

VILANO BEACH





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Community Snapshot

VISION: “The visioning group developed individual broad statements for areas of focus which included: Land Use and the Environment, Infrastructure, Architectural Review, Culture and Leisure, and Governance.”

DESIGNATION: 1999

APPLICANTS: North Shore Improvement Association and St. Johns County

STATUS: Active; Vilano Beach Waterfronts Florida Partnership is a sub-set of the North Shore Improvement Association.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Received Sustainable Florida Best Practices Award from the Council for a Sustainable Florida; worked with St. Johns Board of County Commissioners to create a Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) and a special zoning overlay for Vilano Beach; with County partner, oversaw infrastructure improvements and installation of public art and upgrades to facilities at the waterfront fishing pier and purchased oceanfront property for a community center; obtained grant from Waterfronts Florida Partnership Program to develop business marketing plan, Town Center designs, and handbook for developers.

CURRENT CHALLENGES: The economy and the price of gasoline; need for volunteers.

FLORIDA ASSESSMENT OF COASTAL TRENDS DATA:

Public Dollars Contributed: \$18.7 million

Private Dollars Contributed: \$75,000

VILANO BEACH



Vilano Beach, one of Florida's earliest land development communities, is flanked by the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Intracoastal Waterway on the west. A cluster of mostly single-family homes and a smattering of small businesses are situated at the northern edge of the inlet to the Tolomato River, some two miles seaward of the historic City of St. Augustine.

The community was built in the 1920s by New York philanthropist August Heckscher and the St. Augustine & Atlantic Corporation. The oceanfront Grand Vilano Casino was the centerpiece at a time when a casino was a venue for entertainment, not gambling. The structure was known for its "monumental architecture, salt water swimming pool, and fine dining." The development failed in the Florida land bust circa 1926, and the Casino washed away in a Nor'easter in 1939 despite Heckscher's battle to protect it from the sea.

Vilano Beach transformed itself in the years following World War II as a string of small motels and restaurants grew up along then-SR A1A, catering to the newly mobile American public that arrived from the mainland by bridge. When the Florida Department of Transportation relocated SR A1A two blocks to the north to accommodate the ramp for a high-rise fixed span bridge, the community floundered, becoming a cul-de-sac of sorts with homes but little or no stable

businesses. While Vilano kept its community footprint, the new route sent travelers away from the community with little more than a glance before the turn to the beach road. Motels converted to long-term rentals and commerce withered.

Some of the buildings and a kind of large-scale memorabilia that gives a taste of "Old Florida" survive today. The historic 1950s sign at Haley's Motor Lodge Court — a comet — has been refurbished and reinstalled; the Blue Bird of Happiness — two orange balls and a beak stuck together to promote fresh Florida orange juice — came home the summer of 2008. It will be repainted and relocated in what promises to be Vilano's Town Center in the 21st century.

THE VISION

Vilano Beach is one of a series of residential developments lined up alongside SR A1A up to Ponte Vedra in northern St. Johns County. These unincorporated communities — working together as the North Shores Improvement Association (NSIA) — began development of a vision for the area in 1995 as part of a County initiative, spurred at least in part by rapid growth in the coastal areas. Accepted by the Board of County Commissioners in February 1999, the vision goals include:

- A town center and business district along Vilano Road (old SR A1A) from the Intracoastal Waterway to the Atlantic Ocean; and
- A focal point for recreation and special events at Vilano Pier at the waterway side and at Vilano Beach at the Atlantic side.

Just as importantly, the NSIA vision created a path for doing business with government, called for civic education of citizenry, and set out the initial list of partners to help implement their vision. Within months, the St. Johns County Commission applied for designation as a Waterfronts Florida Partnership Community.

THE VILANO BEACH WATERFRONTS FLORIDA PARTNERSHIP

The Vilano Beach Waterfronts Florida Partnership was the first community without ties to the commercial fishing industry to receive assistance from the Waterfronts Florida Program. The review committee decision considered the economic loss imposed on the community by the state-supported re-alignment of A1A. For structure and practicality, the Waterfronts Committee was formed as a sub-group of the NSIA, a non-profit corporation, thereby expanding its options



for financial support. Unlike some Waterfronts Partnerships, the Vilano Beach committee is a collection of self-selected members who volunteer for projects, serve as officers, or do both; the working partners are not appointed by local government and the group does not hold elections.

The idea of a town center captured the imagination and the energy of the Partnership from the beginning. Still, the group recognized that it would

take large sums of money and more than grants to convert the Vilano Beach main street to a vibrant town center and so began learning about Community Redevelopment Areas (CRA) and Tax Increment Financing (TIF). The Partnership and others hesitated upon learning the community must be designated as a “blighted” area to become a CRA, but then yielded because of the long-term financial gains. The County Commission created the Vilano Beach CRA in 2002 and so far it has produced some \$12.5 million for streetscape improvements, a zoning overlay, and a companion handbook for developers.

The linchpin for revitalization came in 2007 with the public purchase of Fiddlers Green Restaurant to be used for a community and environmental educational center and Vilano Beach Oceanfront Park. The Florida Communities Trust put up a grant for \$4.1 million, matched with \$1.4 million from the County, to buy the 1.7 acres of waterfront property. The park is in line for designation as an official trailhead for the East Coast Greenway, a stop on the Florida Birding Trail, and the A1A Scenic and Historic Highway Scenic Byway.

The Vilano Beach list of accomplishments and future goals is lengthy. In 2007 alone, the County revamped the urban streetscape design and constructed pavilions; installed public art; and widened Vilano Road to install sidewalks and angled parking. Separately, a marketing plan was developed for Vilano

and technical assistance is being provided to business and property owners on business recruitment.

Vilano Beach’s key to success may be linked to the abilities of the Partnership to learn the language of planning and government, form partnerships, and to renew itself with fresh advocacy organizations and members. The Vilano Beach Waterfronts Partnership joined forces with another group aimed at revitalizing the area — the Vilano Beach Main Street program — that draws from the same cadre of volunteers. Together the programs depend on the energy of local residents and the financial support of St. Johns County to make the Vilano Beach vision a reality.

CHALLENGES

Development activity at Vilano Beach – as elsewhere in Florida and the nation – slowed in 2007 and 2008, putting the plans for the Town Center on hold. The Partnership and its various iterations and local residents say the work to make this community a destination is moving forward, although at a diminished pace; they are waiting for the economy to rebound and looking for developers to take the next steps toward making the Town Center a reality. Meanwhile, the County is working with property and business owners, offering training on the comprehensive plan and on code enforcement, and encouraging people to “clean up and fix up” existing structures. Some things, communities have learned, can be done with little or no money or grants; sweat equity still spends.

