

## VIEWPOINT

### 8th Street - The Road More Travelled

By: Philip Griffin

June 16, 2014

Sitting in my office on 8th Street and watching the cars drive by, I have to wonder if the occupants are thinking the same thoughts I have when I drive the street, “What happened to this street that makes no one willing to invest in its future?” For many first time visitors to Amelia Island this 4 mile stretch of abandoned and worn out properties is unfortunately the first view they see on their way to “historic downtown Fernandina Beach”. Rather than being a gateway to the downtown it has slowly decayed into a gauntlet of rundown shabby buildings and empty sites that is stuck in the past.

Why should anyone care about 8th street if they don't own property, live or work there? The answer is because a healthy and beautiful 8th street is good for everyone. A revitalized strip would provide a clean and pleasant welcome mat to visitors and locals alike. Imagine a street lined with attractive buildings, beautifully landscaped businesses offering services, retail and even housing to meet the needs of residents and tourists. For locals a new and improved 8th street would mean job creation, higher property values, more tax revenue and the loss of an eyesore. To visitors and south Amelia Island residents a new 8th street would add joy to the drive and maybe give folks a reason to stop and shop or dine on their way to Centre Street. A pretty street is a happy street for all.

The positive benefits of improving a scarred and tarnished area anywhere in Fernandina Beach or on Amelia Island can also become the catalyst for more beautiful things to come. Investment tends to be contagious and could easily spread to neighboring streets and lead to revitalization of an even larger area, including the long blighted “just off Centre Street” CRA. Thinking of blighted streets and neighborhoods as a cancer that affects all of us is the only way for us to band together and make the needed changes.

Want to contribute to this endeavor? We need your input and guidance. Recently, a group of concerned citizens teamed up with representatives from Fernandina Beach and Nassau County to come up with a plan for revitalization. The New 8th Street group plans to meet monthly to envision and then implement a plan for the future. We will examine why no one wants to invest, what needs to change and how can the public and private sector work together to make it happen. Please add your comments by taking a quick survey at

[www.surveymonkey.com/s/8thStreetInput](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/8thStreetInput)

and stay informed on progress by going to [www.fbfl.us](http://www.fbfl.us) and look for updates on the home page or join us in future meetings. The group's next meeting will be in City Hall commission chambers beginning at 3:30 on Tuesday July 15, 2014. Other group members will be offering viewpoints in future issues so stay posted.

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Philip Griffin frequently writes articles on public policy and business matters. He is a licensed commercial real estate broker on Amelia Island, Florida and has a degree in Business Economics from Syracuse University. He can be reached at [phil@acrfl.com](mailto:phil@acrfl.com).

## VIEWPOINT

By Robin Lentz  
July 2014

Over the nine years that I've lived in the wonderful city of Fernandina Beach, I have logged many miles by foot through the greenway, on the beach, and pounded the pavement on the roads. When you are out training for 20 miles at a time, you have a lot to think about and observe, and at my snail's pace, I get a really great look at things. Many times I run down 8th Street, and I feel it is not the "gateway" to our community that it could be. I am not alone in my feelings, as a recent survey conducted by the Fernandina Beach Community Development Department revealed the majority of those who took the survey described 8<sup>th</sup> Street as "Ugly," "Shabby," "Run-down," and "Eye-sore." Of the 300 plus surveyed, many felt that in the future it could be, "Welcoming," "Inviting," "Attractive," and a "Beautiful gateway." But what can be done to make 8<sup>th</sup> Street more attractive? And, would the businesses along 8<sup>th</sup> Street benefit from esthetic improvements?

The answers lie within the code. No, this isn't some crazy science-fiction movie or the next Dan Brown novel, but it lies within updating our land development code and aligning it with the county's code to create a consistent look along 8<sup>th</sup> Street. The corridor lies partly in the county and partly in the city. Both parts have different codes. For example, the most noticeable difference is the sign ordinance. The county allows taller, back-lit signs while the city allows lower signs with internal lighting from the front. If the codes were more similar, there would be more continuity.

You may be wondering what is being done to address this seemingly forgotten corridor? For the last six months, the City of Fernandina Beach's Community Development Department has been meeting with a diverse group of citizens and gathering their expertise and input about ideas for 8<sup>th</sup> Street revitalization and updates to the land development code. I am fortunate enough to work with this group of local architects, engineers, real estate developers, board members, planners and concerned citizens. Anyone is welcome to get involved. Many of you have already taken the survey and suggested several ideas for what you think would be most improved along one of our main roads. The majority of responders believe more landscaping, enhanced lighting, revised sign policies, and developing a theme or mission to guide redevelopment would be a great starting point for helping 8<sup>th</sup> Street.

There are several ways you can become even more involved in this effort. Number one: support the businesses along this road by shopping, eating and using their services. Number two: Join our group for meetings to offer your feedback and stay connected to what is going on. Number three: Contact me if you are interested in starting a grass-roots effort to actually work on fixing up properties along 8<sup>th</sup> Street like weeding, mowing, planting, and coordinating with property owners. I can be reached via email at [robinforfernandina@gmail.com](mailto:robinforfernandina@gmail.com).

I believe our entire community would benefit from an improved 8<sup>th</sup> Street corridor. The businesses along there would attract more customers and more business leads to more jobs in our local economy. Improved property values could help bump the tax base to help with providing better services to all citizens. And, a revitalized 8<sup>th</sup> Street would more accurately reflect the welcoming sentiments of the city's residents.

For more information on the 8<sup>th</sup> Street planning process, visit [www.fbfl.us/LDCED](http://www.fbfl.us/LDCED) or contact Community Development Director Adrienne Burke at 904-310-3135 or [aburke@fbfl.org](mailto:aburke@fbfl.org).

## The Eight Street Corridor – A “Revisioning” Project

Dear Fellow Fernandinans,

We serve in a *pro bono* capacity on the City’s Land Development Code and Economic Development Advisory Group. Our first mission is to study the 8<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor, from Centre Street to Lime Street, and provide recommended changes to the City’s Land Development Code to spur economic development and improve the aesthetic character of this important “gateway” into our City. To that end we are proposing a “revisioning” of the 8<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor to include increased mixed use development with a particular focus on increasing residential uses within the subject area.

The predominant zoning categories in the Corridor are C-2 (General Commercial) and MU-1 (Mixed Use). These zoning classifications vary in allowable uses, setbacks and building height limits, but the common thread between the zoning categories is their limitations on residential uses. If the City of Fernandina Beach and its residents want to see redevelopment along the 8th Street corridor, it is logical to consider all redevelopment options, including residential uses.

Historically, Fernandina Beach was developed with mixed-use in mind – residential uses were typically located on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> floors above commercial/business uses at the ground floor. As time has progressed and modern planning principles were implemented, the City began separating its uses into different zoning classifications. For example, undesirable uses (factories, warehouses etc.) were limited to industrially-zoned areas and residential zones were “sanitized” to limit or reduce commercial or business uses. This was the general planning model throughout the country. Citizens were to live in one area (a residential district) and commute or travel to another area for work (a business district).

This planning model is no longer economically nor environmentally viable in our City. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century successful cities need to be more efficient – making the most of their available land area while making these areas more livable/usable. One of the most successful strategies toward this goal is increasing density coupled with implementation of sustainable design principles.

Unfortunately, the City’s Comprehensive Plan does not have sufficient residential density to incentivize this strategy in a meaningful way. The maximum density allowed by the City is 10 units per acre, meaning 10 individual residential units on one acre of land. On the surface, this sounds like a very high number, but there is a reason it doesn’t work within developed areas. It hasn’t even worked in our own downtown district which promotes residential uses (note the lack of residential units along Centre Street).

As an example, if a landowner owns a 100 foot wide x 100 foot deep lot on a City roadway, this equates to 0.23 acres of land (10,000 square feet/43,560 square feet/acre). When you consider a right of way bonus that the City gives you for density calculations, this bumps the acreage up to just shy of 0.3 acres (0.298 acres to be exact). When multiplying 10 units /acre x 0.298 acres this yields 2.98 units or 2 units (when calculating, the fractional units do not count toward the overall unit count). Consequently, as it stands today, a duplex (2 units) is all that can be built on a 100 foot wide x 100 foot deep lot at maximum density within the City. Duplexes hardly fill the need for much-needed multifamily housing.

It has been voiced by residents that multi-family housing is needed within the City to provide housing diversity and allow for redevelopment. Mixed use (commercial and residential in this case) has also been mentioned along the 8th Street corridor. If mixed use redevelopment is to be achieved, a density increase is vital to creating multi-family development. The 8th Street corridor is mostly comprised of 100 foot wide x 100 foot deep lots and it is highly unlikely any meaningful mixed use development will occur until someone can build enough residential units to justify the expense and effort for redevelopment.

Government is not going to redevelop and clean up 8th Street...only the private sector can solve the problem and mixed use redevelopment can be the answer. If the City were to double the density in this area, this could allow for a 100 x 100 lot to have ground floor commercial and 4 total residential units on the second and third floor. This could in turn increase property values, since there now can be a commercial end user and 4 separate residential users on one small piece of property. When you apply this formula across dozens of lots, this is meaningful enough to the private sector to interest entrepreneurs to invest in this corridor and make a change in a positive direction.

Additionally, implementation of sustainable design strategies coupled with incentives for their use can increase the economic viability of mixed-use development. To City staff's credit over the past few years they have added language in the LDC's incentivizing sustainable design, ie., parking count reductions for certain zoning categories including credits for saving existing trees. But we need to go further. Generally speaking the City's parking space requirements are suburban in nature. Current parking standards favor new buildings within an island of parking. Couple this with requirements for on-site water retention and landscaping and a mixed-use project suddenly becomes non-viable very quickly.

In summary, there are no easy answers. Any "re-visioning" of the 8<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor will take effort and more importantly courage. If we truly care about the future of our City then our development codes need to adapt to our ever-changing needs. They should not be an impediment to development but should serve as incentive for new, successful development which reflects our citizen's goals and aspirations.

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## **VIEWPOINT: A City Planner's Opinion on Updating 8<sup>th</sup> Street – We Need YOU!**

By Adrienne Burke, Kelly Gibson, and Scott Schultz

*Adrienne, Kelly, and Scott are members of the Planning Department with the City of Fernandina Beach and have studied planning at the University of Florida, Florida State, and Florida Atlantic University, respectively.*

It's no secret that just about everyone has an opinion about 8<sup>th</sup> Street coming into downtown Fernandina Beach. A community survey this summer returned words like "depressing, ugly, and run-down." The positive news is that when asked how 8<sup>th</sup> Street COULD be, people used words such as "vibrant, welcoming, and attractive." That's all well and good, but how do you get from one to the other?

Part of the job of being a city planner is to help the community determine what they would like to see for the future of their city. In Florida, the official way that city planners accomplish this is through the City's Comprehensive Plan, a document required under state law that addresses a variety of topics. Our City Comprehensive Plan has chapters on future land use, transportation, housing, public facilities, conservation and coastal management, recreation and open space, intergovernmental coordination, capital improvements, port planning, public schools, historic preservation, and economic development.

The City adopted the most recent Comprehensive Plan in 2012, and it has policies that direct the City to look at how we can get the Land Development Code ready to encourage revitalization of the commercial corridors in our community – 8<sup>th</sup> Street, 14<sup>th</sup> Street, Sadler Road, and the commercial areas at Main Beach and around Seaside Park. The dictionary defines revitalization as "to give new life or vigor to" something. Did you know that only 6% of the land in the City is vacant? That's why revitalization or redevelopment of these commercial areas is really important, because the City does not have much area left in which to grow or offer areas for new opportunities. The Land Development Code is the document that spells out the details of ideas in the Comprehensive Plan. It gives property owners the guidance for development, so it's important that this document reflect what the community wants to see for revitalization.

One of the most important principles of city planning is that citizens be involved in the planning efforts. As part of the discussion about revitalization of these areas, city planning staff requested community assistance from a working group to help begin the conversation about planning for these commercial corridors. This group first met in March 2014, and includes an architect, engineer, a Nassau County Economic Development Board representative, a citizen at large, Planning Advisory Board members, a retired economic development professional, and Nassau County planning staff. The group decided to tackle 8<sup>th</sup> Street first.

In just about every meeting we have had, the group has talked about how important it is to get community input on this effort. We have been asking different group members to write these viewpoints to share with everyone, and we asked for opinions through a community survey earlier this year. We advertise our meetings and encourage people to come or submit ideas. Still, it is hard to get people engaged around what can seem like a boring process.

Think about it this way...although plans and codes do sound boring, it is truly the way to shape the community that YOU want to see. Although we planners live here and use 8<sup>th</sup> Street too, and studied city planning in school, our ideas for 8<sup>th</sup> Street may not be what the community has in mind. Through the 8<sup>th</sup> Street survey, prior viewpoints in the paper, and people attending our meetings, we have started to get some ideas of what citizens and visitors are thinking about 8<sup>th</sup> Street. But that's not enough – we want to get more and more input, more and more ideas, and more and more people talking to us about how to improve 8<sup>th</sup> Street. We NEED YOU! Any ideas are worth sharing.

The working group meets each month and will resume meeting again after the new year. The group is open to the public, and anyone is welcome to attend. Please check the City Calendar online at [www.fbfl.us](http://www.fbfl.us) or if you'd like more information about how you can get involved, please contact Adrienne Burke at (904) 310-3142 or e-mail [aburke@fbfl.org](mailto:aburke@fbfl.org). Visit [www.fbfl.us/LDCED](http://www.fbfl.us/LDCED) to view more information about the group. Thank you for your interest in improving your community!

## VIEWPOINT: “What’s in store for Eighth Street?”

By Steve Rieck

*Steve Rieck is Executive Director of the Nassau County Economic Development Board.*

For the past several months, a small group of citizens and professionals have been working with staff from the City of Fernandina Beach to come up with a set of policies and land use strategies that can encourage sustainable economic growth in key parts of the city. The working group has focused its initial efforts on the Eighth Street Corridor from the Shave Bridge to Centre Street. Because a good portion of the Eighth Street Corridor lies in unincorporated Nassau County, we have engaged the county’s growth management staff in the project as well.

As a part of its research, the working group posted a survey on the city’s website, seeking input on a variety of questions:

1. What one word would you use to describe 8<sup>th</sup> Street today?
2. What one word would you use to describe how 8<sup>th</sup> Street could look in the future?
3. What kinds of businesses do you patronize on 8<sup>th</sup> Street?
4. How often do you visit them?
5. Out of a set of 18 options, which six would you choose to bring the most effective change to 8<sup>th</sup> Street?
6. What suggestions would you have for the city and county governments to improve 8<sup>th</sup> Street?
7. Would you be willing to participate in a community visioning exercise to help decide what should happen on 8<sup>th</sup> Street?

We should note that this was not a scientific survey. It was simply meant to gain a general sense of how people felt about the Eighth Street Corridor. The survey was posted for about ninety days, and nearly 400 responses were recorded. Here’s what we learned from them:

1. The six most used words to describe 8<sup>th</sup> Street today were “depressing, busy, ugly, blighted, run-down, eyesore.”
2. The most common words used to describe how 8<sup>th</sup> Street could look were “vibrant, welcoming, inviting, attractive (beautiful), gateway.”
3. There were four categories of businesses that people mentioned most often as using on 8<sup>th</sup> Street—restaurants/fast food, auto repair, consignment shops, and retail/services.
4. Fewer than 11 percent of respondents indicated that they never shopped on 8<sup>th</sup> Street; more than 89 percent visited businesses “regularly” or “sometimes”.
5. More than half of survey respondents said they would like to see more landscaping (trees, shrubs, flower boxes, etc.); fewer big trucks; and a theme/vision to guide redevelopment of the 8<sup>th</sup> Street “Gateway”. Other top suggestions included enhanced lighting (like streetlamps downtown); revised sign policies (to improve how the business signs look); bike-friendly options (bike racks, marked routes, etc.); and a park or open space.
6. Respondents suggested a few themes for possible action by governments to improve 8<sup>th</sup> Street: enforce codes and penalize violators; provide tax incentives for property owners to improve properties; re-route trucks; encourage landscaping; and improve signage (way-finding, etc.).
7. About half of respondents said they’d be willing to participate in a community visioning exercise in the future.

The Eighth Street Corridor Working Group will continue its work through the end of this calendar year. The group meets on the third Tuesday of each month at City Hall. If you’d like more information about how you can get involved, please contact Adrienne Burke at (904) 310-3142 or e-mail [aburke@fbfl.org](mailto:aburke@fbfl.org). Visit [www.fbfl.us/LDCED](http://www.fbfl.us/LDCED) to view more information about the group.

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