



CITY OF TARPON SPRINGS

**SPONGE DOCKS
SPECIAL AREA PLANS**

COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOP SUMMARY

FEBRUARY 2, 2010



RENAISSANCE PLANNING GROUP

THE EVENT

On December 8th, 2009, the City of Tarpon Springs held a community stakeholder workshop in support of the Sponge Docks Area Special Area Plan project. The workshop was conducted during a regularly scheduled session of the City's Planning Focus Group. It was attended widely by area residents, business owners, City officials and City staff. Renaissance Planning Group consultants conducted the workshop along with the assistance of staff from the City's Planning & Zoning Division of the Development Services Department. A total of 27 participants – including 12 Planning Focus Group members – were present at the workshop.

Workshop Intent

The intent of the workshop was to gather input from community stakeholders to identify the most important variables towards implementing a future vision for the Sponge Docks area in Tarpon Springs. Participants were asked two key questions important to defining and implementing a future vision through the Special Area Plan process:

- What are the key ideas that define the future vision for the Sponge Docks?
- What strategies would help implement this vision?

The information gathered was instrumentally important to develop the Special Area Plan Vision and Objectives.

Workshop Instruction and Presentation

Renaissance Planning Group consultants gave a presentation to begin the workshop. An account of the Sponge Docks area existing conditions was presented to set the stage, followed by a brief description of the Special Area Plan requirements and process. Finally, descriptions and visual examples of ideas and strategies were presented to assist stakeholders in considering a desired future for the Sponge Docks area.

Evaluation Worksheets

Workshop participants were provided a list of broad key *ideas* to consider for defining a vision as well as a list of *strategies* to consider for successfully implementing the vision. Worksheets were used to numerically rank the ideas and strategies and participants were encouraged to record additional ideas and strategies, if desired. Also, participants were given additional space on the worksheet to provide more detailed descriptions and definitions of their individual rankings.

Group Discussions

The participants were randomly divided into three groups of stakeholders to discuss their feelings and opinions of the various ideas and strategies considered on the worksheets. A Renaissance Planning Group consultant was present among each of the groups and assisted in facilitating the discussion. Planning & Zoning Division staff also provided assistance and recorded notes of the discussions on large flip charts. After approximately one hour of discussion, a representative from each group presented a verbal report summary of their discussion to the other stakeholders.

INFORMATION AND DATA ANALYSIS

Renaissance Planning Group consultants collected and recorded the data and information from the completed worksheets and group discussion notes from the flip charts.

Key Ideas toward a Future Vision

The question was asked, “What key ideas define the future vision for the Sponge Docks?” Five key ideas specific to the area were included for workshop participants to rank. The lower the number, the greater the level of importance determined for that key idea. Therefore, the lowest total score represented the highest level of importance among the group of five choices. Participants were also encouraged to add key ideas believed to be important, however not listed on the worksheet.

The key ideas were ranked by the community stakeholders in order of importance as follows:

Rank	Key Idea	Total Score
No. 1	Tourist-Orientation	57
No. 2	Working Waterfront	64
No. 3	Waterfront Promenade	72
No. 4	Hope-Athens Greek Community (a “Greek Village”)	83
No. 5	Connecting Sponge Docks and CRA	103

Additional ‘key ideas’ expressed by participants included:

- Reface existing downtown
- Hotel in Sponge Docks area (3)
- Local draws/activity, attract local nightlife traffic, more sidewalk activity (4)
- Develop north side of river
- Multi-modal transportation options

- Improving on what's already there
- Make area more upscale
- More water-related recreational uses

Many of the comments written to address the individual key ideas in the worksheets as well as the notes recorded on the flip charts during group discussions were helpful in developing a more in-depth understanding of the feelings of stakeholders. When aggregated, several comments began to echo some collective thoughts and attitudes of the group. A general summation of worksheet comments and group discussion notes is included, below, and organized by each of the key ideas, in order of their ranking.

Tourist-Orientation

The history, character and current activities primarily along the waterfront of the Sponge Docks drive the tourist interest in Tarpon Springs. Tourism is important to the local economy and efforts should be considered to better accommodate visitors, such as improving the quality of routes and destinations as well as providing more opportunities for tourists to increase their stay with expanded evening activities and lodging accommodations. Because the tourism is driven by the 'local' flavor of the Sponge Docks, the need to accommodate visitors must be balanced with the needs of the local community.

Working Waterfront

The waterfront is a unique, major asset and strength of the area for local identity as well as tourism. The waterfront is not driven by tourism; it is a "working" waterfront, the use of which drives the tourism. As such, land use and development policies should be directed toward preserving the character as well as enhancing and expanding upon the function of the Sponge Docks waterfront area. Increased waterfront-oriented business activity like sponging, commercial fishing, shrimping, public dockage, water taxis and fish markets, for example, would add to both the longevity of the working waterfront and the tourist industry of Tarpon Springs. Other land uses and facilities, such as bathrooms and informational kiosks should be considered as well.

Waterfront Promenade

The pedestrian way along the waterfront is the public space jewel of the Sponge Docks. Efforts should be made to complete a true waterfront promenade that can harness the synergy between Dodecanese Boulevard and the working waterfront through increased accessibility and pedestrian amenities. The waterfront promenade should be an ample, continuous, uninterrupted pathway ignited with activities such as outdoor entertainment, vendors, and ferry boat stations, for example. It should be a comfortable place for gathering with plenty of seating, shade, and perhaps a water feature such as a fountain.

Hope-Athens Greek Community (a “Greek Village”)

This is a special place rich with history and charm. The components of a unique, authentic community character exist today and should be protected; however, revitalization that respects and enhances such character may be necessary for the future longevity and prosperity of the area. The residential land use fabric of the neighborhood streets should continue along with future potential land uses that are complimentary and supportive to the community while remaining respectful to the character.

Connecting Sponge Docks and CRA

The distance between the Sponge Docks and downtown makes physically linking the two areas difficult. And while it has not been easy to make this connection, it is none the less important. Efforts should be made to improve the function and appearance of roadways that connect the two areas through beautification, lighting, shade trees and accommodating multi-modal transportation opportunities for pedestrians, bicycles and a future potential transit connector such as a shuttle, trolley or minibus line.

Implementation Strategies to Apply

The question was asked, “What strategies are most important to successfully implementing this future vision for the Sponge Docks?” Ten implementation strategies were included for workshop participants to rank. Same with the ‘key ideas’ question, the lower the number, the greater the level of importance determined for that implementation strategy. Therefore, the lowest total score represented the highest level of importance among the group of ten choices. Participants were also encouraged to add implementation strategies believed to be important, however not listed on the worksheet.

The implementation strategies were ranked by the community stakeholder group in order of importance as follows:

Rank	Implementation Strategy	Total Score
No. 1	Sense of Place	55
No. 2	Amenities	75
No. 3	Retail Development	90
No. 4	Street Network	105
No. 5	Building Orientation	112
No. 6	Mix of Land Uses	118
No. 7	Development Scale	120
No. 8	Parking	123
No. 9	Public Space	125
No. 10	Housing Mix	149

Additional ‘implementation strategies’ expressed by participants included:

- Buses from downtown to Sponge Docks and public parking
- Neighborhood-supporting retail
- Public restrooms (2)
- Hotel
- Better promotion of area

Many of the comments written to address the individual implementation strategies in the worksheets as well as the notes recorded on the flip charts during group discussions provided a better understanding of the strategies idealized. A brief summation of worksheet comments and group discussion notes is included, below, and organized by each of the implementation strategies, in order of their ranking.

Sense of Place (architecture / development character)

The area’s current “Greek Village” like feel should be maintained and improved upon with a general focus on enhancing the existing building fabric and assuring that new development respects such fabric with regard to parking, entryway locations, building placement and design styles.

Amenities (art, lighting, benches, landscaping)

The Sponge Docks area includes a range of amenities; however, their locations, style, and effectiveness vary throughout. In general, the area would benefit from increased shade and benches. Additional beautification in the form of unified street lighting, landscaping, and public art, perhaps in the form of a water feature element, would help to improve the look, feel and popularity of the area. New and replacement amenities should possess unified style elements that are in keeping with the character of the Sponge Docks.

Retail Development

Current retail development is heavily focused on daytime tourist trade. The area could benefit from a greater diversity of retail and a better retail strategy to increase tourist stays and activity along the entire length of Dodecanese Boulevard.

Street Network (vehicular and pedestrian connectivity)

The Sponge Docks area street network supports general vehicular travel flow, pedestrians, bicyclists, commercial vehicles and on street parking. This causes an obvious conflict between the various needs and modes of travel. Transportation network improvement strategies should be reviewed and considered for routing and roadway usage to foster a better coexistence of the various competing transportation interests. In addition, the sidewalk network should be improved and enhanced for easier and more comfortable pedestrian access and travel so as to better support the local residents and tourists.

Building Orientation (frontage, building siting)

The area's older, existing building fabric is oriented so that primary building entrances are located in the front of the property, along the sidewalks. Today, this helps preserve the Sponge Docks "village" like identity. New buildings and major rehabilitations to existing buildings should continue this method of orientation and further increase the consistency in the look and feel of the area. Furthermore, when private off-street parking is included, it should be focused toward the rear of the property, behind the building.

Mix of Land Uses

While commercial uses will likely continue to dominate the area, residential uses would provide an added mix to support such commercial uses and increase the number of permanent residents in the Sponge Docks area. Traditional land use arrangement prototypes consisting of commercial uses at the ground floor level and residential uses on the floor(s) above are preferable.

Development Scale (density/intensity)

Increases in development densities and intensities may be viable in areas such as those available for infill development as well as areas that could benefit from increased support and patronage of new residents. Additional residential densities will be necessary to support future convenience retail uses for neighborhood residences.

Parking

Access to and the availability of parking is important for the continued success of the Sponge Docks area, and there appears to be an adequate supply available; however, the current parking situation is visually unappealing and detracts from the area's better qualities. Future strategies that will efficiently direct visitors to parking lots while minimizing their physical presence should be explored. Also, strategies to develop a future public parking garage should continue to be explored.

Public Space

Quality public spaces accommodate residents and tourists alike. The area would benefit from public spaces that provide comfortable, attractive areas for public gathering and interaction, as well as activities and events. Also, the area would benefit greatly from having more public restrooms.

Housing Mix

A greater mix of housing should come primarily from mixed use buildings with residential units on upper floors.

SPONGE DOCKS - VISION

The Sponge Docks area stakeholder workshop provided valuable information that helped develop a Sponge Docks Vision statement for the Special Area Plan (SAP). The Sponge Docks Vision statement is written, below.

The Sponge Docks in Tarpon Springs have a definite sense of place that is derived from its past as a hub for the Greek sponging community. This sense of place is represented to some extent in the physical environment but is manifested largely in the community that lives and works in the Sponge Docks area. The Sponge Docks in Tarpon Spring is a regional tourist destination in the Tampa Bay area. It is also home to a vibrant Greek community as well as other residents attracted by the village like scale and charm of the place. The Sponge Docks waterfront serves as a working waterfront for local businesses but also as a recreational open space attraction for the tourists and local residents.

Maintaining and enhancing this diversity of uses and users is essential to sustainable future growth and change in the Sponge Docks area. One critical strategy to achieve this larger goal is to balance the needs of tourists with the needs of the local community. Dodecanese Boulevard and the waterfront are both physical places where this dichotomy is reflected. Another critical factor is the Sponge Dock's connectedness to Tarpon Springs Downtown.

SPONGE DOCKS – SPECIAL AREA PLAN OBJECTIVES

The Special Area Plan (SAP) Objectives are intended to guide the future vision for the Sponge Docks area. The SAP provides the strategies for successful implementation of this vision through land use elements such as development scale (density/intensity), sense of place (architecture/development character), amenities (art, lighting, benches, landscaping), building orientation (frontage, building siting), street network (vehicular and pedestrian connectivity), mix of land uses, housing mix, retail development, public space, and parking.

The Sponge Docks area stakeholder workshop provided valuable information to help inform the SAP Objectives. General, overall area Objectives are listed first, followed by more direct place-based Objectives.

PLAN OBJECTIVES - GENERAL

A. Form-Based Guidelines/SmartCode

- Coordinate areas/subareas with SmartCode transect zone definitions.
- Provide form-based development and design standards.
- Coordinate requirements for SAPs with Historic District, Multimodal Transportation District, and Central Business District.

B. Complete Streets

- Organize the road network based on their primary role as transit-oriented, vehicle-oriented, pedestrian-oriented, and local or service-oriented streets.
- Prepare streetscape guidelines to improve vehicular and pedestrian accessibility and mobility.

C. Market Study

- Conduct a market study to assess the current area economic strengths and weaknesses, as well as the market feasibility of future uses, densities and intensities.

D. Parking Study

- Prepare a consolidated parking strategy including parking management, shared parking, and structured parking.

PLAN OBJECTIVES – PLACE-BASED

E. Tourist Destination

- Encourage tourist-oriented business and retail opportunities along Dodecanese Boulevard.
- Provide services and amenities for visitors such as restrooms and water fountains.
- Provide tourist accommodation options such as hotels, motels, inns, and other short stay lodging within walking distance of the tourist destination in the Sponge Docks.

F. Waterfront

- Maintain and integrate the working waterfront into a predominantly tourist oriented district.
- Create a public open space for festival markets and other events supporting the primary function of the waterfront.
- Extend existing waterfront promenade from Pinellas Avenue to Roosevelt Boulevard.

G. Greek Village (Hope-Athens Greek Community)

- Preserve and enhance “Greek Village” character through development pattern, scale and use.
- Reinforce Dodecanese Boulevard as the ‘Village Center’ for the resident community with local retail and services.
- Create more live-work opportunities by encouraging vertical residential mix along Dodecanese Boulevard, Athens Street, and Roosevelt Boulevard while maintaining the existing scale and development pattern.
- Consider infill/redevelopment opportunities within residential areas for higher density residential typologies such as townhomes and garden apartments.

H. Connecting Sponge Docks and Downtown

- Create ‘architectural’ gateway at Pinellas Avenue and Dodecanese Boulevard.
- Create minor gateway to the Sponge Docks at Pinellas Avenue and Athens Street.
- Enhance Athens Street as a pedestrian and/or bike connection to the Sponge Docks.
- Connect the Sponge Docks and Downtown core with a feeder bus loop.
- Plan coordinated annual and monthly events that engage local residents and visitors in the Sponge Docks and Downtown areas alike.