



ENHANCING PINELLAS COUNTY BEACH ACCESS

November 2015

Introduction

At its September Work Session, the Pinellas Planning Council/Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization (PPC/MPO) Board identified three priority emphasis areas: 1) a vision for the US 19 corridor; 2) enhancing beach access; and 3) the Gateway.

Understanding this beach access subject starts with Pinellas County's best-known natural asset, and that is the 35-mile stretch of white sand beaches located along the barrier islands facing the Gulf of Mexico and separated from the mainland by the Intracoastal Waterway. Along this shoreline, which extends from the Anclote River and Fred Howard Park in Tarpon Springs on the north to St. Pete Beach and Fort Desoto on the south - encompassing 13 local government jurisdictions, communities have developed to serve both permanent residents, businesses, and tourists.

This beach area developed in the post-World War II era, with a unique character evolving in each community, but all sharing similar interests and issues. Tourism is still the dominant industry for our beach areas, and has a significant economic benefit countywide and throughout the Tampa Bay region. So, not only is there a need to provide access to and along the beach areas for tourism, we need to provide reliable transportation options for the beach workforce as well as appropriate goods, services, and accommodations for residents and tourists. In the reverse, there is also demand for access from beach visitors and residents to the mainland for shopping, dining, and various forms of entertainment.

From a land use perspective, over the past 20 years or so every community in Pinellas County has experienced significant pressure to redevelop. These areas have structures and infrastructure that is decades old, so there is a great opportunity to redevelop in a quality fashion, and at a scale and design that is appropriate for each of these unique communities.

Many efforts have been undertaken to guide and shape this redevelopment, including the far-reaching and well-known plan for Clearwater called Beach-by-Design. They also include many of the various neighborhood and downtown plans adopted by local governments, and local government land development code and local government and countywide comprehensive plan changes that address what form our built areas should take. Those plans are focused both on the existing defined centers of activity, and to a lesser degree along the Gulf Boulevard corridor and the corridors leading to the beaches from the mainland.

With respect to transportation, the east-west access points and north-south roadway corridor have seen significant physical and operational changes in the past few years, with a variety of entities leading or influencing those changes. Local governments along the beaches and other government agencies like the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) and Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA) have worked to provide residents, tourists and others safe, and convenient access between neighborhoods and destinations along the corridor and between the beaches and the mainland.

Project Scope

One way to define beach access is by concluding there are at least 13 east-to-west, mainland-to-beach access points that accommodate vehicle travel, with each of these experiencing significantly high levels of congestion during certain times of the year. These access points primarily serve the automobile, with some providing facilities to accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists; however, this has not been done in a consistent manner. The beach access subject not only takes into account the beach communities, but the mainland areas as well (i.e., the transportation system and land uses), as all visitors and many residents and workers must first travel from or through the mainland.

In addition, the north-south roadway corridor from Clearwater on the north to St. Pete Beach and Fort De Soto Park on the south has to accommodate the residents and visitors needs, not just with transportation accommodations and options, but also with appropriate land uses that serve them.

Project Goals

The project will result in specific recommendations and priority actions that enhance safe and convenient access for residents, tourists and visitors, and employees needing access to all beach areas and access along the beach corridor. This will involve the provision of a variety of transportation options for all users, including where appropriate: Complete Streets, seamless intermodal connections from other parts of Pinellas County and Tampa Bay, access via water taxi and other unique forms of travel, bike share programs, consistent signage and pavement markings, and robust transit service – essentially creating an array of reliable and convenient transportation choices to improve access and economic vitality in keeping with the unique context of our beach areas.

The project will also identify the appropriate and complementary redevelopment of areas to include a mix of uses, while respecting the desired scale of development and being careful to protect the character of the surrounding residential areas. This all must be done in proper context to the surrounding areas, as determined appropriate by each local government. Additionally, proper regulatory tools and urban design are important aspects facilitating this redevelopment.

Some of the specific strategies and actions to accomplish this include:

- Involve a variety of public and private stakeholders in the identification of issues and opportunities pertaining to beach access, building consensus on appropriate strategies for the corridor and each community, keep them involved in finding ways to address those issues and build upon those opportunities, and ensure that they are included in carrying out the solutions and capitalizing on the opportunities.
- Evaluate all modes of travel available to the beaches and along the beach corridor, including the assessment of:
 - Automobile levels of congestion, transit service levels, and facilities available for other modes of travel (i.e., walking and bicycling);
 - The feasibility of implementing park and ride, shuttle, water taxis, Intelligent Traffic Systems, informational signage, and other technologies to improve access and mobility options;

- The location, number, and operation of intermodal centers to ensure that they are coordinated with other transportation improvements and so that they have the greatest benefit to the beach areas;
 - Conflict points, gaps in service, and the inconsistent provision of transportation infrastructure;
 - Traffic control measures, signage and way finding systems in place to determine their effectiveness at improving safety, offering convenience, and reducing vehicle speeds and improving upon safety in critical areas (utilizing available crash data to assist in this evaluation);
 - The consistent and predictable application of signs, pavement markings and other multimodal strategies to aid understanding and compliance by various users of the transportation network;
 - Motor vehicle demand management accomplished by working with employers and strengthening the role of other modes of transportation; and
 - Feasibility of applying innovative transportation strategies that help meet the demand for travel while enhancing the user experience.
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- The identification mixed use areas that are underutilized, as well as areas that could benefit from the location of a mix of uses;
 - Applying the appropriate redevelopment strategies that promote compact, mixed-use redevelopment;
 - Provide information and outreach to all barrier island local governments on the benefits of compact mixed use development and redevelopment, including providing for more efficient use of land resulting in a higher economic benefit, better utilization of existing infrastructure, reducing the number and length of vehicle trips, and being better served by our transit system;
 - Evaluate local government land development regulations and comprehensive plan policies to determine how they address mixed uses;
 - Develop design criteria and redevelopment regulations that are supportive of mobility, access and safety for all transportation users;
 - Evaluate issues impacting access for existing neighborhoods, including preserving and protecting their character; and
 - Interface with external agencies (e.g., FDOT, PSTA, the Southwest Florida Water Management District - SWFWMD, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency - FEMA) to address opportunities for redevelopment under a unified approach.

Communications and Public Involvement

A communications and education campaign will be used to move this project along and will:

- Include an outreach plan defining key stakeholders/contacts;
- Establish a lasting coalition of interested individuals and entities; and
- Maintain clear and consistent communication as a priority.

There are a variety of groups that are impacted by this topic, including many government agencies that are involved in programs and projects addressing the needs of the beach areas. This includes the 13 local governments fronting on the Gulf of Mexico, but also the 12 remaining local governments in



Pinellas County that are affected by what goes on there. In addition, the PSTA, the FDOT, the SWFWMD, the FEMA are some of the important governmental agencies to be involved. From a non-governmental perspective, there are many that are affected by the interaction of transportation and land use along the beaches; and these include hotel and restaurant owners, retail and office building and business owners, chambers of commerce, and the Visit St. Pete/Clearwater Convention and Visitors Bureau. The work plan entails a process that involves those entities to meet the needs of the beach areas and Pinellas County in partnership.

End Products/Results

This project will result in the identification of the gaps, needs, and barriers to enhancing beach access. A variety of solutions to address these issues will be developed, prioritized, and programmed. We will be left with a clear path to creating the appropriate consistent and coordinated development form that includes quality design, safety, and convenience for all users accessing the beach areas.