

# A walk by the water in St. Marys

As the master plan process nears completion with recommendations expected in June, I reviewed comments from many residents who believe we should look to our greatest asset as we create a vision for the city's future. That is a vision of our beautiful waterfront that I share. If you walk along our waterfront looking out over marshes and river, it is easy to envision what could be. What may not be as obvious are the steps underway to achieve that vision.

Regardless of who develops the gateway property, the city has protected the path that fronts the property so that the public will always be able to enjoy the waterfront view as they walk or bike. We envision a marsh walkway from the gateway to Weed Street and beyond perhaps even to the rookery, but that will take time and investment.

We have to act in affordable phases with the first phase being a new brick walkway from the gateway entrance on Ready Street to the dock. Construction is currently underway with a May completion date. It's a great spot to watch dolphins at play or capture a glimpse of manatees or sea otters as you enjoy a spectacular sunrise or sunset.

Like many residents, I envision a waterfront development that includes up to 20 new boat slips at the gateway, attracting visitors and boaters. It can be a flexible facility accommodating sailboats, yachts of varying sizes or even small cruise ships and would boost our tourism



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economy. Boaters seek easy access to amenities with the ambiance of a friendly town and we are in a position to offer both. But we are also a city with a working waterfront. The fleet of shrimp trawlers working out of the historic buildings owned by the Carnegies, and now the Langs, is important to our local economy but also adds to the picturesque setting for visitors. We have the opportunity to develop a waterfront that protects our history yet provides modern conveniences as we create a more vibrant St. Marys.

The next stop on the walk is the wooden pavilion where Osborne Street ends at St. Marys Street. On the dock beneath the structure is a recently added new pump out station and water station for boaters. They are not visible from the street because they are designed to accommodate boaters, not pedestrians. It is just one of many steps we are taking to be responsive to the needs of the boating community. We have ideas for pavilion improvements to make it more useful.

Continue the walk to

enter the well-maintained park and docks operated by the National Park Service. NPS is a great partner of the city in continuing to ensure this section of the waterfront remains resident and visitor friendly. There is considerable history at this location, formerly the old Miller dock. While the last effort at establishing ferry service between Fernandina Beach, Fla., and St. Marys was not successful, this is the location where such a service would load and discharge passengers if the two cities are able to find a way to attract a private operator to try again.

As you pass the Wheeler Street boat ramps that are so popular with locals who enjoy fishing, boating and kayaking and move along to the waterfront park, there are plenty of recreational fishing and viewing docks. We regularly maintain and rehab these docks and work with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, which owns some of them.

A new waterfront engineering study will help determine how to replace the river buoys that were lost due to age. Hopefully, replacement will be in the upcoming budget as the buoys will be necessary to accommodate large boats seeking to anchor in our river.

At this point where the Gilman riverfront park and the Lang private marina meet, you look out and realize just how close Florida is and are reminded of the time in history when the St. Marys River was the international boundary line for the United States. Because of

that unique status, the city border extends to the middle of the river.

We have a long history as a waterfront community and if you take the walk, you will see that much of the waterfront is alive and beckoning to residents and visitors. Yet, more can be done to make it even more inviting. We want to capture the historic charm, maintain what works well and bring in modern conveniences to establish St. Marys as a new and popular stopover for boaters traveling the intracoastal waterways. To accomplish that objective, upgrades and added amenities at both public and private docks are essential.

As residents say, the waterfront is a key asset to the future. We have the vision, but that vision has a hefty price tag. We continue to apply for federal boating grants and bike and walkway grants knowing the competition is stiff. Until we obtain a grant or find a philanthropist who shares our vision, we will continue moving forward in affordable phases.

In the coming months, I'm going to report on my walks throughout St. Marys, a city with dozens of interesting neighborhoods and commercial centers, each with the potential for improvement in the St. Marys of the future. In the meantime, take the waterfront walk with an eye towards marsh and water to enjoy what is and envision what can be.

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