



Rockledge Community Redevelopment Agency Subdistrict Economic Development Implementation Strategy June 2020



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Economic Development Solutions
Maximize Your Market Place



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Introduction

The City of Rockledge has a strong and rich history that is grounded in economic development and quality of life. From its very beginning, it is a story of entrepreneurship, business attraction, and residential investment that is still relevant today. It was a place that northerners sought out to improve their health. It was a center of agriculture and tourism, and its story also demonstrates that there are many influences on a city's economy that are outside of its control. Rockledge's history includes the importance of the connection between economic development and transportation, demonstrated by the waterfront boom that occurred when Rockledge had the only railroad spur to the Indian River, and again when Henry Flagler removed the spur in favor of his hotels further south.



Indian River Hotel

The city's brand back then – "The City Supreme," said it all. Even during the Great Depression people still vacationed in Rockledge. The city had a healthy citrus economy, prosperous tourism industry, and good leadership, which is a legacy that has continued throughout the city's history to today. As a bedroom community to the Space Center, Rockledge lived through the ups and downs as programs came and went. Mercury. Apollo. The Space Shuttle. As space becomes a public private partnership, and eventually a private sector endeavor, those ups and downs may subside. The Space Coast is one of the fastest growing job markets in the country, and Rockledge is perfectly positioned to benefit from this growth.

The city enjoys a positive reputation and low crime. It has a reputation for good government and leadership, and a well-respected public safety team. The residents and business owners interviewed during this process expressed a sense of having a very good

quality of life, but identified some gaps that need to be filled such as bicycle lanes, more local restaurants and other businesses so that they do not have to leave the city to shop and dine, and be entertained.

As previously mentioned, the Space Coast is a fast-growing job market. However, there is not enough local skilled labor for the jobs that are being created, so the area needs to attract new residents and train or retrain the existing residents. Quality of life and educational opportunities are two of the most important tools for Rockledge to compete for new residents and improve the educational attainment of existing citizens.

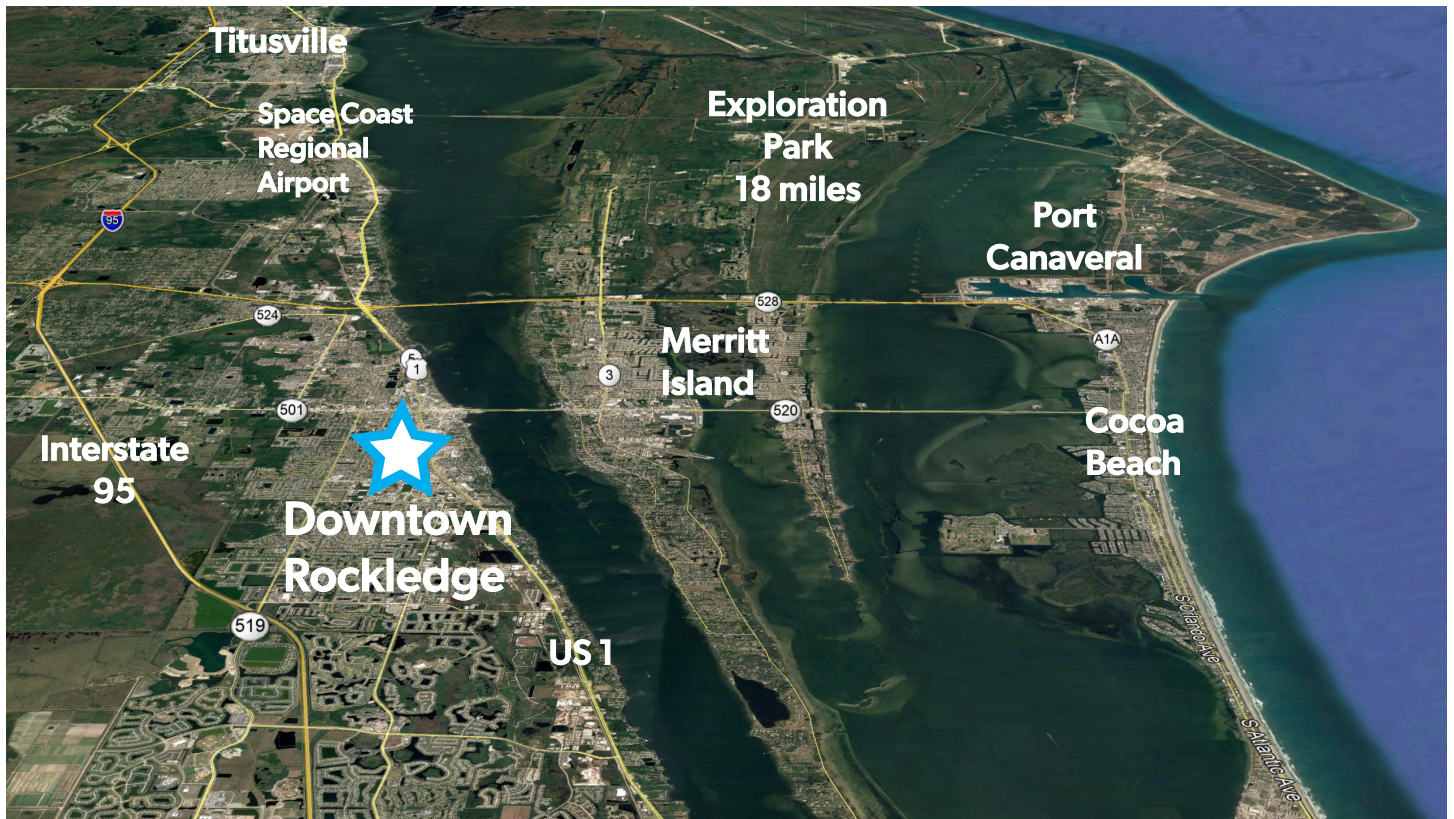
Years ago, when a company advertised for an engineering job, ten people might show up for the interview. One person would be offered the job, and it was the company that dictated the terms including salary, hours, and location. The company was in charge.

Today in many cases, due to the specialized nature of some fields of work, the company is no longer in charge. Ten companies might advertise for a specialized engineering position, and there might be two qualified individuals that are interested. It is no longer the company that is in the driver's seat, it is the individual. It is the same with residential recruitment.



SpaceX launched a manned Falcon9 mission May 30, 2020 and docked with the International Space Station on May 31, 2020.

More and more people can live anywhere; their home location is not necessarily determined by the location of their job. Rather, it is determined by a balance of



Rockledge's central location on the Space Coast

different lifestyle choices and driven by quality of life. Commute time, housing type, quality and cost, recreational opportunities, quality of schools, entertainment options, even the location of craft breweries are some of the factors that go into a worker's decision on where to plant roots.

Ultimately while location decisions by businesses and residents involve a significant amount of financial review, analysis and planning, the ultimate decision usually comes down to how someone "thinks and feels" about a place. This is where Rockledge's brand is so important. Rockledge already has many brand strengths which include its small-town character, its history, the river and local ecology, healthy lifestyles, a strong sports reputation and a great location. This plan strengthens the city's brand promise by:

- Preserving neighborhood character and the city's connection to history.
- Enhancing connectivity, entrepreneurial, and recreational opportunities.
- Exposing hidden assets such as Lake Betsi and downtown dining opportunities.
- Investing in land and infrastructure improvements to build a real downtown.
- Capitalizing on the city's strengths, vision and the Space Coast economy.



Part of the McKnight Family Sports Complex near Lake Betsi

During this process, the team evaluated two of the CRA's subdistricts: The Florida Avenue Subdistrict and the Barton Boulevard Subdistrict. Within these two subdistricts we have identified four distinct, yet complementary identities.

1. The Rockledge Medical and Professional District
2. Downtown Rockledge
3. The Lake Betsi Recreational Area
4. The Space Coast Innovation and Entrepreneurship District



Subdistrict identities



The Civic Hub and City Hall

Market Overview

Rockledge is in the center of Brevard County, Florida, (also known as the Space Coast) with convenient access to Interstate 95, US 1, Kennedy Space Center, Port Canaveral, beaches, and the Indian River. Recently, the Space Coast has seen a resurgence of economic development and job creation, driven by the entry of private enterprise into the space industry, as well as continuing growth of the aerospace sector.

The BusinessFlare® Approach to market analysis is based on an understanding of how a community can positively influence the five drivers of investment. These drivers are land, labor, capital, the markets, and regulations.

Land

There are three roles local government has in real estate development. It serves as a regulator: zoning and land use, building permits, occupational licenses, impact fees. A second role is as a facilitator of real estate investment and development. This is where policy implementation creates an environment where business and investment will succeed. Community Redevelopment Agencies and/or Economic Development Departments are generally the lead facilitators of real



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estate investment. The third role a local government has is as a participant. Local governments have been directly participating in real estate development for many years.

The City of Rockledge owns significant land within the Barton Boulevard CRA. This includes City Hall, the Civic Hub, McKnight Family Sports Complex



Google Earth

City owned property



The City Parcels

and Lake Betsi, Public Works, and five parcels on the South side of Barton Boulevard across the street from the Civic Hub (the “City Parcels”). The ownership of these parcels provides the City and the CRA an opportunity that does not exist in many other cities. Furthermore the City and CRA can significantly guide the revitalization of the area through the strategic use of City-owned land to achieve the goals of this plan.

Labor

Labor is an area where many local governments have limited influence. Labor markets are generally driven by regional, state, and even local influences that cities do not have control over. In the case of Rockledge, the regional labor market and job creation related to the growth of the space and aerospace industry presents an opportunity.

Resident recruitment is as important as business recruitment for Rockledge’s redevelopment efforts. There is an adage that says that “retail follows rooftops.” In addition, business follows talent, and now more than ever talent seeks out quality of place. Rockledge already provides strong quality of life, and implementation of this plan will further improve quality of life and establish Rockledge as a quality place to live for new residents that are moving to the Space Coast.

People in general, and especially the high skill workforce, are looking for real, authentic places where they can be part of a community. Places that have character and history, community gathering spots, and opportunities to engage with each other.

Similar to the skilled worker/company dynamic introduced earlier, it is now the workforce that is in charge

of where they decide to live, and they will make that decision as part of a balance of different lifestyle choices that include housing characteristics, transportation and commuting, school quality, social and recreational activities, and many other factors, even including the presence of amenities such as craft breweries.

Cities that embrace and understand the changing landscape of the labor markets and focus on quality of life and quality of place as an economic development strategy will position themselves for success.

Capital

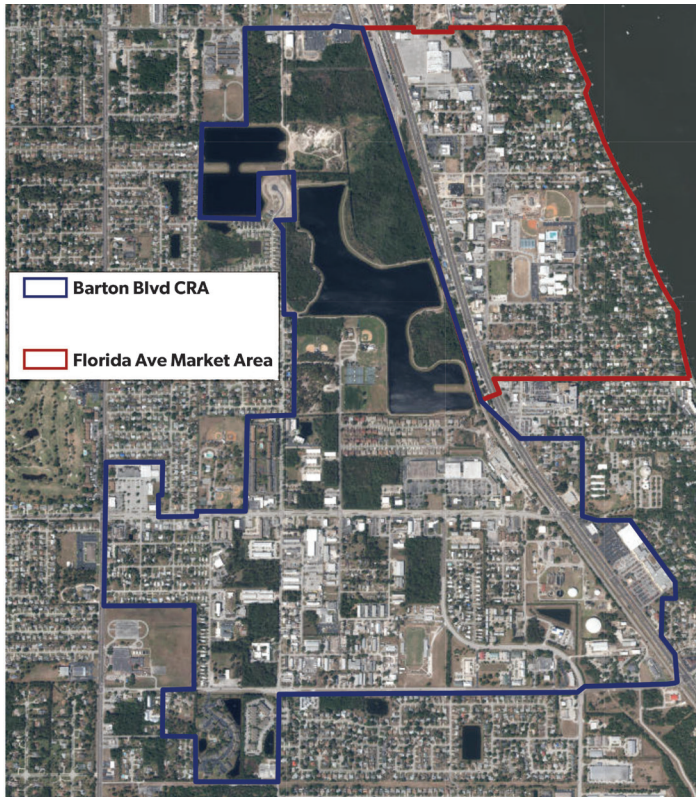
Capital is the investment driver that is focused on availability of funding and financing, financial feasibility, and cash flow. In addition, incentives can influence investment decisions by businesses to buy and renovate property. The CRA has participated in this driver using funds for façade improvement programs and land acquisition. Additionally, private investment is already occurring in the CRA with the development of Rockledge Flats, a new multifamily residential apartment complex by the Hutton Group.

Markets

Markets, especially consumer markets, are one of the most important drivers of investment. The ability of a city to influence this market is limited, however. Supporting local businesses through CRA programs and creating opportunities for community activities such as special events are initiatives that the public sector can engage in to increase market share. It is important for cities to understand the character and demographics of their community to understand what market opportunities exist for new and expanding businesses.

For this analysis, the BusinessFlare® team evaluated five geographic areas:

1. The area within the Barton Boulevard Subdistrict of the CRA (Barton Blvd CRA).
2. The area within and the neighborhood adjacent to the Florida Avenue Subdistrict of the CRA (Florida Ave Market Area).
3. The combination of the Barton Blvd CRA and the Florida Avenue Market Area (Combined Areas).
4. City of Rockledge.
5. Brevard County.

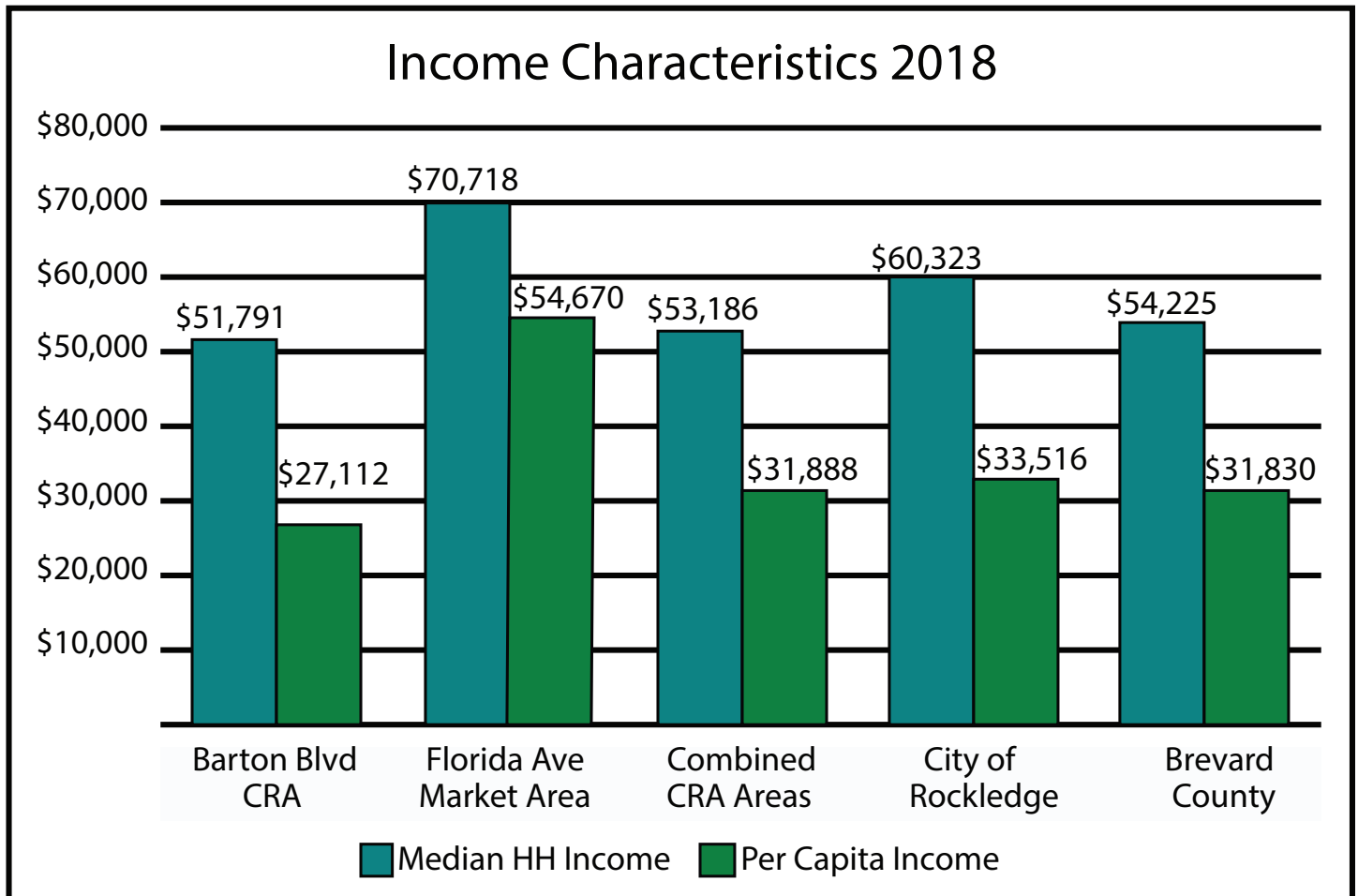


Study Areas

Regulation

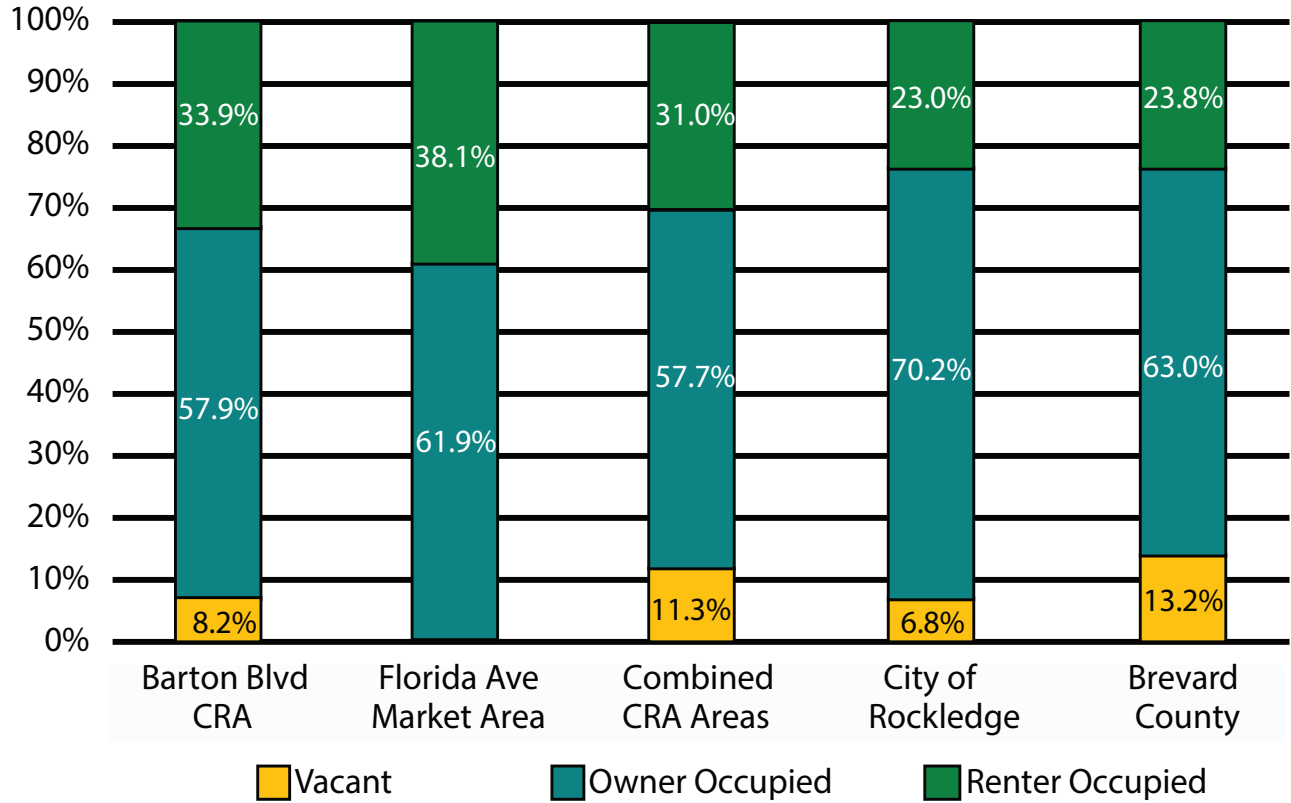
Regulation is the investment driver over which the public sector has the most control. There are multiple reasons that cities engage in regulation, but the primary reason is to protect the health, safety and welfare of the community. Additional reasons include the preservation of community character and fostering economic growth. In an economic development context, the two important elements of regulations are: 1) the regulations themselves and what they mean to feasibility and viability of a business or investment, and 2) how those regulations are applied and implemented. Effective use of regulation as an economic development tool requires the adoption of three key economic development values:

- Certainty – certainty and predictability are critical to private sector investment decisions.
- Information – reliable and relevant information for prospects, stakeholders and decision makers is necessary for sustainable economic growth.
- Credibility – reputation, responsiveness, and the ability to realistically address challenges and solve problems will help position a city for economic growth.



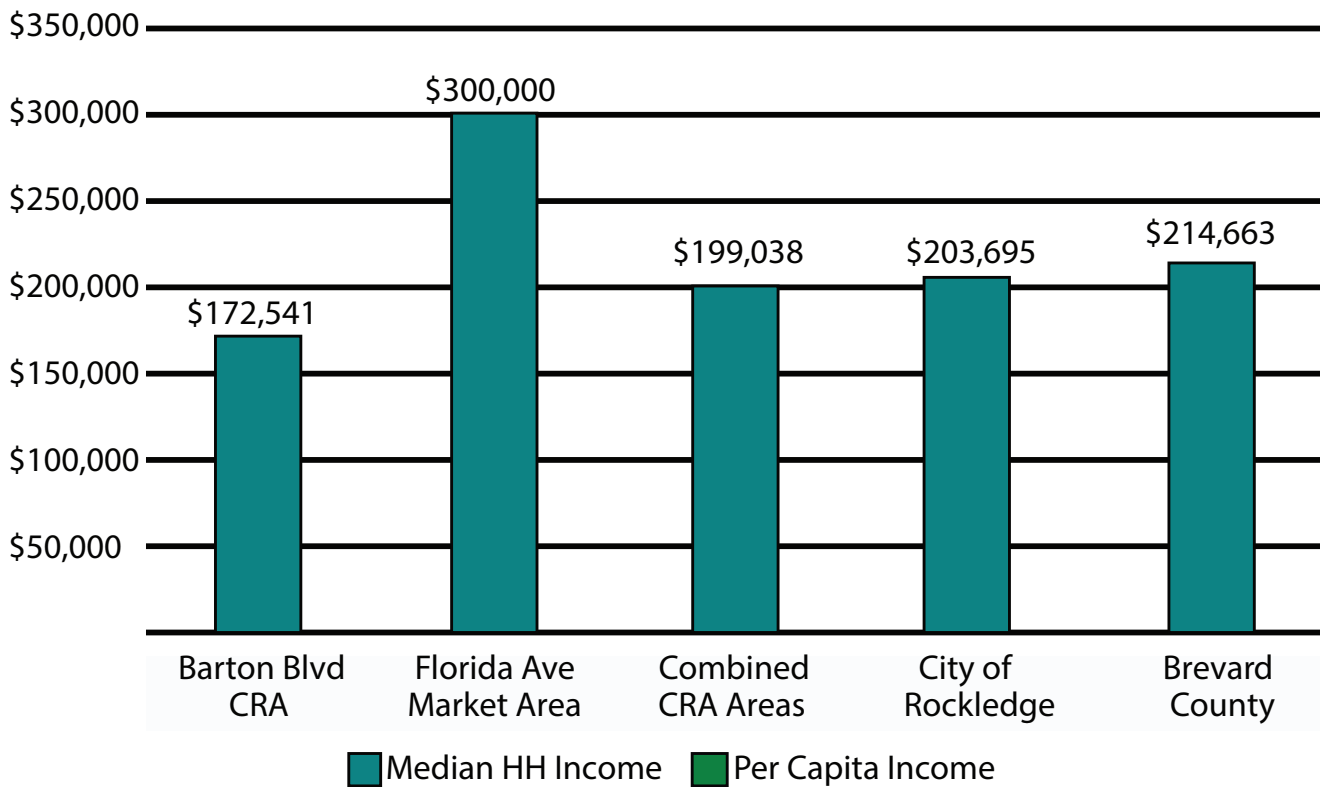
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ESRI Inc.

Housing Occupancy 2018



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ESRI Inc.

Median Home Value 2018



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ESRI Inc.



A review of the City's Land Development Regulations (LDRs) for the CRA Subdistricts identified limited enhancements that can foster economic growth. In general, the LDRs are already redevelopment friendly and supportive of business investment. The LDRs provide flexibility on issues such as parking, and the City has demonstrated its support of enhancements to the LDRs that support economic development but remain compatible with community character.

One area of concern is the density limitations on the targeted redevelopment sites, such as Searstown. Current density is 14 units per acre, with the ability to gain an additional 8-12 units per acre through design criteria. We recommend an increase of the "as of right" density to 25 units per acre, with the ability to reach 40 units per acre by providing public benefits. Examples include design criteria, public parking, infrastructure investments, public art, or other items identified by policy makers, staff, and stakeholders.

Key Market Observations

1. The City controls significant acreage of land in strategic locations, especially on Barton Boulevard in Downtown Rockledge.
2. Downtown Rockledge is strategically located in the center of Brevard County, which has one of the highest job growth rates in the United States.
3. The space industry drives the need for talent in Brevard County. Now is the time to perform background and groundwork to position Rockledge to capitalize on this growth.
4. The Rockledge CRA has a track record of supporting businesses and investments through grants and regulatory measures.
5. The city has strong market demand and desire for goods, services and activities.
6. Investment activity and interest is already taking place in the CRA.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted every municipality in the United States. Businesses throughout the country are closing and laying off or furloughing employees. Hotels are closed, travel is almost nonexistent, labor force participation has declined, and unemployment has increased.

Unlike prior economic downturns, this one is grounded in a lack of consumer spending, and recovery of the economy will depend on a recovery of consumer confidence. As the economy begins to reopen, the key question on people's minds is, "will the customers come back?" Significant uncertainty remains and includes:

- When will people feel comfortable visiting businesses again?
- When will people feel comfortable being around large crowds, including in places like theaters, concerts, special events, bars, or other locations?
- What measures should a business implement in response to the pandemic and are there going to be certain measures required by law in the future? For example, will building codes be amended to change occupancy capacity?
- What will be the impact on local government finances?

The initial assessment of the impact of the pandemic on local government finances is that for fiscal year 2020/21, the main areas that may have negative impact are:

- Local option sales taxes
- Tourist development taxes
- State revenue sharing
- Licenses and permits
- Fees for service
- Gasoline taxes

The deadline for payment of property taxes has already passed, so the impact on ad valorem tax receipts for the fy 2020/21 budget should be minimal. However, there may be an increase in appeals of taxable value by property owners, as well as an increase in unpaid property taxes which may increase tax certificate sale activity. Unlike the City's General Fund, the Rockledge CRA should not experience significant revenue shortfalls in fy 2020/21 since it is funded almost exclusively by property tax.



The impact of the pandemic on fiscal year 2021/22 ad valorem revenues is unclear. Several months of updated real estate trend information will be necessary to develop a forecast of the impact on property values. This will depend significantly on if the economic recovery trend line is a "V" or a "U".

It is also important to note that economic downturns are regarded as one of the best times to start a business or begin an entrepreneurial venture. New problems are identified that need to be addressed in the market, and individuals that were previously reluctant to start a business find new motivation during this time. The Space Coast is positioned very well for new business growth, since there are several sectors of the economy that may experience limited short or long term negative impact from the pandemic.

Other sectors, such as health care (especially hospitals) and higher education will take longer to recover and may experience disruption to their current operating models.



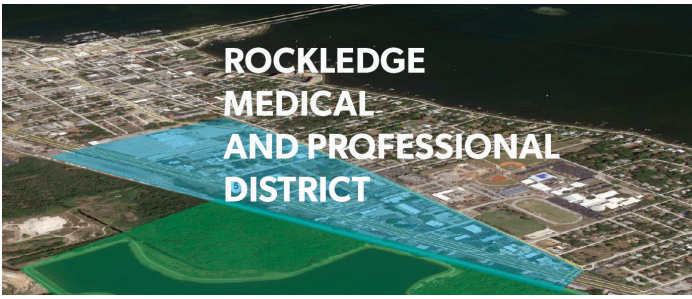
Rockledge Regional Medical Center

Rockledge Regional Medical Center is a key anchor, property owner and stakeholder in the Florida Avenue and Barton Boulevard subdistricts of the CRA, and is an important partner for economic growth and quality of life. The City and CRA should expand the relationship with the hospital to identify additional mutually beneficial partnership opportunities during and post COVID.

During the Great Recession, the Wall Street Journal highlighted this situation, writing “Tough times breed a different kind of entrepreneur. With the economy tanking, lots of people are striking out on their own. Some never thought of starting a business until they got laid off. Others kicked around the idea but never found the time or the passion to pursue it. Now, launching a start-up seems like a better bet than taking on an endless job hunt. Call them entrepreneurs by necessity. And while some of them have waited years preparing for just this moment, others may not be quite so ready or eager to make the move. ‘I think we’re going to see a lot of businesses started by people who otherwise would not have started business-

es’ in better times, says Bo Fishback, vice president of entrepreneurship for the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, a Kansas City entrepreneurial-research organization. ‘Necessity-driven entrepreneurship can be a powerful motivator.’”

The COVID-19 Pandemic will impact the implementation timeline of this plan. However, it does not impact the content and recommendations. Certain actions will be delayed, especially those that require financial participation by the city. However, for many of the recommendations there is planning work to be done which can be done as the economy and municipal budgets recover. Additional information about how the pandemic impacts specific recommendations will be provided as part of that recommendation’s description.



The Rockledge Medical and Professional District is located on Florida Avenue, running from US 1 on the south to the city limits on the North. The district also includes both sides of US 1.

The district is a largely professional area and home to many medical and office related businesses. 27.5% of the jobs occupied within the Florida Ave CRA are within the Education and Health Care Industries, 18.1% in Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate, and 15.8% in Public Administration. The district itself has approximately 65 residents and 104 businesses, but it has a significant residential community immediately to the east. Although not actually located within the District, Rockledge Regional Medical Center is a key anchor for this area, and Cocoa Village is located within walking distance to the north.

Rockledge High School, located just outside the boundaries of the Florida Avenue Subdistrict, is currently a “B” rated school according to Florida Department of Education. Rockledge High School hosts the Cambridge International Diploma program, a curriculum that prepares students to get into a university with up to a potential 45 hours of college credit already earned. Rockledge High School also offers the following Career and Technology Education (CTE) programs: Allied Health/Patient Care Assisting (PCA)



Raider Park

(CNA), Architectural Drafting, Automotive Maintenance & Light Repair, Criminal Justice, Digital Media/Multi-Media Design, Fashion Design, International Business, and Web Application Development & Programming.

The District can be described as a “linear office park”. It is located adjacent to the city’s most desirable residential neighborhood but has poor aesthetics in the public and private areas. One strength of the district is the presence of US 1, which can provide strong visibility for businesses as the area grows. Unfortunately, at the moment the vacant Searstown property serves as a negative visual gateway to the District.

The key recommendations for the Florida Avenue Subdistrict of the CRA are:

1. Improve the aesthetics
2. Support target industries
3. Facilitate redevelopment
4. Establish a brand and identity

Aesthetics

The three key things that connect people to their community are the Aesthetics, Activities, and Openness. These are the things that drive how people “think and feel” about a place, and an area’s aesthetics are key elements that influence that feeling and which can drive investment and quality of life decisions.

The aesthetics of the public and private areas along Florida Avenue are key to continuing to attract business interest in vacant properties and appropriate investment and development where possible. Public resources in this area should focus on elements such as improved sidewalks, driveways, and landscaping. An additional aesthetic improvement, as well as needed infrastructure, is the addition of a marked bicycle lane and/or shared lane. The neighboring community has many bicycle users, and connection of this district to areas such as Cocoa Village as well as to Barton Boulevard and other parts of the city will enhance the area’s appeal.

The City and CRA should also continue to work with the School Board and Brevard County to address the aesthetics and appeal of their properties which are located along Florida Avenue.



Example of a bike lane as an aesthetic enhancement

The COVID-19 Pandemic will impact the enhancement of the aesthetics of the Florida Avenue Subdistrict. In some cases, projects that are funded by the CRA can continue, including potential property improvement grants and public realm improvements. Enhancements to other publicly owned property by agencies such as the County and School District may be more challenging in the near term due to the negative revenue impacts the pandemic may have on their finances.

Target Industries

The professional nature of many of the businesses, combined with the presence of institutions such as the Hospital and the High School, make this district a strong candidate for new businesses. Some of the key businesses that are growing, for which the available real estate is appropriate and which connect to the “character” of the area are Professional Services and Health Care. New opportunities could include expansion of higher education opportunities, especially connected to teaching opportunities at the Hospital. Expanded professional services, combined with the desirable adjacent residential neighborhood, potential educational opportunities, and proximity to Cocoa Village, US 1, and the connection to the beaches indicate that there may be good opportunity for mid-priced hotel development in this district as well.

Another growing industry to consider and explore further is cybersecurity. Given the proximity to the Space Center, multiple technology and aerospace companies, Port Canaveral, and the central location and value available in Rockledge, cybersecurity firms may be a good target and should be researched more with the City’s economic development partners.

Some of the targeted industries in this area may experience limited impacts from COVID-19, such as professional services which will continue to be needed by the local marketplace. The impact on other industries, such as health care, are still uncertain. The pandemic had a clear significant and negative impact on hospitals, and the additional impact on the broader health care industry is still uncertain.

This area may experience less disruption to its office market than other areas. There is currently speculation regarding office space and the impact that more acceptance of working remotely will have on business real estate decisions. This district has limited space that is occupied by office users that generally need to see their clients in person: medical and professional services.

Brand and Identity

This area is designated as the Florida Avenue Subdistrict of the CRA, but it needs a brand identity that reinforces and strengthens how the district is viewed internally and externally. With the presence of anchors such as the Hospital and High School, other government uses, and many professional and medical offices and service providers, BusinessFlare® recommends establishing and reinforcing a brand concept of Florida Avenue as the “Rockledge Medical and Professional District.”



Florida Avenue gateway sign

It is important to reinforce Rockledge’s identity as part of this brand in order to connect beyond the district boundaries to other areas of the city, and to begin to establish community pride in the district. Way-finding and gateway signage should reinforce this identity, and the CRA can begin working with public and private partners to promote this district’s identity, its strengths, and opportunities. Additionally, the CRA can improve the subdistrict’s brand through enhanced relationships with real estate brokers, investors and developers. Broker, banker and developer events are good opportunities to improve relationships, as well as participation with realtor organizations and trade associations such as the International Council of Shopping Centers and the Urban Land Institute.

COVID-19 does not negatively impact the ability to brand and position this district in the marketplace. The CRA should rebrand the subdistrict in the near term to establish its identity in the mind of prospects.

Searstown

The 13-acre site known as Searstown is one of the top subjects that was raised during the public input process. Located at the entrance to the city from the North along US 1, the vacant shopping center is well maintained, but it is still an empty shopping center and an eyesore that impacts the city’s image.



Florida Avenue side of Searstown

There are several different concepts that may be appropriate for the site, which may or may not be feasible.

- Hotel(s) and outparcel development
- Multifamily development
- Workforce housing for the medical and professional industries
- Trade School
- Higher Education



A mural on a vacant shopping center

In the near term, the CRA could work with the property owner to further improve the aesthetics (and marketability) of the site. This could include artistic uses such as murals, especially on the back side facing Florida Avenue. Additionally, the CRA should help market the site to a wide audience, and work with the property owner and listing agent, including meeting with prospective buyers, promoting the site (and others) at regional and state real estate events, and highlight the site during banker broker events that promote the district and/or city.

Current land development regulations limit the maximum density on the site to 26 units per acre, provided that numerous design criteria are met. The City has flexibility to address parking challenges to facilitate investment, but we recommend consideration of increasing the maximum density to 40 units per acre to improve the financial feasibility of the site. We do not believe that an increase in height is necessary, but the CRA and City should work with prospective buyers, developers, and operators to understand their challenges and determine if there is an opportunity to facilitate the investment.

The COVID-19 Pandemic may have significant impact on the marketability and feasibility of this site in the near and possibly medium term. The CRA should enhance the communication with the property owner and/or its representatives to understand their challenges and those of potential buyers and developers. The City should move forward with LDR enhancements that improve the position of the property in the marketplace.



Downtown Rockledge is located along Barton Boulevard between US 1 and Fiske Boulevard. Barton Boulevard is a commercial street with limited commercial development and numerous vacancies. According to ESRI data, there are approximately 3,662 residents and 338 businesses within the Barton Boulevard Sub-district. Downtown features a diverse business mix ranging from Public Administration, Manufacturing, Medical and Professional Offices, Retail and a wide variety of restaurants.

The Median Home Value within the Barton Boulevard Subdistrict (\$172,541) is significantly lower than the Rockledge Citywide Median Value of \$203,695. A retail gap assessment indicated an unmet demand within the Barton Boulevard CRA for the following business types: Clothing & Accessory Stores, Grocery Stores, Specialty Food Stores and Drinking Places. Barton Boulevard experiences an Average Daily Traffic (ADT) volume of just over 16,000 cars daily.

Based on the market analysis, public input, and discussions with staff, our team observations are that the area's identity should be based on the following:

- Barton Boulevard is Downtown Rockledge.
- Downtown Rockledge includes the recreational area and Lake Betsi.
- There is already active public and private investment occurring such as the Civic Hub and Hutton Group's Rockledge Flats apartment project.
- Downtown Rockledge has natural gateways that can be enhanced to reinforce the Downtown identity.
- Downtown Rockledge already has existing dining destinations with a diverse mix of available cuisines including seafood, cajun, barbeque, healthy eating, Mexican, Chinese, American grill, and Latin.
- Downtown Rockledge has "good bones" for a downtown and quality civic and public spaces.



Hutton Group broke ground in early 2020 on their Rockledge Flats apartment project

Downtown Rockledge has many assets, which include investment momentum, redevelopment-friendly land development regulations, quality public assets such as the Civic Hub and the presence of City Hall, private investment, additional city-owned properties to catalyze investment, and an existing restaurant industry. There are also several vacant and available properties including a large parcel in the block east of the Civic Hub, the property immediately north of City Hall, the properties owned by the Hospital, and other properties in the Downtown core.

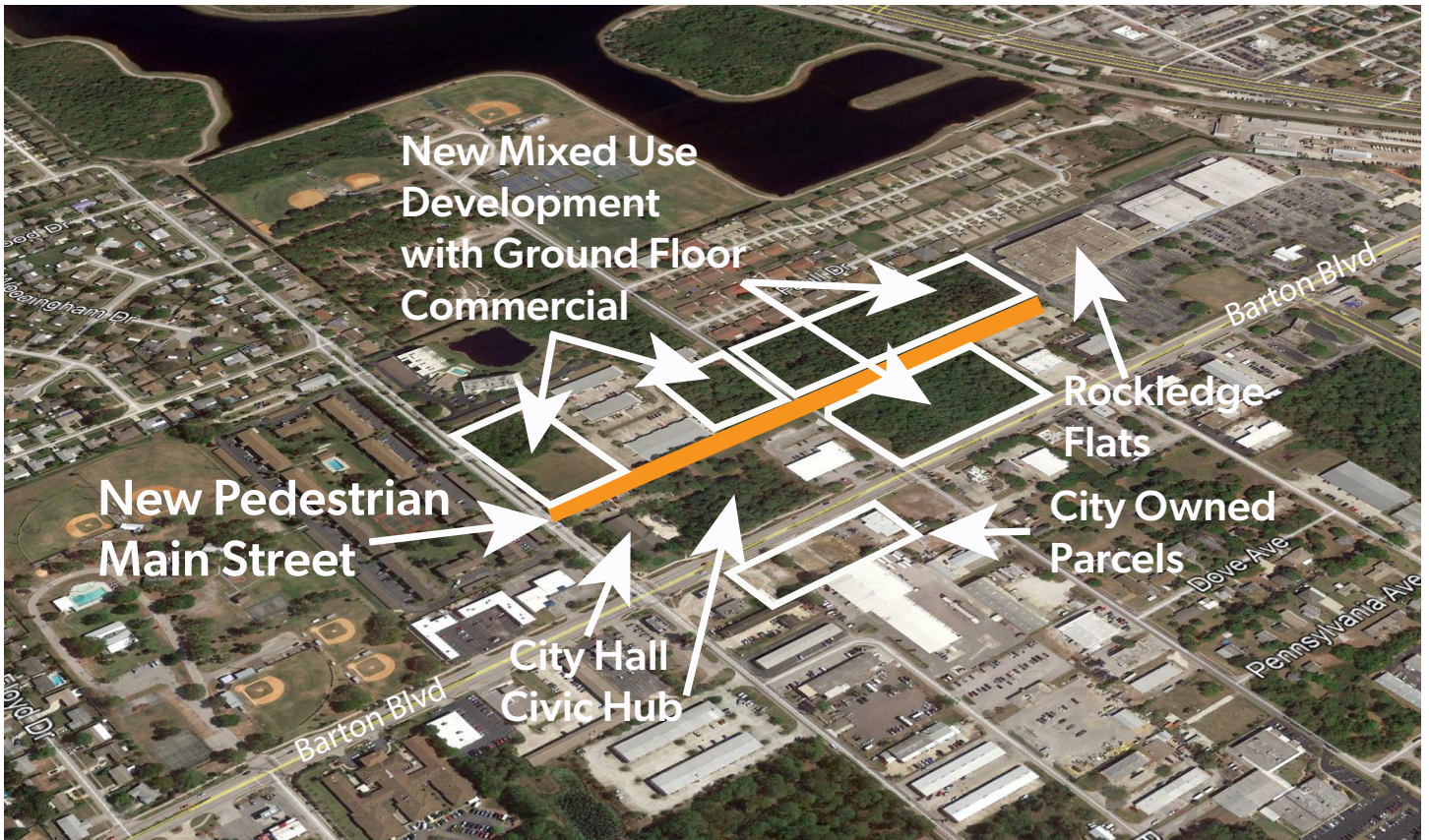
The City has also already moved forward to capitalize on opportunities which will include discussions regarding the privately owned property north of City Hall and the City-owned properties across the street from the Civic Hub.

The Key Recommendations for Downtown Rockledge are:

1. Create a Main Street
2. Improve Walkability and Comfort
3. Real Estate Redevelopment
4. Targeted Industries
5. Special Events
6. Identity and Brand

Main Street

An opportunity exists to create a "Main Street" that runs for two blocks parallel to Barton Boulevard, from City Hall to Hutton's property. This would include public and private property and require the City to



The "Main Street" concept

work with the property owners. This would provide an "extension" of the public space created by the Civic Hub, and it would be an authentic aesthetic enhancement that attracts additional interest from businesses, investors and customers. This Main Street concept would integrate with Barton Boulevard and would provide an opportunity to expand and grow an evening and nighttime economy.

There are several ways to accomplish this endeavor. The CRA can work with the property owners to purchase an easement through their properties, the City could initiate a process to gauge interest in a public/

private partnership to accomplish it, and this concept could be included in revised design standards for the Downtown. If the City and CRA are interested in pursuing this concept, we recommend a design charrette. This concept also allows new businesses to have two front doors: one facing Barton Boulevard and one facing Main Street. The CRA and City should engage a design consultant to conduct a design charrette for this Main Street concept.

Although the COVID-19 Pandemic may impact business decisions regarding new investments or locations, this concept requires significant planning and input prior to implementation. It is likely that the economic recovery will be underway by the time a planning process has been completed, and this type of placemaking activity has been proven to attract new business investment. Despite the near-term impacts of COVID-19, and also the trend toward online shopping, consumers will continue to seek out activities and social situations. Restaurants and entertainment options will attract customers, and authentic main streets and public spaces are well positioned against shopping centers and malls, especially indoor facilities which lack character.



A pedestrian street example



Front doors of retailers facing Lincoln Road Pedestrian Mall



Back doors of the same retailers facing public parking

Aesthetics, Walkability and Comfort

As previously mentioned, aesthetics drives how people “think and feel” about a place. Aesthetics and walkability are especially important in downtown areas. To establish Barton Boulevard as Rockledge’s Downtown, we believe that the following improvements are necessary:

- Improve the connections between Barton Boulevard and Florida Avenue, Lake Betsi, and the neighborhoods to the south and west.
- Reduce Barton Boulevard to two (2) lanes. We believe that this is critical to establishing Barton as Downtown. This reduction should not have a negative impact on traffic for the businesses along Barton, in fact it will enhance the desirability of Barton as a business location and slow down the traffic, improving walkability, business viability and the opportunity for outside dining. This initiative will provide the opportunity to create significant additional parking in the downtown with

possibly 200 new on-street parking spaces. Outside dining can occur at outside decks that front Barton, creating a unique character that enhances Barton’s identity and creates a sense of activity.

- Shade – identify opportunities to introduce additional shade into the public realm.
- Establish Gateways at the main entrances to Downtown – US1, Fiske Blvd. and Murrell Rd.
- Enhance and adjust the façade grant program to improve private property aesthetics.
- Encourage private property owners to improve their properties or sell them to investors and developers.

These types of projects do not depend on private sector investment and are prime opportunities to “set the table” for Downtown Rockledge. These are near-term priority projects due to the limited impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on CRA revenues.

Real Estate Redevelopment

Redevelopment in the Downtown area will be critical to attracting new investment to the area. There are three key opportunities in the Downtown, in addition to other smaller privately owned properties.

The first opportunity is the 5 parcels located across the street from the Civic Hub. The CRA and City should work to aggressively market these properties for purchase and development for one or more of the Downtown’s targeted industries. These properties’ location directly across from the Civic Hub is a strength, and the activation of these properties, combined with the lane reduction on Barton Boulevard,



Barton Boulevard



A building on the City Parcels across the street from the Civic Hub

will create an activity center that will anchor the new Downtown. This property is ideal for a craft brewery, from the perspective of both a brewery operator and the vision of this plan.

These properties remain marketable within the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic however, potential business terms may change due to market uncertainty by prospective buyers.

The City's Public Works facility is located at the North-east end of Barton Boulevard. This is a large site that can serve as an eastern anchor for the Downtown. The City and CRA should work to relocate Public Works to the City-owned property that is further south and pursue development of the existing site with uses that could include mixed-use commercial and residential uses. Should the opportunity arise, this site would be an excellent location for an institution of higher education or student housing. This site is a key City-owned anchor site that will benefit Downtown Rockledge at the time it can realistically be redeveloped into alternative uses, whether in the near, medium or long term.

The relocation of Public Works to create a significant City-owned catalyst site in Downtown Rockledge remains a key element of this plan however, impacts on City revenues due to COVID-19 will limit the ability of the City to pursue this initiative in the near term. The relocation costs are estimated at between \$8 and \$10 million, therefore, the City and CRA should explore the viability of other options to accelerate this initiative that evaluate the viability of reducing the costs to the City, including a through a public private partnership. Higher education and related uses are a preferred use in the area however, near term impacts to higher education are unknown at this time.

The Village Green property at Barton and Fiske Boulevards is another property that was mentioned often during public input. This property could accommodate multifamily development; however, it does not appear that multifamily uses on this site would be feasible in the near future until significant momentum is occurring in the Downtown. Our recommendation is that this property remain commercial, with upgraded retail offerings and a grocery use if it is viable in the marketplace for this site.

Viability of the Village Green property in the near term may be challenging due to the uncertainty and impacts of COVID-19.

Targeted Industries

The industries identified for the Downtown are those that are traditional downtown uses, including:

- Food and Beverage, including Craft Breweries
- Arts, Entertainment and Culture
- Neighborhood and Specialty Retail, especially retail that serves as community gathering spaces
- Higher Education

COVID-19 has had significant impact on these targeted industries, which are primarily traditional downtown uses. However, entrepreneurs and small business owners begin new endeavors every day, including during economic downturns. One of BusinessFlare's economic development philosophies is that "economic development is inevitable, where it occurs is not." Implementation of this plan and its vision, including public realm enhancements, recreational amenities, branding, and communication strategies will help make the successful economic revitalization of Downtown Rockledge inevitable.



The Civic Hub with the City Owned Parcels in the background



The Art and Craft Show, February 2020

Special Events

Continued activation of public spaces for events is key to enhancing the identity of and interest in a Downtown and is important to other businesses that can capture additional customers from events. The CRA should work to identify partners to expand the offerings available at the Civic Hub to create critical mass and regularity of events. This could include the eventual relocation of existing events such as the Food Trucks, enhancement, and “relaunch” of events such as Farmers Markets, and new events such as an open mic jam. The CRA could consider a special event grants program to identify operators and producers of regular events.

Identification of a signature event for Downtown Rockledge will attract not only residents, but visitors as well, improving the market conditions for existing businesses and opportunity for new investment, including possible hotel investment in the city.

There remains uncertainty regarding large public events and gatherings due to COVID-19. The City and CRA should stay up to date on the latest recommendations and best practices for events, because special events are one of the best tools for getting people downtown. Planning for a signature event will take approximately one (1) year and should begin once post-COVID certainty regarding events and crowds has returned.

Identity and Brand

As previously mentioned, Barton Boulevard’s identity is “Downtown Rockledge”. This should be reinforced through CRA and City written and verbal communications, and in all relevant promotional efforts. The CRA should discuss brand concepts with key stakeholders, and especially with Hutton who will be moving forward with branding of their project. The concept of outdoor dining decks, if feasible and accepted, could become an icon for the Downtown. Finally, the CRA should conduct broker banker events to promote the vision of Downtown.

The vision and identity of Barton Boulevard as Downtown Rockledge does not change due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. In fact, branding efforts to establish Barton Boulevard as “Downtown Rockledge” in the consumers’ minds should begin immediately in order to generate awareness of the opportunities that exist in the minds of potential businesses and investors.

**Economic
development is
inevitable.**

**Where it occurs is
not.**



This recreational area, which is only a 5-10-minute walk from City Hall, the Civic Hub and Downtown, can be an anchor for Downtown. While there are opportunities for private sector participation in enhancing the recreational area, improvements to this area should be driven by a desire to accomplish a vision and generate public benefits over revenue.

Rockledge features a long length of waterfront land along the Indian River Lagoon that offers breathtaking scenery. This waterfront however, is mainly single family residential with extremely limited public access to the water. Additionally, a prohibitor of economic development in Rockledge is the city's poor connectivity and pedestrian friendliness. According to WalkScore research, Rockledge features poor walking and biking paths which have limited connectivity. Almost all errands in Rockledge require the use of an automobile, including going to recreational activities. There is, however, a large cycling, jogging, and walking community in Rockledge despite the poor connectivity.

The recreational area is also a non-traditional retail anchor which ties into the trend toward experiential retail to sustain and grow retail operations, especially for small businesses. Enhancement of the recreational area, its offerings, and brand can be a quality of life boost for the area and a catalyst for additional investment in the Downtown.

Key Recommendations

1. Brand the overall area as the Lake Betsi Recreational Area
2. Attract a Waterfront Restaurant
3. Improve Recreational Offerings
4. Change the Management Structure

One of the main observations identified during the public input was the lack of knowledge about Lake Betsi and the recreational opportunities around and adjacent to it. Recreation is a key element of quality of life, and the recreational assets in this area represent a significant opportunity to connect to Downtown as an asset for business retention and attraction.

Brand the Overall Area as the Lake Betsi Recreational Area

The area currently has several recreational assets, including the McKnight Family Sports Complex, the Pinder Tennis Center, Lake Betsi, and the Don Griffin Recreational Trail. These assets have different management and operations structures and are relatively



The Lake Besti Recreational Area

unknown to the public. We recommend branding the overall area as the Lake Betsi Recreational Area, with appropriate marketing of the assets and awareness of future upgrades and repositioning. This rebranding will bring attention to the area and position it as a local and regional asset with greater awareness. This rebranding will also integrate with the efforts to establish Barton Boulevard as Rockledge's Downtown. Another public comment area which we also observed was the need for additional restaurant invest-



Example of a waterfront restaurant

ment. Many other locales along the Space Coast have large public parks and commercial areas along the Indian River, where the public can gather along the waterfront for events, dining, sunrise and sunset, and other activities. Although Rockledge does not have a public riverfront, it does have a public waterfront at Lake Betsi. A waterfront restaurant at Lake Betsi would be a significant addition to the redevelopment area and the recreational area, increase the awareness of the lake, and contribute to growing a nighttime economy in Rockledge. It may also provide some level of revenue to the City. This restaurant could also include terraces and/or roof decks from which patrons can watch the sunrise, sunset, and launches.

The attraction of a waterfront restaurant in the near term could be challenging however, due to the uniqueness of the location and the significant amount of lead time for lease negotiation, design, permitting and construction, by the time the restaurant is ready to open it is possible that the economic recovery will have occurred. This project remains viable with the right restaurant entrepreneur partner. Additionally, this concept offers a restaurateur an opportunity to design an establishment with larger, more open spaces and plenty of spacious outdoor seating.



A "Bump Track"

Like the recommendation for Barton Boulevard, the vision of this area as the "Lake Betsi Recreational Area" does not change due to COVID-19 and should begin immediately. In fact, given the large open spaces available for recreation, this rebranding can appeal to individuals that are concerned about social distancing, especially when engaging in recreational activities.

Improve Recreational Offerings

The CRA and City should explore upgrading the park area to more contemporary recreational uses. Additionally, we recommend the relocation of baseball uses to McLarty Park where baseball can be concentrated in one location.

The Lake Betsi Recreational Area should include a mix of active and passive uses. Additional uses for considerations could include:

- A bump track around the lake for bicycles.
- An indoor recreation / multipurpose center. This facility could also be utilized for eSports, for which there may be state incentives available as well as university partnerships.



Lake Betsi and the Don Griffin Recreational Trail

- Drone Races
- Tot Lot and children’s programming
- Dog Park
- If access can be secured, a RV park for vacationers could be established on the NE side of the Lake.
- Kayaks and non-motorized vessels, which has already been identified and planned by the City.
- Opportunities with educational institutions including Rockledge High School and a partnership with FIT’s rowing team.

The importance of large outdoor spaces that can facilitate social distancing will increase in the future, and this area is an opportunity that can be thought of as a “blank canvas” to introduce new, contemporary recreational offerings in a setting that responds to the new concerns from the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Management Structure

The management structure at the park right now is layered and confusing. The City of Rockledge owns the land and has contracted with Brevard County for operations and maintenance. This arrangement does not include Lake Betsi or the path around the lake. This management structure may not be the most efficient to effectively deliver quality recreation to the community or serve as a catalyst for redevelopment

and revitalization of the nearby downtown. We recommend that the City and CRA explore other options for operation and management of the Recreational Area. These could include:

- The City assumes operation and maintenance responsibility from the County through an agreement in which the County continues to provide the same level of funding currently provided.
- The City explores a partnership for operations with other nearby stakeholders, such as the Hutton Group.
- The City issues a Request for Letters of Interest in a public/private partnership at the recreational area. The use of public private partnerships by local governments to provide recreation have grown significantly in recent years.

Revenue impacts to the general fund budgets of both the City and County due to COVID-19 may make negotiations regarding the management structure of the parks more challenging than in a Pre-COVID time. Regardless, the repositioning of this area and its recreational offerings is critical to the redevelopment and revitalization of Downtown Rockledge.



The expansion of private space exploration, aviation, defense contracting, and tech companies has created high-level employment opportunities along the space coast. According to USA Today, the Palm Bay-Melbourne-Titusville Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) (which includes Rockledge) has the 12th highest amount of tech related jobs in the US (#1 in Florida).

In Rockledge, the highest percentage workforce industries are Services (55.2% of workers), Retail (11.8%), Manufacturing (11.8%), and Public Admin (7.4%). According to Florida Department of Economic Opportunity research, the industries with the highest amount of job vacancies in Brevard County per industry were Education and Health Services (1,906 vacancies), Leisure and Hospitality (1,832), Trade Transportation and Utilities (1,134), Professional and Business Services (960), and Manufacturing (519).

The City of Rockledge has experienced stable job growth, adding over 1,000 jobs since 2014. During that same period, the unemployment rate has fallen from 5.9% to 3.2%. Rockledge features a well-educated population base with nearly 20% of residents achieving a bachelor's degree and over 12% receiving a graduate or professional degree.

The industrial and warehouse area south of Barton Boulevard is already a center of small business and entrepreneurship. It has an eclectic mix of businesses and operations that range from small mechanics, machine shops, and tradesmen to UPS and the County's Emergency Operations Center. As Downtown Rockledge evolves, this district will become more attractive to entrepreneurs and small business owners that want to be close to, but not directly in, Downtown. Additionally, these are important businesses that, although they are not compatible for a location directly in Downtown, are assets due to the amount of employment and industry diversification they can bring.



A maker space in Pittsburgh, PA

Key Recommendations

1. Aesthetics – Improvements to the public realm along strategic corridors will help improve the identity and character of this area and provide access between the neighborhoods to the south and Downtown, enhancing the aesthetic and awareness of the entrepreneurship district.
2. Connections – There are many businesses located in this area that could benefit from enhanced connections to potential employees, especially through partnerships with school and apprenticeship programs. The CRA should work with other service providers to connect small business owners to resources.
3. Target Industries – The area could accommodate certain targeted uses that will complement the district and its identity, as well as the nearby Downtown. These include industrial uses, industrial arts, maker spaces, and trades. The trades are one of the high wage industries of the future (if not already). Fewer and fewer students study the traditional trades, but they continue to be in high demand by both residential and commercial markets, including the high-tech industries. As the Downtown evolves, this district will become more attractive to these types of uses that are not traditional downtown uses, but which can thrive nearby. Care should be taken to maintain the light industrial character of this district.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted many businesses located in this area, however, many of these businesses are by their nature, able to continue to operate during pandemic times and should be very adaptable to the "new normal," since they are generally located in light industrial and warehouse property. Many of



Site of the new Brevard County Emergency Operations Center in the Space Coast Innovation and Entrepreneurship District

these businesses, while maybe not deemed “essential” by public authorities, are seen as essential by the consumer market and local Rockledge stakeholders. Many of these businesses are trades which are necessary for quality of life in a community.

Currently the full impact on schools and their job training programs is unknown. Communication should be maintained with the educators in the community to identify negative impacts or opportunities related to

apprenticeship, skills training, and job placement for graduating students.

As previously stated, economic downturns can be the best time to start a new business or entrepreneurial venture. This district is a location that can be attractive to these new ventures, especially given its proximity to the new downtown. This reinforces the need to communicate the vision of Downtown Rockledge and its opportunities.

Conclusion

The Rockledge CRA faces new challenges due to the COVID-19 Pandemic however, the opportunities for economic growth and revitalization remain. The ability of the CRA and City to implement the vision for this area is in place and ready for implementation.

The Vision

Preserve neighborhood character and the city's connection to history.

Enhance connectivity, entrepreneurial and recreational opportunities.

Expose hidden assets such as Lake Betsi and the downtown dining opportunities.

Invest in land and infrastructure improvements to build a real downtown.

Capitalize on the city's strengths, vision and the Space Coast economy.

This vision includes the enhancement of Subdistrict identities:

- The Rockledge Medical and Professional District
- Downtown Rockledge
- The Lake Betsi Recreational Area
- The Space Coast Innovation and Entrepreneurship District

Some of the key areas of market support for this plan include:

- The City controls significant acreage of land in strategic locations, especially on Barton Boulevard in Downtown Rockledge.
- Downtown Rockledge is strategically located in the center of Brevard County, which has one of the highest job growth rates in the United States.
- The space industry drives the need for talent in Brevard County. Now is the time to position Rockledge to capitalize on this growth and attract new high skill residents.
- The Rockledge CRA has a track record of supporting businesses and investments through grants and regulatory measures.

- The city has strong market demand and desire for goods, services and activities.
- Investment activity and interest is already taking place in the CRA.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has severely impacted every municipality in the United States. Businesses throughout the country are closing and laying off or furloughing employees. Hotels are closed, and travel is almost nonexistent. As the economy begins to reopen, the key question on people's minds is, "will the customers come back?" Significant uncertainty remains and includes:

- When will people feel comfortable visiting businesses again?
- When will people feel comfortable being around large crowds, including in places like theaters, concerts, special events, bars, or other locations?
- What measures should a business implement in response to the pandemic and are there going to be certain measures required by law in the future. For example, will building codes be amended to change occupancy capacity.
- What is the impact on City and CRA finances?

The COVID-19 Pandemic will impact the implementation timeline of this strategy. However, it does not impact the content and recommendations of this plan. Certain actions will be delayed, especially those that require financial participation by the City. For many of the recommendations there is planning work to be done while the economy (and city budgets) recover.

Top Five Initiatives:

1. **Engage with the private sector for development of the City Parcels.**
2. **Convert Barton Boulevard to two lanes with on street parking, enhanced landscaping and connections.**
3. **Begin a master plan for the Lake Betsi Recreational Area.**
4. **Continue, and enhance programs to support entrepreneurship and small businesses.**
5. **Implement the rebranding of the different sub districts.**

Summary of Key Initiatives

Land

1. Work with the School Board and Brevard County on aesthetic improvements to their properties.
2. Work with the owner of Searstown to explore short-term aesthetic improvements, such as a mural program.
3. Work with the owner of Searstown and its representatives to assist with marketing of the property to prospective developers.
4. Engage a design consultant to conduct a design charrette for the Main Street concept.
5. Enhance the facade program to improve private property aesthetics in a focused geographic area or for specific targeted uses.
6. Encourage private property owners to improve their properties or sell them to investors or developers.
7. Continue to target prospective buyers of the City Parcels located across the street from the Civic Hub for redevelopment.
8. Relocate Public Works to a location outside of the CRA.
4. Improve the connections between Barton Boulevard, Florida Avenue, Lake Besti, and the neighborhoods to the South and West.
5. Reduce Barton Boulevard to two-lanes with medians, on-street parking and enhanced landscaping and shade.
6. Identify alternative funding opportunities for the relocation of Public Works, including an evaluation of the feasibility of a public private partnership.
7. Attract a waterfront restaurant to the Lake Betsi Recreational Area.
8. Upgrade the McKnight Family Sports Complex and other uses around Lake Betsi to more contemporary recreational uses.
9. Consolidate baseball activities at McLarty Park.
10. Improve the public realm in the Space Coast Innovation and Entrepreneurship District to enhance connectivity.

Labor

1. Work with other service providers to connect small businesses, entrepreneurs, and employees to resources.
2. Work with the High School to connect students with on site training and apprenticeship opportunities with local businesses, especially in the trades and other programs taught by the High School.

Capital

1. Improve public and private areas along Florida Avenue, including sidewalks, driveways, parking lots, and landscaping.
2. Work with the School Board and Brevard County on aesthetic improvements to their properties.
3. Enhance and expand wayfinding and gateway signage.

Markets

1. Explore opportunities to attract higher education uses to the CRA.
2. Work with economic development partners to identify realistic target industry opportunities.
3. Establish and reinforce the Rockledge Medical and Professional District brand.
4. Establish and reinforce the Downtown Rockledge brand.
5. Brand the area including Lake Betsi and the McKnight Family Sports Complex as the Lake Betsi Recreational Area.
6. Work with the private sector to promote and reinforce the subdistrict brands, including through broker banker events.
7. Enhance relationships with real estate brokers.
8. Promote the CRA's opportunities through industry associations such as the Urban Land Institute and the International Council of Shopping Centers.
9. Identify partners to expand the special event offerings at the Civic Hub to create critical mass and regularity of events.

Summary of Key Initiatives

10. Create a signature event for Downtown Rockledge that will attract not only residents, but visitors as well.
11. Work with stakeholders in each subdistrict to promote and capitalize on the new brands.

Regulation

1. Consider a density increase on the Searstown property.
2. Evaluate design standards for Downtown Rockledge.
3. Explore options to facilitate the implementation of the Main Street concept.
4. Amend the Land Development Regulations if necessary to facilitate the attraction of target industries.
5. Explore other options for operation and management of the recreational areas and parks in the CRA.

Post-COVID

1. Stay up to date on latest trends and best practices for special events.
2. Monitor consumer behaviour trends.
3. Monitor regulatory proposals in response to COVID.
4. Explore alternative means of financing for City and CRA projects.
5. Enhance the partnership with Rockledge Regional Medical Center

Key Implementation Steps

Short Term (6-9 months)

- Identify a partner and sell the City Parcels.
- Engineering and planning for two-lane of Barton Boulevard, including landscaping, connections, wayfinding, and gateways.
- Launch the Lake Betsi Recreational Area.
- Brand Barton Boulevard as Downtown in consumers' minds.
- Hold a main street design charrette.
- Begin to plan a Rockledge signature event.
- Begin a recreation plan for the Recreation Area.
- Begin discussions with Brevard County regarding park management.
- Negotiate the purchase of additional downtown property.
- Plan a bike lane on Florida Avenue.
- Enhance the Land Development Regulations for Redevelopment Sites.

Medium Term (9-24 months)

- Plan relocation of Public Works.
- Market the waterfront restaurant opportunity.
- Begin the signature annual event.
- Implement wayfinding.
- Begin construction of the reconfiguration of Barton Boulevard.

Long Term (24+ months)

- Relocate Public Works.
- Implement new recreational offerings at Lake Betsi.
- Open the waterfront restaurant.





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