

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Palm Beach County Intracoastal Waterway:
Charting a Course for the Future**

The Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) represents one of Palm Beach County’s most identifiable, complex, and asset-creating marine facilities. The roughly 43-mile long, multi-use “water highway” provides a desirable transportation route for recreational, freight, and commercial boating vessels as well as for manatees and marine life. It offers access to more than 1,000 waterway-related businesses, highly desirable homes and residential neighborhoods, and nodes of restaurant, retail, and entertainment destinations. The Intracoastal also provides numerous opportunities for recreational and eco-tourism activities ~ birding, fishing, canoeing, sailing ~ or a simple afternoon of picnicking on the water’s edge. In addition, the waterway connects 23 of the County’s 38 municipalities, underscoring its role as an important regional connector.

Recognizing the importance of an environmentally sound, competitive, and modern Intracoastal Waterway for the County’s long-term viability, Palm Beach County’s 2007 Strategic Economic Development Plan called for developing a regional economic waterway master plan that builds on its unique assets. Development of such a plan, which sets out a shared vision, common goals, and methods to achieve those goals, is consistent with similar initiatives in world-class communities, both in the U.S.



Within Palm Beach County, the Intracoastal encompasses 43 linear miles of shoreline east and west, cutting through 23 municipalities with a broad variety of upland conditions.

Completion of the Intracoastal Waterway

Completion of the Florida Intracoastal Waterway forges the last long link in the inland route from northern waters to southern Florida.... With sheltered passage along Florida’s entire eastern seaboard, the joy of cruising to Palm Beach or Miami or still farther southward through the keys to Key West is no longer limited to those who own either big sea-going yachts or sturdy boats of exceptionally shallow draft.... So this year cruise in Florida’s enchanted waters, where the tropics weave their strongest spell.

Commission of the Florida Inland Navigation District – Announcing the Completion of the Florida Intracoastal Waterway Jacksonville to Miami, circa 1935

and around the world (from Seattle and Vancouver to Toronto, Monaco, and London). The goal of those plans is to boost the regional economies and quality of place by enhancing, linking together, and capitalizing on their unique environmental and cultural assets. Reviews of these documents quickly indicate the broad nature of these efforts, addressing economics as well as land use, transportation, environmental systems, and other aspects of their respective waterways and waterfronts.

For Palm Beach County, a waterway master plan also reinforces another important county and state objective: to protect and retain working waterfronts, including those areas that house water-dependent activities such as marinas and the Port of Palm Beach. The broad range of issues related to working waterfronts and marine industries is addressed in this ICW Plan for Palm Beach County.

The development of a master plan for the Palm Beach County portion of the ICW requires a multi-

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agency, multi-disciplinary effort, crossing nearly two dozen jurisdictional boundaries and numerous regulatory and advisory agencies. Within Palm Beach County, the Intracoastal covers 43 miles, with coastline on both sides, and tens of thousands of individual properties. To initiate the effort, the Palm Beach Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), which is responsible for integrating all modes of transportation planning and programming, including water-based transportation as well as economics,



As represented in the map above, the Palm Beach County Intracoastal study area includes the entire length of the waterway (a total of 43 miles) and all properties a half-mile both east and west of the shoreline.

environmental sustainability, and quality of life enhancement, partnered with the Florida Inland Navigational District (FIND), a special taxing district responsible for the continued management and maintenance of the waterway in Florida.

These two lead agencies engaged the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council (TCRPC) to develop the ICW Plan in conjunction with Palm Beach County (particularly the Office of Economic Development and the Department of Environmental Resource Management), the Florida League of Cities' Gold Coast Chapter, the Palm Beach County Business Development Board, and the Center for Urban and Environmental Solutions at Florida Atlantic University. Representatives of these different organizations comprised a steering committee, which guided the project's due diligence as well as a highly participatory planning process led by TCRPC in 2008 to develop the plan.

The resulting Palm Beach County Intracoastal Waterway Master Plan detailed in this report sets forth a bold and comprehensive vision and implementation plan that, when realized, will transform the waterway into a world-class destination. It integrates continued ongoing environmental restoration and enhancement initiatives and calls for expanding economic, cultural, and recreational opportunities and strengthening transportation connections to improve the quality of life for residents of and visitors to Palm Beach County.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

The development of the vision and master plan began in the fall of 2007 with the establishment of a multi-agency steering committee comprised of agency representatives. After several months of due diligence and background review of on-going efforts throughout the County as well as waterway plans in other parts of the nation and world, the public planning process was initiated in the spring of 2008. More than 40 stakeholder interviews were conducted,

followed by a seven-day public design charrette (a series of highly interactive workshops) from May 9 through May 15, 2008 that enabled some 150 residents, property and business owners, and agency representatives to work side-by-side to understand the history, current features, challenges, and opportunities related to the waterway. Participants in the charrette were supported by a multi-disciplinary design team, who received additional public input during initial public input session as well as the design studio, which was open from 9 AM until 9 PM for the balance of the week. The resulting ideas provided the basis for the development of this comprehensive blueprint that is intended to guide decisions that shape the development along and access to the Intracoastal for generations to come.

The master planning process began with understanding the waterway’s history, current role, and condition. Participants learned that a connected sheltered inland waterway located behind the barrier islands was created for economic reasons – to expedite the movement of goods (winter fruits and vegetables) north and settlers south as well as provide access to the land along the waterway. To do that, a series of primitive canals were dredged to connect existing natural waterbodies. Over time, those canals were expanded to today’s 10-foot deep and 125-foot wide Intracoastal channel, resulting in the current mix of waterway users (ranging from heavy freight and commercial ventures such as water taxis and charter cruises to recreational boaters and kayakers, and a migratory corridor for manatees).

Planning participants also learned that the waterway is fulfilling its role to provide access to the adjoining land. However, both the upland/waterway relationship as well as the use of the water has created instances of environmental distress, a condition that has begun to improve with major investments in remediation and enhancement. Today’s Intracoastal Waterway is lined by and links together a series of thriving cities and towns that emerged from the early agricultural settlements created when the waterway

was first constructed, a broad range of water-dependent businesses and recreational uses, a variety of residential opportunities, spoil islands created from dredge material, and protected natural areas. Two key initiatives to improve the natural environment are the revised Lake Worth Lagoon Management Plan (designed to improve and monitor water quality, reduce the amount of suspended sediment, and restore habitat) and the Palm Beach County Manatee Protection Plan (developed to protect manatees and their habitat as well as increase public and boater awareness of manatee needs).

CORE PUBLIC THEMES

Outlined in the following chapters, the participants in the charrette identified six core areas, which have been used in the organization of the plan. These include:

- **Increasing public access to the waterway**, defined as locations offering unrestricted interaction with the water (for both large and small vessels, motorized and non-motorized, as well as those walking, fishing, wading, and swimming along the ICW)..
- **Protecting natural resources**, particularly the natural areas along the waterway and the Lake Worth Lagoon (the largest natural area of the waterway and a major estuarine resource) as well as the other natural systems.
- **Expanding all forms of water-based transportation** (the foundation for the creation of the Intracoastal Waterway and still crucial to the future prosperity of water-based and dependent activities), with accommodation for a range of water vessels, including water taxis, ferries, and motorized and non-motorized watercraft).

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- **Increasing and enhancing nature-based recreational and eco-tourism opportunities.**
- **Creating a system of marina “villages” and other key waterfront destinations** along the waterway and interconnecting those destinations through improved water transportation (for example, via water taxis).
- **Promoting sustainable economics,** particularly in the marine, hospitality, and tourism-related industries.

In addition to chapters that correspond to the topics outlined above, the master plan contains two opening chapters outlining, respectively, the history of the Intracoastal Waterway in Palm Beach County and the process used to develop the plan.

KEY PUBLIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The ICW Plan for Palm Beach County is a multi-tiered, multi-agency document that embodies scores of different programs and projects. The general findings and recommendations for each of the core issue areas are presented at the conclusion of the respective chapters. The plan supports the continuation of many of the on-going programs underway presently, particularly those related to the protection of natural resources, recreation, environmental enhancement, and public access. In addition, this report recommends the following key programs, projects, and strategies:

- Create a “Working Waterfronts” Task Force to support marine industrial uses help develop supportive policies and regulations;
- Explore development of a Marine Industry Cluster;
- Establish a “Megayacht Mile” overlay from the Blue Heron Bridge, south through Riviera

Beach into West Palm Beach;

- Create a workforce development program for the marine industries sector to support and expand the industry;
- Develop marine district overlay zones, in conjunction with working waterfront designations, to protect these areas and identify and better organize supporting ancillary uses;
- Support on-going marina village efforts in Jupiter, Riviera Beach, West Palm Beach, and Boynton Beach and further analyze the three marina village opportunities identified in this report (Palm Beach Gardens/North Palm Beach, Lake Worth, and Lantana);
- Further analyze establishment of a County-wide water taxi service and high-speed ferry service;
- Require expanded public access to the ICW with new development and redevelopment;
- Identify street-end park opportunities with specialized regulations for their development and maintenance;



Sunset on the Intracoastal; photo by Greg Reynolds.

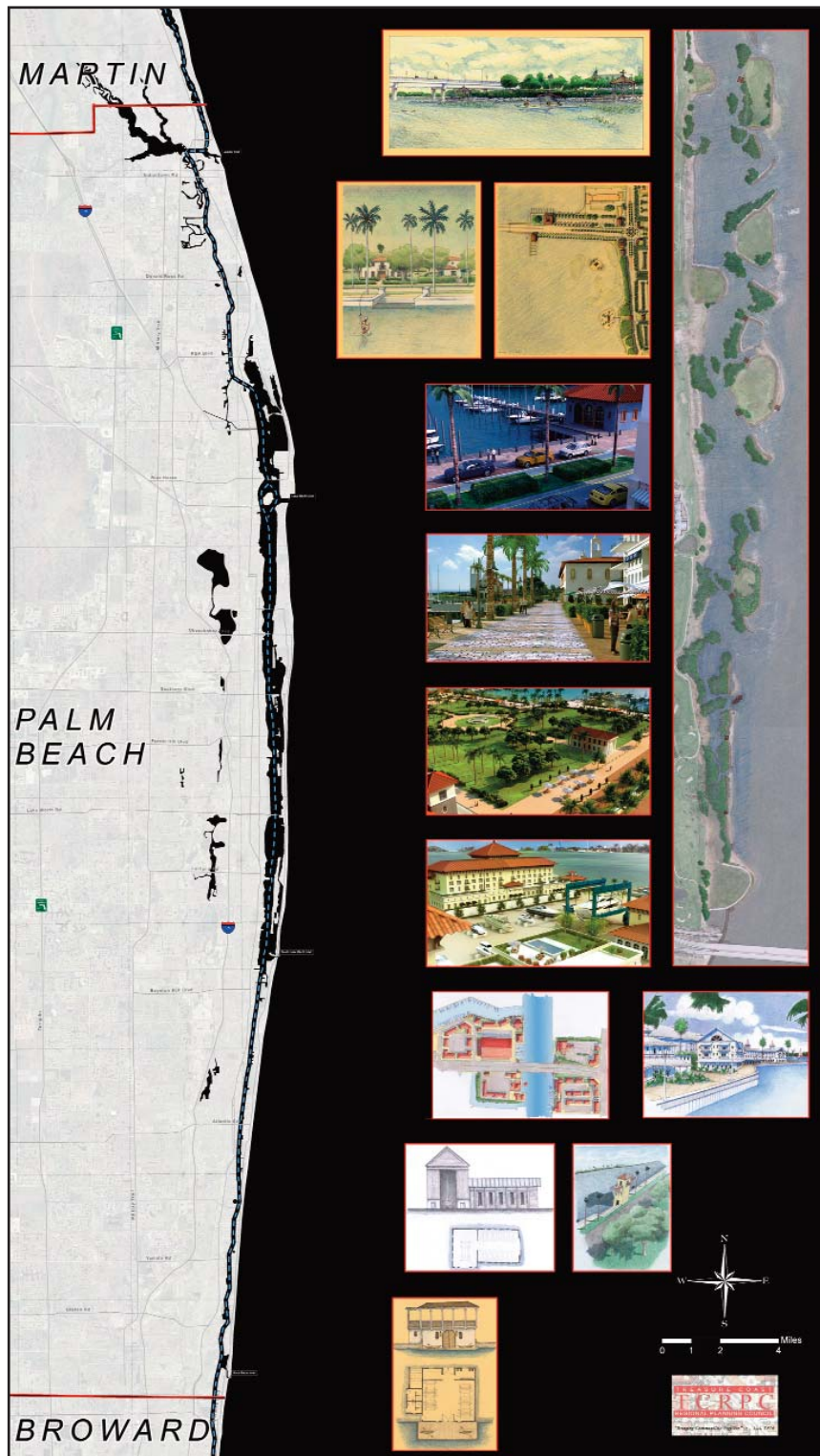
- Enhance ecotourism and nature-based recreation with a greenways/blueways mapping and information system, expanded public access for spoil islands and other restoration efforts, and improved portage facilities for canoe/kayak users;
- Develop a County-wide plan to address sea level rise;
- Develop a stormwater utility addressing, at a minimum, properties within a half-mile east and west of the ICW; and
- Create a Palm Beach County Intracoastal Waterway Commission to oversee implementation of this plan, including marketing, management, and advocacy.

These programs, projects, and strategies are recommended for implementation over the next five to ten years. While some can be initiated immediately, others will require longer term interagency agreements and partnerships for their realization. With the continued discussion and adoption of this plan, Palm Beach County can select consensus projects to position them for funding with advanced planning and design. As components of a large-scale comprehensive master plan, these projects will be more competitive for regional, state, and federal funding, especially given the broad public participation embodied in the development of this plan.

NEXT STEPS

The ICW Plan is intended to be used as a shared vision statement that clearly depicts the desired future for the waterway and an agreed-upon detailed outline of goals and actions that can be used to guide private and public-sector decisions that impact the waterway itself and the land alongside it. A well-articulated, widely understood shared guiding vision and clear implementing action plan are all the more important

for a resource that intersects 23 different municipalities and falls under the oversight of numerous local, state, and federal planning, regulatory, and permitting agencies. This multi-disciplinary, multi-agency approach is key for designing collaborative solutions that endure because they fairly balance what often seems like competing interests (for example, between economic and environmental priorities and the need for public access at a time when a push for private ownership of the land along the waterway is becoming more common). While some projects and programs identified in this master plan are within individual jurisdictions, many cross municipal boundaries and will require collaborative leadership for intergovernmental success. Continued inter-agency engagement will be critical for the plan’s successful implementation, especially between and among local governments and regulatory/permitting agencies.



The Palm Beach County Intracoastal Waterway Master Plan covers nearly 43 miles of coastline, travelling through 23 municipalities in eastern Palm Beach County. The master plan details the types of improvements and conditions prioritized by participants in the planning charrette to develop the vision for the future of the waterway.