

# TOWN OF WELAKA DOWNTOWN VISION



**Welaka, FL**  
*River of Lakes*



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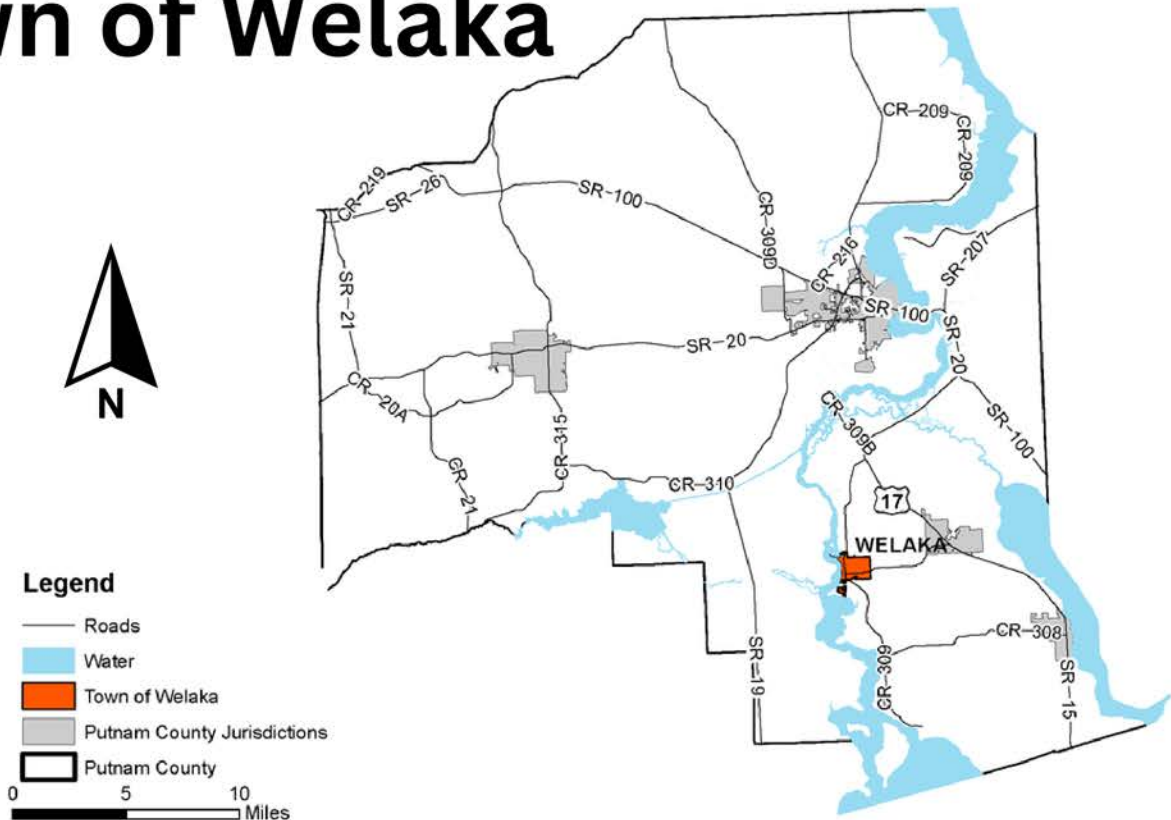
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## Town of Welaka



# WELAKA'S VISION

## Background

In 2022, the Town of Welaka undertook a strategic planning process to review options for a village center. The intent of the process was to plan for the preservation of the Town's unique character and quality of life, given outside development pressures. This plan provides an overview of the public involvement process and subsequent strategies to help the Town continue to enjoy its small-town feeling, locally owned, characteristics establishments, and scenic nature.



## Draft Vision

The Town of Welaka has a feeling of straddling the past and its potential future. This unique situation is confronted by the potential transformation of the surrounding area with a nationally branded fishing high-end resort. Welaka must plan for this expected growth to protect its natural and cultural assets. In planning for the future, the Town will enhance its quality of life and increase economic opportunities while also preserving its identity as a unique "Old Florida" town.

To preserve its unique characteristics, the Town of Welaka needs to create an inventory of its natural and cultural assets, especially its historic buildings and hundred year old oak trees. The preservation of aesthetically pleasing architecture as well as natural shading from the tree canopy will provide a base to be built on.

The Town can enhance its beauty through design and prepare for the future. Community pride can be displayed by welcoming residents and visitors alike through a community-determined entryway. An inviting entrance will create an opportunity for traffic to slow down and stop for a visit. A pedestrian-oriented downtown will enhance a social, safe, and inviting environment for current residents and visitors. With this enhanced walkability, the community has an opportunity to connect important public assets like the downtown park and waterfront.

By creating a more defined downtown and preserving its unique identity, the town will be well-positioned to experience economic growth. Increased foot traffic will entice small-scale retail and restaurant development. The enhancement of community assets such as the downtown park and waterfront will be an amenity for residents and incentivize visitors to stay for longer periods of time and spend locally. This plan is only a vision and guide for future efforts by the Town. On its own, it does not make any of the changes called for. It does provide a roadmap for future projects, each of which needs further exploration and refinement, which together will move the community forward."

# IMAGINING THE FUTURE BY PRESERVING THE PAST

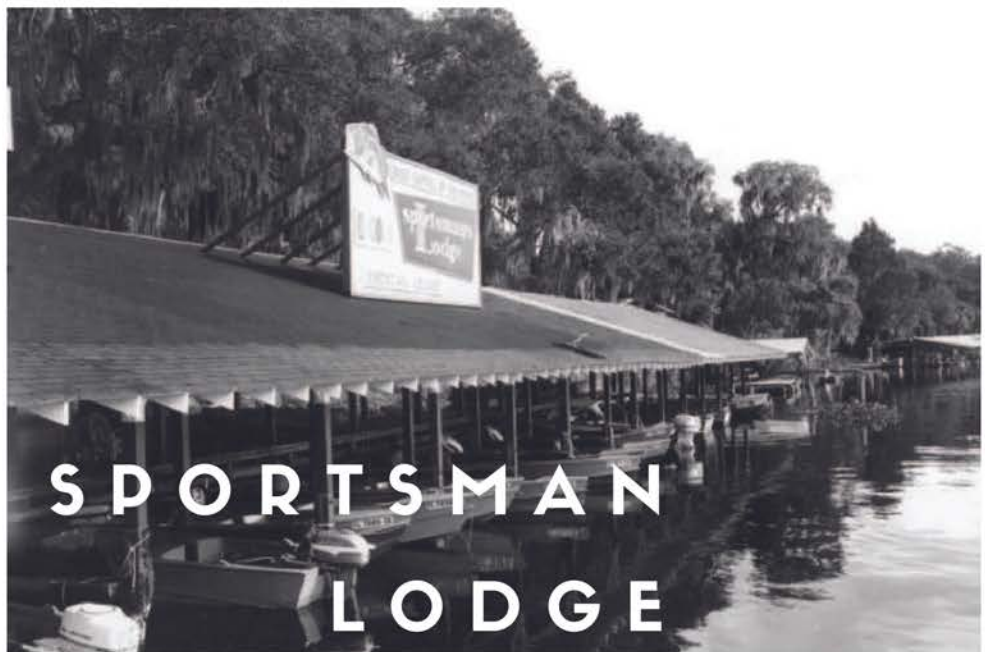
## Let's start with our history

Welaka has a fascinating history, both pre-historic and modern, within the town limits and adjacent to it. Though the town was incorporated in 1887, human occupation can be traced back in the area for more than one thousand years. Directly to the south of Welaka is the Mount Royal site where there is archaeological evidence of habitation from the 10th to 14th centuries. There is evidence that this site served as a center for trade with Native communities as far west as Illinois which residents proudly remember today.

After the American Civil War, with many visitors seeking medicinal cures from nearby springs, Welaka became a resort destination for guests seeking access to cures from nearby springs. The town became such a destination for its 'healing waters' that the Mineral Water Company was established in 1907 to market the water to visitors.

With the decline of riverboat traffic at the beginning of the 20th century along with the consequences of the "Big Freeze" in 1895, Welaka began to rely on the fishing industry with the establishment of the Welaka Seafood Company, the O.H. Morris Fish and Crab Company, and the St. Johns River Crab Company.

Today, the unique "Old Florida" character of Welaka makes it well-positioned to experience the next period of growth through tourism, and this plan illustrates the exciting opportunities for the Town going into the future.





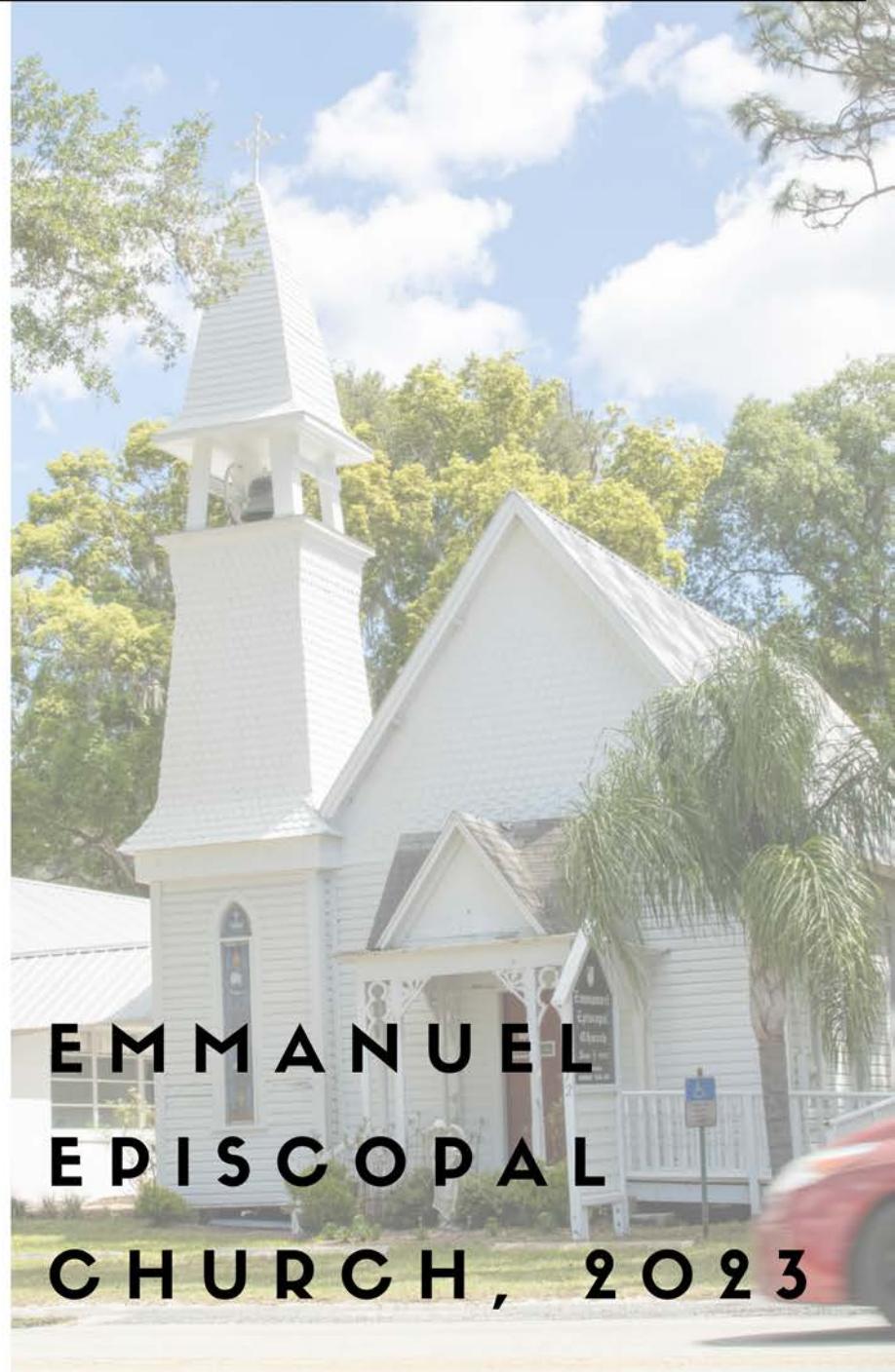
Welaka, FL  
*River of Lakes*

# THIS PLAN ILLUSTRATES THE EXCITING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WELAKA

## A DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

A Competitive Florida Partnership Grant Program from the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity provided the opportunity for the Town of Welaka to plan for economic development in anticipation of potential changes associated with development of a nationally branded fishing resort nearby. At the heart of this community-driven process are proactive elected officials and residents with a desire to develop a village center or downtown to define its identity, attract visitors, and increase property and sales tax revenue for the Town.

The Northeast Florida Regional Council (NEFRC) was contracted by the Town of Welaka to manage the grant and assist the community through a visioning exercise. Due to the nature of the work, the NEFRC collaborated with the Center for Hydro-generated Urbanism at the University of Florida's Faculty of Architecture, to assist with a visual narrative that illustrates the residents vision for their village center.



EMMANUEL  
EPISCOPAL  
CHURCH, 2023

# A PROCESS THAT INCLUDED EXTENSIVE COMMUNITY INPUT

A number of meetings took place to maximize citizen input and share ideas and concerns. The transparent process took place over several meetings which began in the fall of 2022.

## MEETING 1: CITIZENS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

NEFRC staff attended a meeting in October 2022 to provide background to the Citizens Advisory Committee. The visioning process was designed to maximize resident input. Opportunities for engagement included methods that were designed to enhance resident participation. All meetings were advertised and open to the public.

## MEETING 2: PUBLIC WORKSHOP

The visioning exercise had a kick-off meeting in November 2022 that was attended by approximately 60 residents. The NEFRC made a presentation that included a visual preference survey to determine the design vision for the community. The visual preference survey was administered using the Mentimeter, a tool that allowed for quantifiable feedback on the concepts and styles presented to the participants. Following that was an opportunity to provide open ended feedback at breakout stations on the proposed designs, proposed Downtown overlay, and quality of life concerns.

The visual preference survey first asked residents about their preferences for architectural elements and style. Residents were presented with a slide that had photos to be evaluated on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 was terrible, 3 was indifferent, and 5 was good). The results from each answer were added and a weighted average was derived. The answers with the higher weighted averages received the most support and were developed into recommendations.



# SETTING A PROJECT IN MOTION

## MEETING 3: TOWN COUNCIL MEETING

NEFRC compiled results from the November 2022 visual preference survey as well as an initial set of recommendations and presented them to Town Council in January 2023. The Town Council requested a second community workshop to further expand on these recommendations.

## MEETING 4: COMMUNITY ASSET INVENTORY

In March 2023, the Community Asset Inventory brought together State agencies and the Town of Welaka to discuss the implementation-specific issues and projects in the town. The Departments of State, Transportation, Environment Protection, and Economic Opportunity attended the Asset Inventory Event.

Mayor Watts kicked off the day by providing a tour to approximately 50 people comprised of Town residents, State agencies, the NEFRC, and the University of Florida. The tour and presentations were recorded and were shared on the Town's Facebook page. Following lunch, which was provided by the Town, State representatives made short presentations that included program information and funding opportunities.



MAYOR WATTS  
LED A TOUR OF  
WELAKA

## Town of Welaka Visual Preference Survey

Architectural Elements	Respondents	Weighted Average
Height: 1-story	51	4.04
Height: 2-story	53	2.34
Green Infrastructure: Ditch	53	2.68
Green Infrastructure: Rain Garden	50	3.86
Golf Carts & Bike Paths	53	4.43
Street Parking	45	3.44
Off-street Parking	49	3.24
Passive Park	50	4.08
Active Park	52	3.52
Expanded Marina	48	3.98
Sunset Pavilion	51	4.02
Additional River Access: Motorized	52	3.62
Additional River Access: Non-motorized	51	4.00

## Town of Welaka Visual Preference Survey

Architectural Style	Respondents	Weighted Average
Log Cabin Style	51	2.51
Modern Rustic Style	49	1.37
Coastal	50	3.78
Board & Batten Style	50	3.08
Historical Style	50	2.18
European Village	49	1.51
Commercial Style	50	1.10

## DESIGN ELEMENTS


Town residents showed a marked preference for single-story building heights. Rain Gardens had a higher ranking than the ditch green infrastructure. Moreover, there was a strong preference for golf carts and bike paths. When the residents were asked about recreational space, a passive park had a higher average response than an active park.

Moving to the waterfront, residents expressed support for an expanded marina, sunset pavilion, and additional river access. As for the architectural style, "Coastal," which depicted typical simple wooden buildings with front porches, followed by "Board and Batten" had the highest rankings.

After the workshop, residents expressed to elected officials that several people were unable to attend but interested in providing feedback. The visual preference survey presentation was posted on the Town of Welaka Facebook page, and there were an additional 20 responses.

**4. Coastal Style**

Question	Coastal Style				
Respondents	40				
Choices		Weighted average	1	2	3
			4	5	6
			3.78	3	3



**5. Golf Carts & Bike Paths**

Question	Golf Carts & Bike Paths				
Respondents	53				
Choices		Weighted average	1	2	3
			4	5	6
			4.43	4	4







# TAKING A SECOND LOOK

## MEETING 5: SECOND PUBLIC WORKSHOP

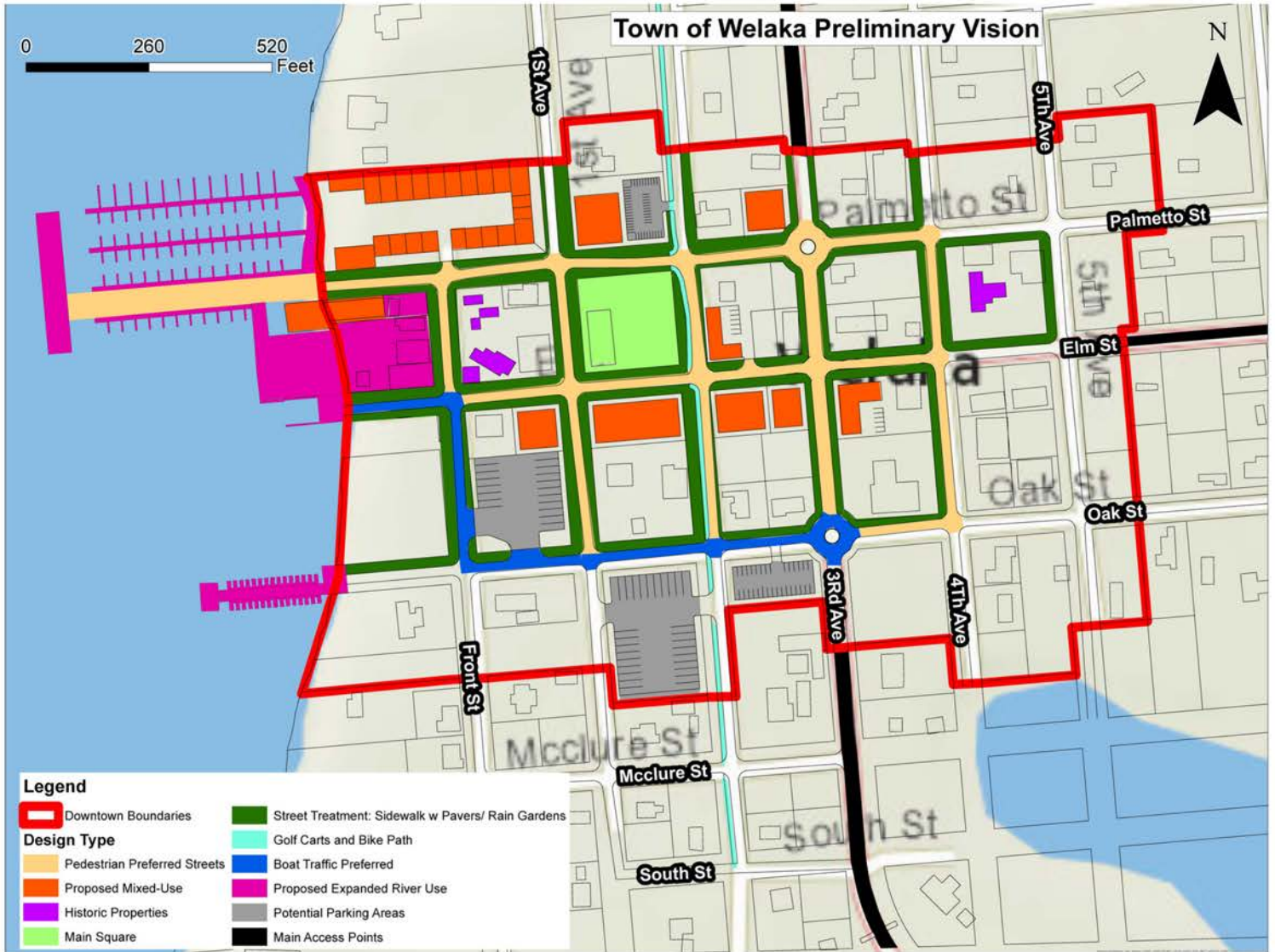
The second public workshop took place in March 2023 and 52 town residents attended. Mayor Watts opened the floor by providing an overview of why a plan with a vision is necessary for the Town of Welaka. The NEFRC made a presentation that provided an expanded explanation and example of the proposed recommendations. Residents were invited to provide input during the presentation as well as breakout sessions. The sessions had renderings of the proposed waterfront, a map with proposed recommendations, and a third station for comments on the overall vision.

## Meeting 6: Presentation of Final Vision to Town Council

The final vision was presented at the May 2023 Town Council meeting. The presentation included proposed recommendations, accompanying renderings or pictures, and potential funding sources.



# MAPPING OUT OUR VISION



# PEDESTRIAN FRIENDLY

## Pedestrian Preferred Streets

In a historic town like Welaka, establishing a pedestrian-friendly downtown area will enhance the community's identity and social environment, while creating development opportunities. Establishing a walkable downtown will require sidewalk and street redesign to create a safe and aesthetically-pleasing place to walk and spend time. Paving sidewalks and roads can create accessibility and continuity that improve flow without interruptions for pedestrians. Pedestrian-friendly downtowns are designed to encourage greater foot traffic and as a result open the door to local commercial development such as coffee shops, bakeries, bait shops; etc.



OFFSET CURB EXTENSION, ALSO CALLED CHICANES, CAN SLOW TRAFFIC SPEEDS

# GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

## Street Design Strategies

Street Racks for Street Water Runoff: to reduce water speed

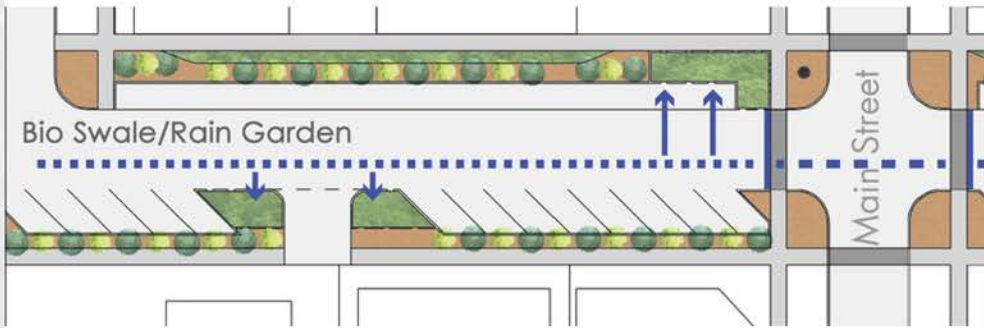


Figure 48 - 50. Street Rack Samples  
Figure 51. Rain Garden System Section



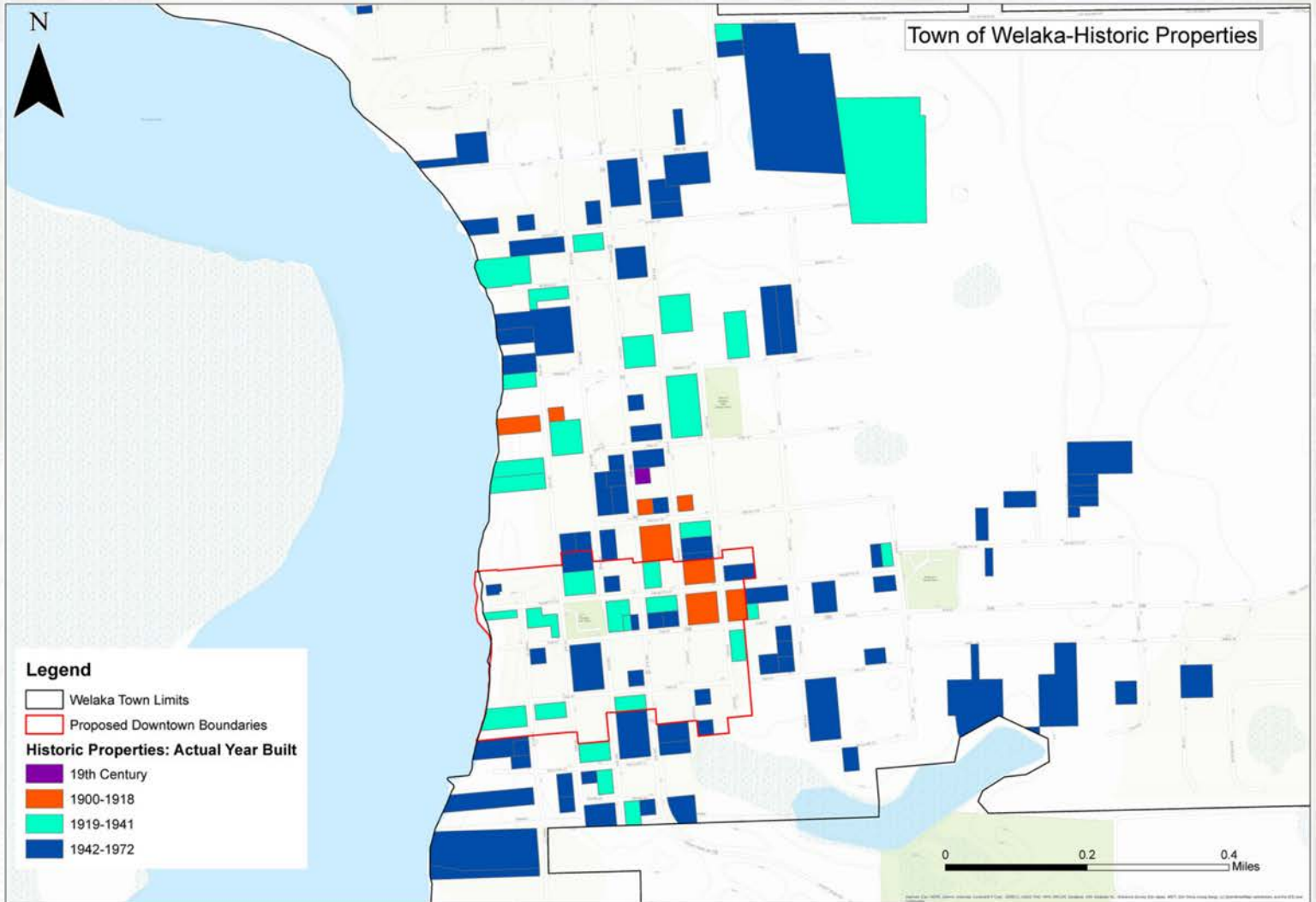
## Green Infrastructure

Along with street redesign, better storm water treatment can be achieved through green infrastructure. Features such as rain gardens or bio-swales are a way to return water to the Floridian aquifer, help reduce erosion, assist to reduce storm water runoff, and provide better soil conditions for trees to thrive. This type of redesign also opens the door to development by creating a visually appealing streetscape that entices residents and visitors to spend time and money locally.

## HISTORIC SURVEY

One of the strengths of the of Welaka is its historic assets within the community. With a potential inventory of historical sites that can contribute to a sense of community, the Town should conduct a Historic Resources Survey to identify the significant assets within the Town. The survey does not just include buildings but also archaeological sites, historic cemeteries, and historic bridges. The sites surveyed could potentially become part of the National Register of Historic Places through the National Park Service.

# HISTORIC SURVEY AND GRANT



## HISTORIC SURVEY GRANT

The Division of Historic Resources offers a Small Matching Grant that can provide funding to assist local efforts in preserving significant historic and archaeological resources along with promoting knowledge and appreciation of unique history within Florida. Historic Surveys are permitted use of these funds along with potential assistance to nominate individuals or resource groups for National Register Historic Designations along with potential heritage education projects. Currently, the Town is a Certified Local Government recognized by the Division of Historic Resources and the National Park Service.

However, it is recommended that the Town maintain the status in good standing with the State to ensure the benefits including grant waivers for the Small Matching Grant, potential prioritization in funding from Federal Historic Preservation Funds, direct access to the Division of Historic Resources for assistance, and access to training offered regularly from the State Division and the National Park Service for Certified Local Governments. Historic preservation is proven to benefit a community's economy, environment, and quality of life. Historic districts on average maintain higher property values, have less population decline, are more walkable, and provide a greater sense of community.

# TREE PROTECTION

## TREE SURVEY

Welaka's beauty is defined by the surrounding nature. The oak tree canopy decorates and distinguishes many of Welaka's downtown streets. The protection and accommodation of this valuable canopy of old-growth helps the visual narrative of the Town and positively impacts air quality, property values, and attract visitors. Most recently, the Town of Welaka received a Tree City USA designation to celebrate its work and show residents and visitors the Town's commitment to the mission of environmental change.

A tree survey is recommended for the Town of Welaka. As the town redesigns its downtown area it will have to make decisions on how to manage its urban forest, including developing a management plan and additional regulations to protect it. Executing a tree survey will provide further information on the number, type, location, and management of trees in the vicinity. It is recommended that the Town of Welaka consider applying for a Community Planning Technical Assistance grant from the Department of Economic Opportunity to fund a tree survey.

**Click on the QR code below to learn more about tree survey grants.**



## WATERFRONT IMPROVEMENTS

The recommendations for the riverfront sections of the Town include an expansion of river use to enhance water recreation along a relatively unspoiled portion of the St. Johns River north of Little Lake George. The Town is currently confronting more challenges from flooding along the river adjacent to the bluffs near the downtown.

# WATERFRONT IMPROVEMENTS



The design for the proposed expanded riverfront must enhance and improve resiliency for both proposed and current features. Floating docks could provide a way to build a Marina for the Town that can adjust to changes in water levels and can adjust to regular flooding with minimal repairs. The ability to expand parking off Oak Street and Front Street for trailers will allow boaters to access the waterfront and the Town Center without trailers congesting the pedestrian-focused streets.



The Town can improve public access to the river through a marina, a kayak and canoe launch, and an expanded boat launch. A focus on expanding non-motorized waterfront operations was provided by residents during the subsequent planning meetings and the proposed non-motorized access points to the river are provided in the final plan design for Downtown Waterfront Access. The preliminary design for boat access also includes boat-preferred traffic for boat launches on Elm Street.

There are potential funding sources for land acquisition to develop public outdoor waterfront recreation provided by the National Park Service through their Land and Water Conservation Fund along with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's State Recreation Development Assistance Program.



The Plan also recommends the addition of public gathering spots along the riverfront, focusing on the boardwalk and recreation and potential lodgings and restaurants that could be encouraged through mixed-use developments that would be reinvigorated through the Town's Land Development Code.





## UPDATE ZONING AND LAND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS

The Town's Land Development Regulations (LDR's) lay out how the Town expects new development to occur, from permitted land uses to the location of where buildings sit on the land or how they look. Regulations also control how stormwater is treated, landscaping, and tree protection. Do the Town's current LDR's reflect what the community wants to see in the downtown area?

The Visual Preference Survey conducted at the first public meeting revealed strong preferences about how development should look. "Old Florida" styles with wood cladding were strongly preferred, while commercial-style buildings and less historical styles (modern, Mediterranean etc.) were not. In 2015 the Town approved a tree protection ordinance and established a Tree Board, to protect existing trees. The Tree Board is authorized to review development plans to ensure that tree protection has been considered. The Town could also change its overall Land Development Regulations to provide a benefit for preserving trees.

To move forward on this goal, the Town would engage a planning consultant to help draft a new set of Land Development Regulations designed to encourage the type of development contained in the vision. There are occasionally grants available for this type of work, such as the US Department of Transportation's Thriving Communities program.



**THIS SHOPPING CENTER HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO LOOK LIKE CONVERTED HOMES**

# ENHANCE DOWNTOWN PARK

## ENHANCE THE DOWNTOWN PARK

The potential development of a Town Main Square can center a community by developing a gathering space for a revitalized downtown. This can be done by re-orienting the downtown park as a public space connecting the community to the waterfront. Currently, the Downtown Park is limited in space because of existing tennis courts that prevent the community from gathering at this park location for vendors and events. The events are currently hosted at the Jefferson Smith Ball Park which is outside of the proposed Downtown Boundary for connecting Town activities with expanded waterfront access.



Therefore, the recommendation is that the Town considers relocating tennis courts to other park sites within the Town, and then converting the paved areas of the Downtown Park to serve as spaces for vendors and farmer's markets to host community events for residents and visitors alike. This location of the Downtown Park along Elm and Front Street has a unique 'Old' Florida charm with its developed tree canopy. As stated previously in the Plan, a recommended preservation effort through the development of a Tree Ordinance is recommended to keep these old hardwood trees as a vital part of the community.

# CREATE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

## CREATE AN ENTRY FEATURE SUCH AS SIGNAGE OR A ROUNDABOUT

One of the primary goals of the vision is to slow traffic on County Road 309, to allow town residents and visitors to cross safely to enjoy their riverfront and the other amenities planned for the area. The town has been experimenting with several methods already to slow traffic, including a radar and light installation just north of the downtown area. In the long run, drivers respond to the way roads are designed and built in determining their speed, more than posted speed limits, signage, or even enforcement efforts. The vision plan recommends a set of roundabouts or traffic circles on County Road 309 at the northern and southern ends of the proposed downtown area. These will slow traffic and provide a distinctive visual cue that drivers have arrived somewhere significant. Due to slower speeds, the traffic light at the intersection of County Roads 309 and 308B can be replaced with a 4-way stop sign. Roundabouts can be designed to meet many different road sizes and right-of-way configurations.

According to data provided by the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), roundabouts are much safer than traditional intersections, with fewer collisions overall and 90% fewer fatal collisions, reduce traffic, and are more environmentally friendly.

To move forward with this concept, the Town should discuss the issue with the Putnam County Public Works Department. The Florida Department of Transportation has developed a number of roundabouts in rural areas recently and is also a good source of information.



If Welaka decides not to move forward with a roundabout, then a similar effect can be created by narrowing the road (possibly by adding curbs and angled parking) and creating distinctive entry signage for the Town.

# COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY

## COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY

A Community Redevelopment Agency, (CRA) offers a potential method to pay for improvements to the downtown area. A CRA can be established after an additional study that also establishes a plan for redevelopment. It allows the Town to establish a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district to direct any additional tax revenue (this amount is known as the Increment) in the CRA area back into accomplishing the goals of the redevelopment plan. In theory, these investments will generate even more private investment, increasing the amount available to support the plan.

The CRA does not result in higher taxes within the district, or create additional funds, although it can change the distribution of tax revenues between the Town and the County. It can also help the Town ensure that revenue generated by new development is reinvested back into the downtown.



# Welaka, FL

*River of Lakes*



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