

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**



## **INTRODUCTION**

### **HISTORY OF CLEARWATER**

Clearwater has a long and illustrious history of planning for its future. Clearwater was one of the early Florida cities that recognized the need for a City plan and in 1925 acted on this belief by hiring John Nolen, a nationally known planner, to prepare a plan for the City. Having completed plans for the neighboring cities of St. Petersburg and Belleair, 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 with the following major elements:

- A street thoroughfare system;
- A park system;
- Locations of schools and playgrounds;
- Creation of a civic center of public uses in Downtown;
- Development of a downtown business district;
- Development of industrial areas north and south of Downtown;
- 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.

Nolen's Plan also included an illustrated Regional Plan, General Plan for the City Proper and Waterfront (i.e., Downtown) and a Comprehensive City Plan detailing the above concepts. 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.

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 and the recognition of the Florida climate as furthering that interest brought many tourists to Florida thereby increasing the permanent population 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 built in the Russian architectural style, native to the railway's founder. A Florida pioneer, Henry Bradley Plant, purchased Demens' railway in 1897, and incorporated it into his existing railroad system which transversed 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 determined 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 Belleview Biltmore Hotel assisted in the growth of both Belleair and Clearwater. Incorporated in 1891, Clearwater experienced significant growth and public improvements 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 requiring brick construction.

Clearwater felt the benefit of the Florida Land Boom during the 1920s including 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, federal construction contracts for Bay Pines Hospital and the Veteran's Administration Center assisted by employing Pinellas County citizens. In Clearwater, the federal government commissioned the construction of the main Post Office on Cleveland Street which was completed in 1933. This imposing Mediterranean Revival style building still occupies a prominent location Downtown at the intersection of Cleveland Street and East Avenue.

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 Belleview Biltmore and the Fort Harrison Hotel. After the war ended, Florida experienced a population boom, as did Clearwater.

Another boom to Clearwater's local economy during this time was the City's selection as the spring training home of the Philadelphia Phillies baseball team. The Phillies spring training facility was constructed by the City in 1955 and named in honor of Jack Russell Jr., a local major league baseball player. Also in the 1950s, the Chamber of Commerce started the Fun 'N Sun Parade which this year celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The Fun 'N Sun Festival originated as a tourist draw and now provides recreational activities for residents and tourists alike over a one month period.

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 several major elements: the desire for the "new mall" and new improved residential neighborhoods, commercial expansion that outgrew available land Downtown, the increased availability of private cars and the lack of mass transit systems.

## **PURPOSE OF THIS PLAN**

This Plan reflects Clearwater's desire to reclaim its traditional downtown and make it the center and heart of the City. Why should Clearwater residents and corporate citizens care about the revitalization of Downtown? There are several good reasons that downtown revitalization is important to all Clearwater citizens. First, every city should have a unique place that fosters community interaction and fun. Downtown should and can be that place for Clearwater residents and tourists alike. Second, Downtown Clearwater is a reflection of how our forefathers lived, worked and shopped. Clearwater's past can be seen in its historic buildings in and around Downtown and historic Coachman Park. We cannot envision and plan for the future unless we are mindful of our past learning from our successes and failures. Third, Clearwater is the Pinellas County seat and should present a welcoming air to all of Pinellas County residents as they transact business with their government. Finally, Clearwater's Downtown is still a major player in the City's economic life and has a grand opportunity to increase its economic impact through redevelopment.

The purpose of this 20-year Plan is two-fold: to serve as a Special Area Plan in accordance with the Countywide Rules of Pinellas County and Florida Growth Management Rules and to serve as a Community Redevelopment Plan in accordance with Florida's Community Redevelopment Act. As a Special Area Plan, this document is the land use plan for Downtown guiding future development through goals, objectives and policies and by the establishment of development potential for six unique character districts. As a Community Redevelopment Plan, this document sets the policies that guide future actions and projects of the City's Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) as it seeks to redevelop the central business district of Clearwater and its newly expanded area. A brief history of Clearwater's Downtown planning activities will assist in setting the context for this Downtown Plan.

In 1970, Clearwater was an early leader in the downtown revitalization field in Florida 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 and a Redevelopment Plan for Downtown in 1981. At the original inception, the Community Redevelopment Area comprised 247 acres stretching from Clearwater Harbor to the Cleveland Plaza shopping center vicinity and from Drew Street on the north to Chestnut Avenue on the south. The original Downtown area had the same boundaries as the 1977 RTKL Associates Plan and encompassed the traditional business district, Coachman Park, the Pinellas County Courthouse and government center and significant vacant and underutilized land available for redevelopment.

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 Plan, thus linking the periphery areas to the traditional Downtown area. These actions recognized the integrated relationship between the core Downtown and its surrounding residential areas.

In 1995, the City Commission approved a major revision to the Clearwater Downtown Redevelopment Plan. While retaining the original boundaries of the earlier Downtown plan, the Plan significantly expanded the policies for Downtown. The 1995 Plan established five overall goals for Downtown which have been retained in major part in this new plan. The 1995 Plan established a land use plan map for the Downtown defining residential, commercial, office, mixed use, public/governmental, religious, and open space/recreational land uses. The Plan also established development potential defining commercial intensity and residential density by sub-area for the Downtown. A major portion of the 1995 Plan was devoted to redevelopment projects with implementation to

be accomplished by either the public or private sector. Some of the public sector projects are now under construction including the new Main Library and the “Prospect Lake Park” for stormwater management.

In 2001, the City approved a major update to the Downtown Clearwater Periphery Plan. The Update better defines the land use plan and development potential for the four periphery areas and provides policy guidance for private redevelopment. The Downtown Clearwater Periphery Plan Update was adopted as a Special Area Plan for these areas, having the same land use planning function for the periphery areas that the Redevelopment Plan does for the original Downtown boundaries.

As is often the case with downtowns, outside influences provide opportunities for rethinking the form and function of downtown. In Clearwater’s case, the recent outside influence is the construction of a new fixed span bridge to replace the existing drawbridge that connects mainland Clearwater with the Beach. Along with the benefits of a new bridge that will improve vehicular circulation to the Beach, the new bridge alignment and access will have a significant impact on Downtown. Through traffic will be re-routed to the Court/Chestnut one-way pair on the southern edge of Downtown, thus allowing Cleveland Street to be reclaimed as a local street and regain its place as Downtown’s premier shopping street. An additional change as a result of the bridge construction is the importance of a new eastern gateway into Downtown located at the intersection of Gulf-to-Bay Boulevard with Highland Avenue and Court Street.

In recognition of the important relationship between the new Eastern Gateway and Downtown, in 2002, the City prepared a Findings and Declaration of Necessity Analysis pursuant to Florida’s Community Redevelopment Act. The Findings Analysis documents the existing conditions and challenges to redevelopment in the Eastern Gateway and sets the stage for combining this area with the original Community Redevelopment Area.

By the approval of the Findings Analysis in October 2002, the Board of County Commissioners approved the expansion of the Community Redevelopment Area for this eastern section of approximately 201 acres. The approval of the Findings Analysis also authorized the City to prepare a Redevelopment Plan for the expanded CRA. This Plan is the Redevelopment Plan for the expanded CRA and the existing CRA whose total land area now comprises 449 acres. There are two areas contained in the Downtown Clearwater Periphery Plan, immediately north and south of Downtown, which are now included in this Plan but are not incorporated into the CRA (See Map 1, page 9, Comparison of Existing and Expanded CRA and Periphery Plan Areas).



**MAP 1**

**RESERVE FOR**



## **SUMMARY OF CURRENT PLAN GOALS**

With this Plan, the City seeks to achieve an integrated approach to planning for the traditional downtown core, existing and planned urban residential neighborhoods and significant gateways to Downtown and the Beach. The Plan consolidates planning efforts and previous planning documents for the traditional Downtown core, the four periphery areas and the new eastern gateway to Downtown. The Plan establishes six unique Character Districts within the Downtown planning area and sets the framework for evaluating redevelopment within each district. The Plan maintains the Downtown Core as the traditional City center serving as the focus of office, government and civic activity. The Old Bay, South Gateway and East Gateway character districts comprise the existing urban neighborhoods and function as the major entryways into Downtown. The Town Lake Residential Character District provides extensive opportunities for new residential development in close proximity to the employment center. The Town Lake Business Park provides opportunities for corporate office development with all of the amenities of Downtown.

This Plan increases the size of the Community Redevelopment Area by 201 acres through extending the CRA from its current boundaries east to the new gateway at Gulf-to-Bay Boulevard, Highland Avenue and Court Street. In addition to the traditional and innovative planning tools to regulate development, this Plan establishes flexibility for future growth by establishing a vision for each Character District which is implemented through site plan and design review. The Plan incorporates design guidelines both for the historic Downtown area and for new construction within each Character District. The Plan establishes varied implementation methods to effectuate this plan. The implementation of this Plan includes a Housing and Neighborhood Element; public strategies to implement the goals, objectives and policies; a Capital Improvement Plan pursuant to the Community Redevelopment Act; redevelopment incentives and estimates of the Tax Increment Revenues available for implementing the Plan.

Clearwater is poised for great accomplishments 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.

For the Clearwater history section, the author relied in great part on Michael Sanders' book *Clearwater, A Pictorial History*.

