



By Mike Bernos  
Contributing Author

## Down the center

Revived road leads motorists to a business oasis

**W**ith over 400 miles of Atlantic coastline, Florida has almost as many seaside towns as spring breakers at a Daytona Beach bikini contest.

Vilano Beach, a quaint area just north of historic St. Augustine and separated from that town by an inlet, was developed in the 1920s and often dubbed that city's best-kept seaside secret. It became even more obscure when an intracoastal bridge was built in 1995 diverting A1A traffic away from its main street and turning its humble little strip into an obscure, dead-end commercial district.

Fifteen years later, thanks to cooperation among public and private entities in St. Johns County, the area is now restored as the Vilano Beach Town Center, a unique waterfront business destination positioned to become a vibrant mixed-use development that still preserves the unique sense of place and Florida

culture. It also provides a working example of how innovative engineering solutions combined with community pride can reinvent an economically challenged commercial district.

"Our main street was very typical of county roads: just two lanes, two ditches and small sidewalks," said Vivian Browning, a member of the North Shore Improvement Association, the local group that pushed through the Vilano Beach Town project. "We only had a convenience store, a few motels and a restaurant."

### Mixed-use results

In 2002, Browning and others in her organization had a vision of turning the area into a vibrant town center of residential and commercial based on the smart designs of a traditional neighborhood development (TND), which promote mixed-use developments with off-street parking, walking and bike paths, as well as open community space.

Since the passing of the Growth Management Act in 1985, Florida has been promoting

the town-center concept as an alternative to urban sprawl. With that goal, Browning and her organization had the Vilano area rezoned from commercial to mixed-use development. They then obtained a Florida Waterfront Community designation, which helped them receive technical assistance as well as meet the statute requirements to be considered as a Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) and tax-incentive financing district. All this was critical for funding of the project.

"We believed in the TND concept," said Browning. "When we went to county we were very specific in wanting a town center and not just a pretty community." Browning admitted the project would be difficult to push through in today's economy, adding, "Infrastructure was the key to development."

According to Tom Crawford, director of Housing and Community Services for the county, the CRA designation allows for a trust fund to be created through the passage of a municipal bond, which is paid back over 30 years from higher tax

revenues generated from the increased property values in the revitalized area.

"St. Johns County set up the CRA in 2002 for several projects, including Vilano Beach—the largest—at the urging of the North Shore Improvement Association," said Crawford. "The entire project was pushed through by that group, who found the St. Johns County Commissioners sympathetic to historic Vilano Beach's plight."

### Water under the road

Once the area was granted CRA status, planning for the 24-acre project immediately started. Greg Caldwell, St. Johns County project coordinator, said the key to project planning was anticipating future needs and accommodating new development.

Caldwell said sewer loading, access locations, transformer locations and other considerations had to be evaluated for properties that had either no development plans or at least were very preliminary concepts.

In addition, he said trying to have existing buildings and services meet new standards was a challenge.

"In short we had to accommodate the old and the new," said Caldwell. "For example, if there had been no existing development we could have elevated the road to meet the minimum 10-ft elevation requirement of new structures. But we did not have that luxury because most existing structures were at elevation 7 ft."

According to Caldwell, solutions to that problem and the other main challenge of maximizing as much land as possible for future development was developed from the project's engineering firm, RS&H, which began work in late 2004. They devised a storm-water treatment system to treat all of the project's 24 acres while containing it within the public right-of-way, knowing there was no more right-of-way to be acquired.

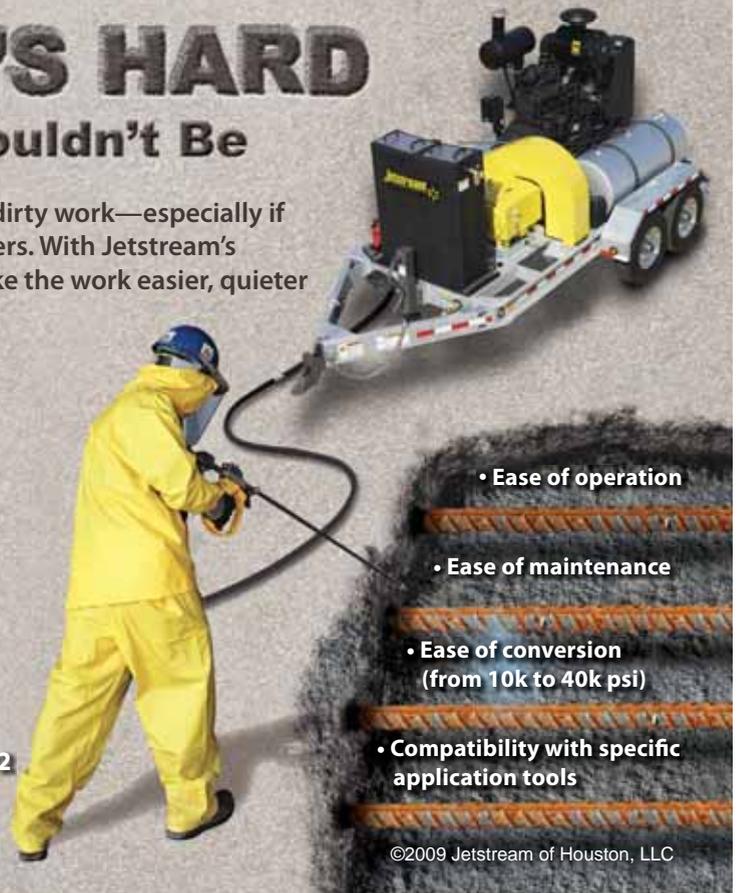
Caldwell said that traditional runoff ponds would have significantly reduced land available for commercial, retail and office uses.

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The Vilano Beach revitalization project, which used a town-center concept, featured improved streetscape that included the construction of three fountains.

"If we had to come up with a pond system it would have killed the entire project," said Caldwell. "We came up with an innovative system that included six underground exfiltration vaults covering a total of one acre," he said.

He said the vaults were constructed under the roadways with slotted drains placed at all surface inlets to divert the required storm-water treatment volume to the vaults.

Wayne Stokes, project manager of RS&H, said that in many instances infrastructure connection locations and capacities were based on land-development guidelines that were being developed by the St. Johns County Planning Division concurrent with the design process.

Stokes and his team wanted as little impact as possible to the newly constructed streetscape improvements in order to facilitate development. To do this he said all parcels were provided with pipe stub-outs and junction structures at the right-of-way line for future connections to the main drainage/storm-water management system. Water service lines with flushing valves and gravity sewer connections not served by the existing sanitary system also terminated at the right-of-way.

"We converted FP&L electrical distribution lines from overhead to underground for aesthetic purposes and to better service connections to new development," said Stokes. "We also had to provide underground power as part of the process to reservice approximately 20 existing buildings."

## Two together

Construction began on the Vilano Town Center project in 2006 and was completed in the fall of 2008. Although the downturn in the economy has slowed the build-out of the project, the improvements have reinvigorated business owners, residents and visitors to Vilano Beach.

"Many of the older businesses have renovated their properties and freshened up their facades since the project was completed," said Teresa Bishop, director of Long Range Planning for St. Johns County. "Older hotels near the beachfront also have refurbished in anticipation of greater tourism."

Bishop also said that St. Johns County purchased a former waterfront restaurant and converted it to public beachfront and that a neighborhood grocery store is currently in the plans.

The project's streetscape designer,

Brett Goddard, of Goddard Design Associates, said that the Vilano Town Center reflects two distinct architectural influences found in Florida: Art Deco and Florida vernacular. Since the planning process began in 2004, Goddard said it went through a number of public meetings and visioning sessions that yielded those two preferences.

"Neither group was going to be happy with choosing just one, so we combined the two options," said Goddard. "It was difficult meshing those two styles, since it is an odd combination. But we found a compromise that worked by adding the vernacular to the horizontal elements and the Art Deco to the vertical. It evolved nicely."

Goddard said everyone is happy with the outcome. The streetscape is highlighted by vertical signs (focal points) such as a bell tower at the intracoastal pier and the tilt-up concrete structure at the entrance of the town center. Marked by the angular design of Art Deco and Art Moderne found in Miami Beach, as well as the Florida vernacular, the vertical signs are filled with mosaic tiles and LED strips to mimic neon lighting. Angular and curvy way-finding designs are found along the sidewalks to pick up the shape of the iconic bell tower. There also are three fountains.

"There are a lot of bright colors," Goddard said. "We used several different bold materials such as the mosaic glass pavers on the sidewalk. But it all works."

Caldwell said that the project is proof of the great partnership that existed among St. Johns County, RS&H, Goddard Design Associates, Callaway Construction and the North Shore Improvement Association.

"Creating a 'plug-in' environment for future businesses where utilities are set up, storm drains, off- and on-street parking and landscaping provided is great for business," he said. "Usually, the county cannot provide these services to developers and can only do so in the case of redevelopment projects. But that can occur only when you have state, local and community support." **R&B**

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