Technical Assistance for Sustainable Communities:
Building Blocks

Technical Assistance Tool: Planning for Fiscal and Economic Health
Pasco County, FL

To: Richard E. Gehring, Planning & Development Administrator
Matthew J. Armstrong, Executive Planner
Smita Ambadi, Planner II

From: Christopher Zimmerman, Vice President for Economic Development
John Robert Smith, Senior Policy Advisor
Smart Growth America

Date: September 15, 2014

Re: Report and Suggested Next Steps

Introduction: Purpose of this Memo

Pursuant to our technical assistance award with Pasco County, this Memorandum constitutes our final report summarizing the workshop on Planning for Fiscal and Economic Health and suggesting some possible next steps for the County’s efforts in the West Market Area (also known as the Harbors).

On July 30 and 31, 2014, Smart Growth America provided assistance under the Planning for Fiscal and Economic Health tool, supported by a grant from the US EPA’s Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities Program. In conjunction with the Pasco County Department of Planning & Development, Smart Growth America delivered a two-day technical assistance workshop. Tuesday evening consisted of a presentation that was open to the public. On Wednesday, invited stakeholders attended a full-day session that involved an additional presentation, a facilitated brainstorming session and discussion of various development issues and alternatives.

The workshop brought together a wide range of professional staff and elected officials, private sector representatives including the real estate community, local residents, the non-profit community and others interested in the future of the West Market Area. The Planning for Fiscal and Economic Health presentations provided an overview of the fiscal and economic impacts of different development patterns, focusing on the differences between sprawling patterns and more compact, “smart growth” patterns.

Through the two-day program, Pasco planning leadership was able to engage community stakeholders around the ways in which smart growth approaches can make the area more
competitive and reduce taxpayer burdens. The intent of the workshop was neither for Smart Growth America to create a plan nor bind the community to any particular course of action, but to assist community efforts to create a more vibrant, successful region, consistent with the goals of their adopted plans.

**Background – Context for the Technical Assistance**

This technical assistance centered on the development challenges in a small part of the West Market Area that includes the River District and the areas surrounding it.

The County has been heavily engaged with the community in creating a vision for the area and establishing new plans, notably the Harbors Plan and an accompanying Economic Development Plan. In addition, the two major municipalities in the area, the City of New Port Richey and the City of Port Richey, have adopted specific plans of relevance, namely the New Port Richey Community Redevelopment Area Strategic Redevelopment Action Plan, the Port Richey Waterfront Overlay District and the Waterfront Park Draft Master Plan. To help realize the vision defined by these plans, the County is seeking implementation tools, and felt that “at this critical stage, guidance received through the ‘Planning for Economic & Fiscal Health’ tool will be instrumental in translating the proposed vision into actionable items.”

A major aim of the technical assistance was to facilitate thinking about strategies that might help to energize appropriate redevelopment activity and foster the realization of the intended vision. The “Planning for Fiscal and Economic Health” workshop sets the stage by presenting information about factors driving economic change across the nation.

**Smart Growth and Fiscal and Economic Health**

Communities around the nation are always concerned about their fiscal and economic health. By fiscal health, we mean a local government’s bottom line: Does the life-cycle cost of new development—upfront infrastructure, ongoing service provision and eventual repair and maintenance—cost more to the town than it brings in tax revenue? By economic health, we mean the general economic well-being of the community: How does new growth and development add to or detract from the creation of jobs, wealth, retail sales, economic competitiveness and fiscal sustainability?

In approaching these questions in the Pasco County area, as in any part of the country today, it is important to bear three trends in mind:

1. **Our nation’s demographics are changing in a way that is profoundly affecting the housing market.**

Demographic trends are moving the housing market strongly away from conventional suburban housing. The two biggest demographic groups in the nation, retiring Baby Boomers and so-called “Millennials” (18-30-year-olds) are both expressing a strong preference for a more walkable,
urban/village lifestyle. Indeed, a growing percentage of Millennials prefer to live without cars altogether or to live a “car-lite” lifestyle. The vast majority of net new households being formed have no children at home, and most of them are one- and two-person households—which are much more likely to prefer a walking lifestyle. Furthermore, vehicle miles traveled (VMT) has fallen below population growth, while the demand for public transportation has been rising steadily. These trends are a complete departure from those experienced for decades in the twentieth century.

2. The formula for economic growth is changing.

Business growth used to be driven by large corporations that operated in a fashion that was both private and linear. In the past, new research breakthroughs occurred in sealed research laboratories controlled by the companies. Manufacturing and other business processes occurred in assembly-line situations. These conditions led to communities that featured large, sealed-off campuses and tended to be linear in their arrangements.

Today, business growth is driven by collaboration among many types of entities—private companies, research institutions, universities and others—that must interact frequently and work together creatively. This trend requires cities and communities that encourage interaction and collaboration—the opposite of the older model just described. How communities are designed directly impacts their ability to create interactive and collaborative environments.

Most significantly, the “Knowledge Economy” depends heavily on skilled workers. The companies that are driving innovation are pursuing highly-educated talent, especially among the Millennial generation. Increasingly, companies find it necessary to locate in places that the work force wants to live in; and this means walkable communities.

Similarly, the market for retail is changing. The suburban shopping malls and “power centers” that thrived for decades are struggling as a result of oversupply and a shift in preferences. With online buying playing a bigger role for consumers (especially for bargain hunters), many are looking for a more “authentic” experience when they shop in person. This is bringing new value to traditional walkable Main Streets.

3. Suburban development patterns are making it more difficult for local governments to balance their budgets.

Suburban development patterns require extensive investments in capital infrastructure and ongoing service delivery. Low-density development requires more infrastructure to serve fewer people and requires service providers such as firefighters and school buses to travel farther. More compact development patterns reduce both life-cycle infrastructure costs and operating costs.

A 2013 study by Smart Growth America, Building Better Budgets: A National Examination of the Fiscal Benefits of Smart Growth Development, concluded that compared to conventional suburban development, smart growth patterns can save up to one-third in upfront infrastructure cost and 10% annually in ongoing operating expenses. Smart growth development patterns can
generate approximately 10 times more revenue on a per-acre basis.

Not all of these trends will be completely relevant in every situation. But it is important to bear all three in mind in considering the fiscal and economic health of any community.

**Participant viewpoints – Realizing the Vision**

These concepts were elaborated upon in the presentation portion of the workshop, which was followed by a general discussion among all participants and the identification of a number of issues or themes bearing on the realization of the regional vision. The purpose was not to establish consensus on a specific plan, but to focus thinking by identifying obstacles and promising possibilities.

Discussion was organized around three plan areas: Main Street and Cotee River (New Port Richey), Millers Bayou and Port Richey waterfront (Port Richey) and the River District-Harbors Area (Pasco County). Two tables of participants focused on each of the three areas.

Participants engaged in a robust dialogue and offered their thoughts on opportunities and obstacles that may impede progress in the region. Major themes and associated issues raised by participants in the discussion included:

*Create a unique identity.*

Specific ideas for the Main Street-Cotee River area included:

- Introduce uses and activities around the Cotee River that follow a common theme or image such as, education, health and wellness.
- Create distinct sub-districts—commercial, entertainment, educational and “eco” areas.
- Do visioning for the various smaller districts and sell the vision through the Downtown New Port Richey marketing package and Pasco Economic Development Council (PEDC).
- Brand “wide open waterways.” Host design competitions to generate more ideas for branding.
- Brand New Port Richey downtown and the riverfront area, perhaps as an artistic theater, culinary, hospitality, aquatic center or outdoor recreation involving kayaking, roller-skating, skiing, high-end boat docks, wind surfing and sailing.
- Create a marketing package for the riverfront area and the Downtown with the help of Pasco Economic Development Council (PEDC) and the Greater New Port Richey (NPR) Main Street.
- Involve local merchants’ associations to help with branding and generating of interest and conversations.
- Introduce uniform signage to enhance greater NPR Main Street, probably with a coastal or river-based theme.
Specific ideas for the Millers Bayou-Port Richey waterfront included:

- Invest in place-making.
- Create a uniform identity for the waterfront district tying together the Millers Bayou area, Port Richey Waterfront Park and the area around Nicks Park and Catches.
- Create gateway features at the entrance to the Port Richey Waterfront District from the U.S. 19 Corridor.

Specific ideas for the River District-Harbors area included:

- Create monuments along U.S. 19 to identify the communities. Create a visual interest and mark the entrance to the waterfront destinations located in the County and the cities of Port Richey and New Port Richey.
- Enhance access and wayfinding, especially to the key sites along the coast and the Cotee River, through effective signage and marketing.
- Emphasize the natural coast as an ecotourism area.
- Adopt signage and symbols along U.S. 19 that reflects the coastal and/riverine context. Adopt uniform cross-jurisdictional signage standards that are consistent with the identity established for the waterfront destinations in the Cities of New Port Richey and Port Richey.

**Make connections linking the jurisdictions, using greenways and blueways.**

Specific ideas for the Main Street-Cotee River area included:

- Enhance linkages to the County and the City of Port Richey (Millers Bayou) through water, bikeways, sidewalks and trolleys.
- Enhance and promote river connections between the City of Port Richey and New Port Richey.
- Introduce boardwalks connecting to or on both sides of Main Street.
- Use trails, blueways and bike paths to tie all the parks and destinations along the coast and the Cotee River-synergy towards Main Street, Hacienda Hotel, James E. Grey Preserve, Frances Avenue Park, Sims Park and Orange Lake Park.
- Use public-private partnerships to create a trolley system that links key areas across the three jurisdictions.
- Introduce multi-modal paths.

Specific ideas for the Millers Bayou-Port Richey waterfront included:

- Improve connectivity between important nodes and water features such as the Werner Boyce Salt Springs State Park, Robert K. Rees Memorial Park (Green Key), Port Richey Waterfront Park, Millers Bayou, Sims Park, and James E. Grey Preserve.
- Develop trail connections across the County, Port Richey and New Port Richey.
- Develop trails to connect Miller Bayou to the Sims Park.
Specific ideas for the River District-Harbors area included:

- Provide trails and blue ways connecting destinations (both existing and proposed) along the Cotee River connecting the three jurisdictions, all the way from James E. Grey Preserve to the Millers Bayou Area.

**Make the land development code more favorable for development.**

Specific ideas for the Main Street-Cotee River area included:

- Make required changes to the local code to allow densities that enable us to go higher.
- Replace professional offices and other similar uses in the City of New Port Richey Downtown with more active ground floor uses such as retail and restaurants.
- Explore overlay district options for the areas around the Pithlachascotee River (focusing on appropriate uses, density and height).
- Improve code enforcement to deal with dilapidated housing and crime.
- Strengthen zoning regulations and code enforcement, and collaborate with local businesses to generally clean up areas, remove illegal signage, and reutilize foreclosed properties and dilapidated structures.
- Do required changes to the code that support and enhance uniform wayfinding and storytelling throughout the downtown and the riverfront area.

Specific ideas for the Millers Bayou-Port Richey waterfront included:

- Introduce shopping, arts and antiques along the boardwalk from the Waterfront Park to Catches. Do required building and zoning code changes to support the above developments.
- Do required changes to the code to support unified landscaping and way finding all the way from the bridge to Grand Boulevard.

Specific ideas for the River District-Harbors area included:

- Standardize the codes (Port Richey, New Port Richey and Pasco County) for signage to create a unified identity along the coast and the Cotee riverfront area.
- Introduce development standards that help create uniform aesthetics along the U.S. 19 corridor.
- Strengthen code enforcement to improve the overall image along the U.S. 19 corridor, especially around the entrance to the key destinations along the coast and the Cotee River.
Effectively address illegal signs and unmaintained properties.

*Introduce a range of activities, uses or attractions along the river.*

Specific ideas for the Main Street-Cotee River area included:

- Activities could include kayaking, roller skating, trolleys, water taxis, white water rafting, etc.
- Expand the existing kayaking and boating areas.
- Promote water uses to James E. Grey’s preserve, such as kayaking and paddle-boating

Specific ideas for the Millers Bayou-Port Richey waterfront included:

- Introduce more family friendly activities at the waterfront park and along the coastline such as a library, educational center, art gallery, museum, or health center.
- Introduce a variety of events to increase usage of the Port Richey Waterfront Park.

Specific ideas for the River District-Harbors area included:

- Introduce uses and activities along the U.S. 19 corridor on key intersections that support a pedestrian environment and create a pedestrian spillover towards the waterfront destinations in both the cities.

*Other ideas.*

Other ideas for the Main Street-Cotee River area included:

- Conduct a design competition to get ideas on possible uses along the river, how to create an image and how to improve connectivity between Cotee River, the Parks and the Miller Bayou Area.
- Promote Sims Park and other waterparks as weekend destinations as opposed to using them only for annual and monthly events.
- Leverage what we have: the Hacienda Hotel (local history), art eclectic, culinary, hospitality and edible landscaping (health and wellness
- Introduce edible landscapes along the waterfront.
- Attract outfitter type retail for major commercial nodes.
- Identify major and small landowners and/investors who are willing to invest and redevelop abandoned and foreclosed properties.
- Remodel Hacienda under a boutique hotel concept.
Other ideas for the Millers Bayou-Port Richey waterfront included:

- Enhance pedestrian connectivity around the water and create unique destinations around the water within walkable distances from the surrounding residences.
- Enhance waterfront access and usage.
- Do park improvements.
- Engage local and transient clientele using a variety of uses such as a mix of shopping, entertainment, arts and hotels.
- Introduce high-density development—vertical structures (with parking and housing) on the site opposite the waterfront park (where the mobile homes were cleared).
- Introduce opportunities for shopping, arts and antiques along the boardwalk from the Port Richey Waterfront Park to Catches.
- Introduce a hotel or similar uses along the Millers Bayou Area that also provides visual access to the Gulf of Mexico.
- Collaborate with educational institutions to create a unique destination that involves a boardwalk, walkable destinations, an interactive children’s museum, educational nature trails and other family friendly activities around the Millers Bayou and Port Richey Waterfront Park.
- Address parking through acquisition of property to the east of U.S.19 close to Millers Bayou or along the bridge.
- Address parking along the coastline, especially around Seaside and Hooters.
- Develop an observation tower close to the Port Richey Waterfront Park that provides visual access to the Gulf.

Other ideas for the River District-Harbors area included:

- Enhance the pedestrian environment on U.S. 19. Develop a comprehensive streetscape plan for the U.S. 19 corridor.
- Prohibit all overpasses on the U.S. 19 corridor.
- Create pedestrian walkovers on U.S. 19, especially at key intersections such as Grand Boulevard and U.S. 19; Main Street and U.S. 19 and Marine Parkway and U.S. 19.
- Create pedestrian oriented developments (anchors) at key intersections on the U.S. 19 which mark the entrances to the waterfront districts and create a pedestrian spillover
towards the coast.

- Provide comfortable and safe pedestrian connections to key nodes and waterfront areas (located on the west of U.S. 19) from the U.S. 19 corridor.
- Enhance water access and create marina and sunset destinations.
- Do capital investments on the U.S. 19 corridor to reflect or emphasize “nature coast” and eco-destination.
- Develop a mixed-use corridor on Rowan Road that will create a spillover into the Port Richey and New Port Richey Downtown and waterfront destinations.
- Introduce value added design (dual purpose design elements).

**Recommendations – Moving Forward**

The recommendations that follow are based on the discussions that occurred during the July 31 workshop and discussion.

Pasco County has made a good start in preparing for a prosperous and sustainable future with the work that has been done in developing the Harbors – West Market Redevelopment Plan and the accompanying Economic Development Plan. The challenge now is to realize the resulting vision. The key to achieving this vision is principally a matter of implementation and coordination with the approved plans of the two municipalities. Some specific recommendations for consideration follow:

1. *Increase interjurisdictional cooperation.*

The County and the two Cities need to work in concert. It is vitally important that their efforts be coordinated. This provides direct benefits (more efficient operations, eliminating destructive competition, etc.) but even more importantly, communicates an important message to the business community.

There are a range of approaches that can be taken to facilitate cooperation across jurisdictions, from informal to highly formalized. In practice, successful interjurisdictional cooperation usually involves some combination of the two. It is important to foster an ongoing dialogue, by establishing regular meetings of elected leadership to discuss key issues that cut across city and county lines. This process in turn will support routine staff collaboration.

A move to systematic collaboration is sometimes begun through informal, low-key techniques, such as instituting regular lunches or dinners among a group of mayors or council chairs to discuss issues in general, or specific topics. More formal approaches include face-to-face public sessions held jointly between a pair of governing bodies or day-long conferences among several, with work sessions on specific issues. The most formal approach is a regional (or sub-regional) association of governments, with representatives appointed by each jurisdiction. (This might be distinct and
separate from any generalized “council of governments” that may exist in the metropolitan area. It may involve only a subset of jurisdictions, and be focused on a specific set of issues, such as economic development, promotion of tourism, etc.)

Ultimately, guidance from the top is essential. To fully realize the potential of the synergies that are possible when they work in concert, meaningful collaboration between (or among) jurisdictions must become institutionalized. For that to happen, leadership must communicate it as a policy imperative to every member of the respective organizations. This can be effected through a joint resolution, with an identically-worded statement adopted by both governing bodies (or more, if there are more governments that are party to the agreement). This is the highest level of guidance, giving direction in a very public manner that signals a strong commitment to collaboration on the part of the elected leadership. It is also possible to execute a memorandum of understanding (MOU), which may cover specific details of collaboration between jurisdictional entities, which could include a pooling of local funds in the service of redevelopment efforts.

2. Work for broad collaboration.

To work towards success, there is a need to foster partnership across government, business, land owners, and citizens. It may be worthwhile to consider whether new partnership institutions should be established that would bring together business and government, private agencies and non-profits, and citizen representatives.

A range of organizational types are found in communities around the US, from small downtown revitalization organizations run as non-profits (typically with some kind of joint sponsorship by government and the business community), to business improvement districts (BIDs) that have access to dedicated revenue sources (which may be derived from local taxes, such as a property tax add-on, approved by property owners within the district). Such groups help to bring focus to a downtown or main street district, ensure that its needs receive consistent attention, and help to provide a sense of identity for the target area.

These organizations could have several roles, including providing a non-threatening venue for different sectors to engage each other, thereby helping to improve communication and understanding across the sometimes contentious interests of local businesses, land owners, developers, neighborhoods and government; advocating on behalf of the district, both to the general public and in official processes; promoting local businesses; and perhaps most importantly of all, providing place management services. Place management services includes staging and promoting events (weekend festivals, lunchtime concerts, evening open-air movies, etc.); sponsoring ongoing activities (like farmers’ markets, “first Fridays”, etc.); and supporting cleanliness, maintenance and security within the district.

An example of a small group that has had a big impact with limited resources is the Columbia Pike Revitalization Organization (CPRO) in Arlington, Virginia, which has operated for more than 25 years with a staff of one to three people and a minimal annual subsidy from the County. Its Board of Directors includes representatives from business owners, developers, land owners,
neighborhood associations, citizen commissions and county government officials. It oversees two weekly farmers markets and an annual blues festival that is a regional draw. It is the principal convener for interested businesses in the corridor it serves. It has been instrumental as an advocate and facilitator for major redevelopment/revitalization efforts, although it has no formal jurisdictional authority.

There are many examples of more formal public-private partnerships that exercise greater powers. A good example is the Bethesda Urban Partnership in Montgomery County, Maryland (see www.bethesda.org), which manages everything from festivals to street beautification to marketing to managing an arts and entertainment district. Other good examples are Downtown Roanoke (www.downtownroanoke.org) in Roanoke, Virginia; River City Company (www.rivercitycompany.com) in Chattanooga, Tennessee; and the James Street Improvement District in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

There are more than 1,000 BIDs in the US today, with varying levels of funding and activities. The International Downtown Association (www.ida-downtown.org) is a good source of information on practices and organizations that perform these functions.

3. Focus your effort.

Work to make one small area (not more than 25-75 acres) a success. Pick an area with promise, create a development program using some of the actions discussed and start working on its implementation. Bring all tools to bear to make it a near-term success. This could include pooling funding resources and channelizing them toward relevant actions and the outlined development program components.

4. Consider changes to local development codes and related ordinances.

Allow a more active, pedestrian-generating mix of uses, with some higher densities and greater height, in target areas. Simplify the process for desired outcomes.

An active downtown district or main street can become a valuable destination, generating a large net tax benefit to local government. In general, such areas produce a high return in taxes per acre, while demanding comparatively little in services (like public school costs). The more attractive the district is (both visually and in terms of the availability of amenities), the more it draws activity, the greater the return to both private land owners and the governments to whom they pay taxes. The creation of such an environment is, however, often impeded by local ordinances.

For example, many communities have ordinances regulating commercial signage which may be too restrictive. Inappropriate regulation can be a significant problem, especially for the small, entrepreneurial businesses that are important to generate active street life and create the sense of place that you are trying to establish. This includes things like the amount of space allowed per building, the placement of business names on awnings and the use of A-frame signs placed outside of shops. Some local codes may not prohibit sidewalk restaurant seating, but may make it
very difficult in practice. Some restrict the appearance of product names on the umbrellas used to provide shade for outdoor seating. It is probably worth asking businesses what regulations are most inhibiting and asking yourself how important those regulations really are to the well-being of the community.

Zoning codes tend to force development into suburban, car-oriented patterns, rather than the walkable environment needed for an attractive downtown place. Inappropriate setback and parking requirements are typically major problems. They can sometimes be relaxed through site-specific granting of exceptions, but this can be cumbersome and discourage applications from developers. One option increasingly used in communities around the country is the substitution, or overlay, of a form-based code. This lets citizens, landowners and developers know what is expected, and it simplifies the approval process for everyone.

On the administrative side, it is also important to make it easier for folks to do what you want. This often means process re-engineering for things like permit approval.

5. **Leverage existing assets.**

Communities should find ways to take advantage of existing assets such as legacy buildings, theaters, green spaces, blues spaces, natural features and other unique assets, such as a concentration of blues musicians who reside in the County/Region.

6. **Make better use of the water.**

Not just the coast, but the rivers as well. Waterfront and waterways are being used creatively for placemaking all around the world, with strong economic performance.

7. **Take better advantage of events.**

The area has many events that attract people each year. Coordinated, promoted, and packaged, they can contribute to an identity for the community, and help to support larger economic development goals.

8. **Create a real downtown.**

New Port Richey has “good bones.” It has a fairly complete street grid, connection to the water and some lovely green space, historic buildings and attractions like the theater. There remain some needs, such as housing, increased density, infill development in place of parking lots and empty surface spaces. A near-term goal should be to create four-or-so quality, continuous walkable blocks. The goal should be to make it a regional destination. (For example, a theater with regular programming can serve as an anchor for a restaurant district, a place where people come from beyond the immediate area to spend an evening. With a cluster of dining options, with outdoor seating, arrayed along a corridor in close, walkable proximity, people will come without necessarily having a specific establishment in mind. They come to stroll, observe the choices, and then take their pick. This activity itself contributes to the ambience of the area, drawing more people. If
there are also shops that may be of interest, this will help to generate interest – and return business – and add to the synergy that makes a destination regional.)

One note of caution: A number of participants in the workshop discussions expressed a desire to move some current office uses out of downtown retail space. (See the note above, “Replace professional offices and other similar uses in the City of New Port Richey Downtown with more active ground floor uses such as retail and restaurants.”) While in the long run restaurants and other retail uses may be optimal for these locations, at present there does not seem to be a shortage of available storefront space, and the current uses are providing some activity. Landlords will likely move such secondary uses to secondary space (i.e., second floors and side streets) as demand grows for the highest and best use of these storefronts. In the meantime, however, it is better to have secondary uses in storefront space than to have empty storefronts.

Notes:


iii “Why urban demographers are right about the trend toward downtowns and walkable suburbs,” Kaid Benfield, bettercities.net, February 28, 2014.


“What to Do with Empty Big Box Stores,” Sarah Schindler, sustainablecitynetwork.com, February 12, 2014.


iii The full report can be downloaded at, http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/building-better-budgets.