



# *Introduction*

Purpose | History | Plan for Downtown

# Chapter 1. Introduction

## PURPOSE OF THIS PLAN

This Plan lays the groundwork to reclaim Downtown as Clearwater's historic urban core and heart of the City. The success and health of Downtown is directly linked to the health and success of the overall City. Downtown must be revitalized for the benefit of the whole city and all citizens. Public spaces and community gathering places are integral to strong communities, positive interaction and sense of place and pride. The residents of Clearwater will have an inviting Downtown that enhances their quality of life. Revitalizing Downtown is not looking to the past to duplicate how our forefathers utilized it, but building on our history to position Clearwater to meet future demands.

This Plan serves as a Special Area Plan in accordance with the Countywide Rules of Pinellas County. As a Special Area Plan, this document is the land use plan for Downtown, guiding future development and redevelopment through goals, objectives and policies and by the establishment of development potential for five unique Character Districts. The Downtown Planning Area is delineated on the Countywide Plan Map as an Activity Center, and on the Transit Oriented Land Use Vision Map with the Special Center subcategory, a designation established in the updated Countywide Rules (adopted August 7, 2015) to recognize previously adopted Special Area Plans throughout Pinellas County. This Plan also serves as a Community Redevelopment Plan in accordance with Florida's Community Redevelopment Act for a portion of the Downtown Planning Area. As a Community Redevelopment Plan, this document is the Capital Improvement

Plan and also sets the policies that guide the future actions and projects of the City's Community Redevelopment Agency. This Plan is implemented through the Community Development Code and its Downtown Zoning District and Development Standards. Quality urban design required by the Code is imperative to meeting the goals of this Plan.

## HISTORY OF CLEARWATER

### *John Nolen*

Clearwater was one of the early Florida cities that recognized the need for a City plan, and in 1925 hired John Nolen, a nationally known planner, to prepare a plan for the City. Clearwater leaders determined that Nolen could provide the City with a competitive advantage: a comprehensive plan, a regional plan connecting the City with its environs, and a Downtown plan focused on the waterfront. Nolen's 1926 plan was comprised of a Comprehensive City Plan and included a street thoroughfare system, locations of schools, playgrounds and parks, a civic center and Downtown business district as well as industrial areas north and south of Downtown. It also suggested rerouting the railroad tracks from Downtown to the east and establishing a regional rail system, development of an airport and cemetery, and establishment of zoning and subdivision controls. Many of Nolen's concepts remain valid today, most importantly, the recognition of the waterfront as the City's premier natural asset, the significance of Downtown as the center of the City, and a multi-faceted park system to serve all citizens.

## *Growth of Florida*

The growth and changes in Clearwater over the years can be attributed to major events that had a similar effect in other Florida cities. Florida's growth in the early 1800s had been primarily limited to the northern part of the State, with Pensacola, Tallahassee and St. Augustine being the main population centers. In 1842, the United States passed the Armed Occupation Act which granted 160 acres of land to any head of household or single man who would bear arms, live in Florida for five years and cultivate the land. This Act drew pioneers to settle the Clearwater area and central parts of Florida. During the decades of the 1880s and 1890s, the Victorian interest in healthful living enticed many tourists to Florida for the climate. The permanent population grew as many tourists made Clearwater their home.

During this same time period, railroad expansion and the development of resort hotels in Florida cities accommodated tourists in fine style. In 1888, Russian immigrant Peter Demens completed the Orange Belt Railway through Clearwater, connecting St. Petersburg with Oakland, Florida, a distance of 117 miles. The Orange Belt Railway had railroad depots in both Clearwater and Palm Harbor. Henry Bradley Plant purchased Demens' railway in 1897 and incorporated it into his existing railroad system which traversed the west coast of Florida. Due in part to the success of the 1888 Tampa Bay Hotel on the banks of the Hillsborough River, Plant decided to add another hotel to his Florida chain and selected the bluff in Belleair for the Belleview Biltmore Hotel. Opening in 1897 as the world's largest occupied wooden structure, the Belleview Biltmore Hotel delivered its guests



via private railroad tracks directly to the plush hotel. The success of the Bellevue Biltmore Hotel assisted in the growth of both Belleair and Clearwater.

### *Florida Land Boom*

Clearwater experienced significant growth and public investments during the 1910s and 1920s. With the separation of the Pinellas Peninsula from Hillsborough County in 1912, Clearwater gained another distinction by becoming the seat of Pinellas County government. The first wooden courthouse constructed in 1912 was replaced by the 1917 courthouse at its current location on Fort Harrison Avenue at Court Street. Although a fire in 1910 destroyed significant parts of Downtown Clearwater, the City quickly rebuilt under strict building codes that required brick construction.

Clearwater benefited from the Florida Land Boom during the 1920s, with the 1926 construction of the City's first skyscraper, the Fort Harrison Hotel, the completion in 1927 of the Million Dollar Causeway from Downtown to Clearwater Beach and significant residential development on the mainland and the Beach. Unfortunately, like other Florida cities, Clearwater also suffered the economic difficulties of the Florida Bust and subsequent nationwide Great Depression beginning in 1929. During this difficult economic time, the federal government commissioned the construction of the main Post Office on Cleveland Street which was completed in 1933. This Mediterranean Revival style building still occupies a prominent location Downtown at the intersection of Cleveland Street and East Avenue.

### *Post WWII Population Boom*

National events of the 1940s through the 1960s affected Clearwater in many ways. From the 1940s through the 1950s, World War II and its aftermath consumed the City and nation. In Clearwater and in much of Florida, the military activity assisted the local economy. Military personnel occupied the Bellevue Biltmore and the Fort Harrison Hotels. After the war ended, Florida experienced a population boom, as did Clearwater.

Another boon to Clearwater's local economy during this time was the City's selection as the spring training home of the Philadelphia Phillies baseball team in 1955. Also in the 1950s, the Chamber of Commerce started the Fun 'N Sun Parade and Festival which originated as a tourist draw and now provides recreational activities for residents and tourists alike over a one month period.

### *Movement out of Downtown*

The opening of Clearwater's first shopping center in 1959 foreshadowed events to come. The Cleveland Plaza at the intersection of Cleveland Street and Missouri Avenue was constructed at a location relatively near but outside of the traditional Downtown. Unfortunately, other commercial businesses had already begun and continued their exodus from Downtown, with many locating to the "new" commercial centers along U.S. Highway 19 North.



In 1968, the Sunshine Mall opened as the City's first enclosed mall, closely followed by the Clearwater Mall in 1973 and the Countryside Mall in 1975. These three events symbolized two major changes in Clearwater: the movement of commercial activity out of Downtown to the east and the movement of the residential center from the center of town to the north as a result of the Countryside residential area created by national developer U.S. Home, Inc. While the new residential area was greatly needed and reflected the countywide northward growth trend, these events had a negative impact on Downtown. The decline of the traditional downtown occurred in Clearwater, as in many American cities, fueled by these changes and the increased availability of private cars and the lack of mass transit systems.

## PLANNING FOR DOWNTOWN

### *First Downtown Plan and CRA*

In 1970, Clearwater was an early leader in Florida's downtown revitalization field as demonstrated by the establishment of a Downtown Development Board (DDB) through a special act of the Florida Legislature. In 1971, Clearwater citizens approved special taxing district powers for the DDB. In 1976, the DDB and the Clearwater City Commission jointly commissioned a major Downtown planning study. The Plan for Downtown Clearwater was presented in 1977 to the City by the principal consulting firm RTKL Associates, Inc. The final Plan included an urban design component, policy direction through goals and objectives and an implementation program.

The City of Clearwater initially established a Community Redevelopment Agency for Downtown and adopted the Redevelopment Plan for Downtown Clearwater in 1981. The blighting factors identified for the Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) in 1981 included:

- A predominance of defective or inadequate street layout by modern standards;
- Faulty lot layout that limited the nature and extent of uses of properties;
- Deterioration of sites, buildings, and other improvements;
- Diversity of ownership which prevented the free alienability of economically feasibly sized properties;
- Unusual conditions of title based on large institutional holdings which restricted the market supply and size of private enterprise land; and
- A static tax base, with conditions of ownership which signified a continuing relative decline in the Downtown area's values.

At the original inception, the CRA comprised 247 acres stretching from Clearwater Harbor to the Cleveland Plaza shopping center vicinity and from Drew Street on the north to Chestnut Street on the south, and encompassed the traditional business district, Coachman Park, the Pinellas County Courthouse and government center, and significant vacant and underutilized land available for redevelopment.

## *Periphery Plans, Downtown Plan Updates and CRA Expansion*

In 1993, the City adopted the Downtown Clearwater Periphery Plan which addressed planning issues for four areas adjacent to the Downtown. In 1995, the City approved a plan amendment to designate these four areas as Central Business District on the Future Land Use Map, thus linking the periphery areas to the traditional Downtown area. These actions recognized the integrated relationship between the core of Downtown and its surrounding residential areas.

In 1995, the City Commission also approved a major revision to the 1981 Redevelopment Plan for Downtown. While retaining the original boundaries of the 1981 Plan, the newly named Clearwater Downtown Redevelopment Plan significantly expanded the policies for Downtown. The 1995 Plan established a Land Use Plan Map for the Downtown that designated allowable uses on a parcel-by-parcel basis. The Plan also established development potential for properties, defining commercial intensity and residential density by sub-area for the Downtown through the creation of Districts. A major portion of the 1995 Plan was devoted to redevelopment projects with implementation to be accomplished by either the public or private sector.

In 2001, the City completed a major update to the Downtown Clearwater Periphery Plan, adopting it as a Special Area Plan for the periphery areas. This better defined the land use plan and development potential for the four periphery areas and provided policy guidance for private redevelopment. As



a Special Area Plan, it served the same land use planning function for the periphery areas that the Clearwater Downtown Redevelopment Plan did for the original Downtown boundaries.

In 2002, the City prepared a Findings and Declarations of Necessity Analysis for the 200-acre area generally east of the existing CRA, known as the “Gateway Expansion Area”, which included land governed by the Southeast and Southwest Expansion Areas of the Clearwater Downtown Periphery Plan. The study clearly demonstrated the need for revitalization outside of the existing CRA boundaries and documented the following conditions:

- Poor lot layout relating to size, accessibility and use;
- Site and environs deterioration;
- Inadequate and outmoded building density patterns;
- Defective or inadequate street configurations, transportation facilities and parking facilities;
- Excessive emergency calls;
- Unsanitary and unsafe environment;
- Excessive violations of the Florida Building Code;
- Diversity of ownership;
- Falling lease rates;
- High residential and commercial vacancy rates; and
- Lack of appreciable increase in the past five years of the aggregate assessed values.

These findings allowed the City to declare the Gateway Expansion Area to be a slum or blighted area, which the Board of County Commissioners approved that same year, thereby expanding the CRA boundaries in 2002, and bringing the total CRA size to 449 acres.

In 2004 a major update to the Clearwater Downtown Redevelopment Plan was completed which incorporated the Gateway Expansion Area (expanded CRA) and the Northwest and Southwest Areas of the Clearwater Downtown Periphery Plan which were not previously integrated into the CRA into the Plan and the Downtown Planning Area. With this expansion, the total Downtown Planning Area expanded to 545 acres, illustrated on the CRA Boundaries and Periphery Plans Map in Appendix 6. At this time six Character Districts were established, as well as the framework for development in each District. The Plan maintained the Downtown Core as the traditional City center and identified the gateways to Downtown, urban neighborhoods and opportunities for new residential, office and commercial development. The Plan established flexibility for future growth with site plan and design review to implement the design guidelines. The overall maximum development potential permitted within Downtown was reduced from the 1995 Plan. The City retained the balance of that excess potential to allocate to specific projects that make a major contribution to Downtown through the creation of the Public Amenities Incentive Pool for the life of the Plan.



## New Bridge

In 2005 a new fixed span bridge replaced the existing drawbridge connecting mainland Clearwater with the Beach. Along with the benefit of improving vehicular circulation to the Beach, the bridge alignment and access has significantly impacted Downtown. Through-traffic was redirected from Cleveland Street to the one-way pair of Court and Chestnut Streets on the southern edge of Downtown. This allowed Cleveland Street to be reclaimed as a local street and regain its place as Downtown's premier shopping street. These changes also created a new eastern gateway into Downtown located at the intersection of Gulf to Bay Boulevard, Highland Avenue and Court Street (also known as Five Points).

## Recent Plans and Studies

The Clearwater Downtown Redevelopment Plan has been amended several times since 2004 to address the changing conditions of Downtown and to further improve the effectiveness of the Plan. Additionally, the City has completed several plans for smaller areas within Downtown that need to have their vision and policies incorporated into the Clearwater Downtown Redevelopment Plan.

In 2011, the City hired Gensler to develop the East Gateway District Vision Plan. This plan utilized a neighborhood market/economic analysis to define the economic base for market-supportable revitalization efforts in the District. Community outreach and stakeholder involvement culminated in a community design charrette that provided a vision for the area and a concept plan and policy framework that identified specific implementation

actions and tools needed to achieve the vision over a 20-year horizon. In 2017, the East Gateway District was renamed the Downtown Gateway.

In 2014, the City contracted with the Urban Land Institute (ULI) to evaluate the City's vision and Downtown redevelopment strategies. The ULI Advisory Services Panel's final report recommended developing several additional plans including a comprehensive boating plan, a study of the "north marina area," and a master plan for the waterfront Bluff.

The ULI noted in their report that the Old Bay neighborhood has a unique mix of housing types that give a rare taste of "old Florida," and the City should invest and enhance the existing community fabric consisting largely of historic bungalows and shotgun-style houses. ULI recommended comprehensively planning for the area, including the Seminole Boat Ramp area, to provide value to both the residents of the neighborhood and the City. In 2016 the City worked with Stantec to prepare the North Marina Area Master Plan, with a study area consisting of a majority of the Old Bay Character District and land northward. The North Marina Area Master Plan's new vision for the area balances the needs of area residents and the boating community and also identifies appropriate redevelopment options. The public was engaged throughout the development of a preferred design concept for the area and implementation strategies for the plan. The plan identified eight key objectives: protecting views of water and bluff; improving connectivity to Downtown through roadway and trail improvements; creating a waterfront destination through the development of uses that attract visitors, residents and boaters,

such as a hotel and restaurants; enhancing the area's unique character through new development that is compatible in scale and form with the historic buildings; putting people first; establishing a cultural hub; promoting a better environment; and unlocking development potential.

Also in 2016 the Clearwater Comprehensive Boating Plan was developed by Moffatt & Nichol. ULI recommended the preparation of the plan as a first step in the long-range objective of making Clearwater, including its Downtown waterfront, the boating capital of the region, if not the State. At the Clearwater Harbor Marina, the plan recommended adding an attraction to draw boaters and non-boaters to the waterfront year-round, reorganizing parking, providing public restrooms, enhancing security, adding public art and artistic lighting, and providing wayfinding. Because the Comprehensive Boating Plan and the North Marina Area Master Plan were completed concurrently, the plan provided more detailed recommendations to improve facilities at the Seminole Boat Ramp and surrounding Marina, including: adding a waterfront hotel with boat slips for guests; enhancing the existing park and marina store; constructing additional staging docks and additional queuing docks to enhance the ramp's functionality; maintaining parking for cars/trailers, even if it is moved to adjacent properties; providing public restrooms; and enhancing security.



The 2014 ULI report identified the Bluff – the highest escarpment along the water’s edge in the State - as a prominent and exceptional asset on which the City could build its brand, and recommended that the City prepare a guiding vision for the area adjacent to the waterfront and Bluff. In 2017, the City completed Imagine Clearwater, which established a vision for Downtown’s waterfront as an active, authentic, iconic civic and open space that celebrates Clearwater’s history, natural beauty, culture and diversity and anchors an economically vibrant Downtown. The plan focused on developing a dynamic waterfront, an activated Bluff and a connected Downtown, and included a master plan for the area that proposed a redesigned waterfront park providing users a series of distinct experiences through several unique areas. To achieve a successful waterfront, the plan recognized that Coachman Park needs an active edge, and identified three City-owned parcels on the Bluff as important catalyst sites: the Main Library, to be activated with additional community uses to leverage its waterfront views; the Harborview Center, proposed to be demolished to create a civic gateway to the park and provide a location for private redevelopment – rental housing or a boutique hotel – to create more activity; and City Hall, to be relocated within Downtown to facilitate a mixed-use development or incorporate a cultural use on the prime waterfront property, to further activate Downtown. The plan identified that the corner of Cleveland Street and North Osceola must be 100% active and that pedestrian and bicyclist mobility is at the foundation of park activation and Downtown connectivity. Core elements of the master plan require charter referendum to accomplish. In November 2017,

City residents approved the first referendum to allow construction and maintenance of certain improvements to support active and passive uses of the Downtown waterfront.

### *2018 Downtown Plan Update*

The 2018 update of the Downtown Redevelopment Plan reaffirms the vision for Downtown as the urban core and heart of the City. It simplifies properties’ development potential so it is not based on lot size, which eliminates the need for lot consolidation in certain Districts. The Plan increases development potential in all Character Districts. In those Character Districts that are primarily low-scale and/or single family residential, density is increased to 35 dwelling units per acre. The density of 35 dwelling units per acre has been identified as being conducive for “missing middle housing” consisting of multiplexes, townhouses and bungalow courts which offer a variety of needed housing types. This increase in density supports the desired residential infill development on small sites that is typical in these neighborhoods, compatible with the existing single family neighborhoods and consistent with urban downtowns. In some instances the density may allow for a single additional unit on an existing parcel and is a gentle way to add density to an urban neighborhood, while also making existing sites and buildings more viable for development.





More specifically, the 2018 update will expand the Old Bay Character District to include the North Marina Area Master Plan and six contiguous parcels to the north to eliminate bifurcation of ownership, particularly along North Fort Harrison Avenue. The Old Bay expansion will increase the Downtown Planning Area from 545 acres to 556 acres. The 2018 update also combines the Town Lake Residential and Town Lake Business Character Districts into one District, Prospect Lake, named for the re-named City stormwater pond and park. This reduces the number of Character Districts from six to five. The boundary revisions are illustrated on Map 1.1. Formerly, the Town Lake Business Park Character District encouraged suburban style office development, which, apart from Frank Crum, did not occur and is not anticipated to happen now. A new direction for the District is envisioned and is appropriate for all properties within the two former Town Lake Districts. Density is increased in the new Prospect Lake Character District. Previously, several developments in the area needed to utilize units from the Public Amenities Incentive Pool to obtain additional density, and where a higher density is appropriate and supported that density should be clear and accessible. The western edge of Prospect Lake Character District received the greatest increase in density to 75 dwelling units per acre, consistent with the Downtown Core Character District, to unify Myrtle Avenue as a corridor. Additionally, this area of the Prospect Lake Character District increased to 2.5 FAR to support office and commercial development. The update clearly defines the acceptable heights that were formerly hinted at in Plan policies, reflecting the importance of protecting the historic single-family character of the Grove Street neighborhood while supporting more intense and taller development

along more major streets.

And, as previously mentioned, the East Gateway District has been rebranded as the Downtown Gateway, this Plan updates the Character District name accordingly.

To implement many of the updated goals of the Plan, the Downtown zoning district in the Community Development Code must be updated to allow many uses by right and to establish design standards for Downtown properties. Implementation will also require Future Land Use Map and Zoning Atlas amendments to sections of the Old Bay, Prospect Lake, and Downtown Gateway Character Districts to reclassify them as Central Business District (CBD) future land use and Downtown (D) District, thereby unifying the entire Downtown Planning Area. The Design Guidelines have been removed from this Plan and will be incorporated in the Downtown (D) Zoning District in the Community Development Code as design standards.

Since the adoption of the 2004 Downtown Redevelopment Plan many notable goals have been achieved and projects developed including the Cleveland Streetscaping Phase I and II, Prospect Lake Park, Station Square Park, Main Library, Capital Theatre, Downtown Marina, Glen Oaks Stormwater Detention Facility and the Nolen apartments. Clearwater is poised for great accomplishments in Downtown. All of the elements are in place for success: a waterfront with exceptional natural beauty, locational advantages, committed citizens and determined elected officials. Let this Plan set the course towards the future success of Downtown.

Notes: The section on planning history is based on John Nolen's Comprehensive City Plan of 1926 and the research on Nolen by Bruce Stephenson, Rollins College. The Clearwater history section relied in great part on Michael Sanders' book Clearwater, A Pictorial History.

# Map 1.1 Proposed Expansion & New Districts

## Clearwater Downtown Redevelopment Plan

