, and economic development.

The City adopted the most recent Comprehensive Plan in 2012, and it has policies that direct the City to look at how we can get the Land Development Code ready to encourage revitalization of the commercial corridors in our community – 8th Street, 14th Street, Sadler Road, and the commercial areas at Main Beach and around Seaside Park. The dictionary defines revitalization as "to give new life or vigor to" something. Did you know that only 6% of the land in the City is vacant? That's why revitalization or redevelopment of these commercial areas is really important, because the City does not have much area left in which to grow or offer areas for new opportunities. The Land Development Code is the document that spells out the details of ideas in the Comprehensive Plan. It gives property owners the guidance for development, so it's important that this document reflect what the community wants to see for revitalization.

One of the most important principles of city planning is that citizens be involved in the planning efforts. As part of the discussion about revitalization of these areas, city planning staff requested community assistance from a working group to help begin the conversation about planning for these commercial corridors. This group first met in March 2014, and includes an architect, engineer, a Nassau County Economic Development Board representative, a citizen at large, Planning Advisory Board members, a retired economic development professional, and Nassau County planning staff. The group decided to tackle 8th Street first.

In just about every meeting we have had, the group has talked about how important it is to get community input on this effort. We have been asking different group members to write these viewpoints to share with everyone, and we asked for opinions through a community survey earlier this year. We advertise our meetings and encourage people to come or submit ideas. Still, it is hard to get people engaged around what can seem like a boring process.

Think about it this way...although plans and codes do sound boring, it is truly the way to shape the community that YOU want to see. Although we planners live here and use 8th Street too, and studied city planning in school, our ideas for 8th Street may not be what the community has in mind. Through the 8th Street survey, prior viewpoints in the paper, and people attending our meetings, we have started to get some ideas of what citizens and visitors are thinking about 8th Street. But that's not enough – we want to get more and more input, more and more ideas, and more and more people talking to us about how to improve 8th Street. We NEED YOU! Any ideas are worth sharing.

The working group meets each month and will resume meeting again after the new year. The group is open to the public, and anyone is welcome to attend. Please check the City Calendar online at www.fbfl.us or if you'd like more information about how you can get involved, please contact Adrienne Burke at (904) 310-3142 or e-mail aburke@fbfl.org. Visit www.fbfl.us/LDCED to view more information about the group. Thank you for your interest in improving your community!