

3.1 EXISTING CONDITIONS

The following is a summary of quality of life conditions in St. Lucie County. These categories were selected because they are components that can be positively affected by an improved greenways, trails, and sidewalks plan.

Natural systems:

St. Lucie is a county largely defined by its water features: the Atlantic shoreline, the Indian River Lagoon, and the North Fork of the St. Lucie River. The County boasts ample public access to the beach, and large portions of Hutchinson Island are publicly owned or under conservation easement. The Indian River Lagoon is one of the most prominent features in the County, and is famous nationwide for its quality fishing—recreational fishing brings in an estimated six times the amount that commercial fishing enterprises do. However, the rapid growth of St. Lucie County has begun to imperil its natural resources. Development encroaching on the Indian River Lagoon and the North Fork threaten the supply and quality of water. Development has also led to a loss of wildlife habitat and land fragmentation—the problems continue to worsen as more agricultural lands in the west are pressured by the real estate market. Without action, the natural resources and rural character that once defined St. Lucie will be significantly degraded or will vanish altogether.

Recreation System:

St. Lucie County encompasses three state parks: Avalon SP, Fort Pierce Inlet SP, and Savannas SP. The 21-miles of Atlantic shoreline can be accessed at nineteen points, twelve of which also serve as parks. Remarkably, the County's public access to the beach could serve a population of 487,000.¹ The County owns and maintains 38 non-oceanfront parks and 23 ballfields. Additional recreation options run by the County include Fairwinds Golf Course, three community centers, a regional sports complex, pools, and other special use facilities.

Other recreation options are managed by the City of Port St. Lucie, as well as by a number of private facilities such as marinas and clubs.

Social/Cultural conditions:

Although more families are relocating to St. Lucie, the County still has a substantial aging population. Additionally, the population is diversifying both racially and socio-economically, causing a greater demand for public services. The land development code has allowed for a growth pattern of homogenous settlements. Much of the County is low-density residential sprawl—especially prevalent in Port St. Lucie—that lacks connections to other neighborhoods, parks, retail centers, and public spaces.

Economic Health:

Despite the population growth in the County, economic health is not a given. For example, in 2004 County per capita income was only an average \$23,656—well below that of state's \$31,469 and nearly half that of neighboring Martin County's \$44,452.² This is likely because the primary employer in St. Lucie is the retail sector, whereas Martin County has succeeded in attracting



¹ St. Lucie County Comprehensive Plan. 1990, revised through May 15, 2004.

² Florida County Economic Profiles. Enterprise Florida Online. Online:

<http://www.eflorida.com/profiles/CountyReport.asp?CountyID=67&Display=all>

higher-paying jobs. One result of this is a south-bound commuting pattern to Martin County during the work-week.

A major challenge for St. Lucie County is in diversifying and strengthening its economic base. There has been recent interest in eco-tourism, a wise direction given the unique natural resources in the area. However, growth patterns must be altered if these resources are to be healthy and sustainable sources of revenue in the future.

Transportation System:

The County's transportation system is dominated by the major north-south corridors of the Florida Turnpike, Interstate-95, and US 1. The commute south to Martin County is made difficult due to a lack of connectivity between local roads—users are forced to use either US 1 or travel out of their way and use the Rangeline Road to 706 Corridor or the Turnpike. A handful of east-west arterials have also become increasingly important (and congested) as development has pushed further west. A forty-mile stretch of Alternate Route A1A has been designated as one of eight Scenic Florida Highways. Fixed-route transit is limited, and there are currently few opportunities for multi-modal transportation, and many areas lack linkages to nearby services and other neighborhoods.

With the exception of Fort Pierce, much of St. Lucie County lacks sidewalks and bicycle trails. An estimated 12,210 children walk or bicycle to school, but many must do so on unsafe routes. A study in 1995 determined there was a need for many more bicycle and pedestrian facilities—there is little doubt that this demand has only increased with the population growth in the past ten years.

3.2 OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Because of the fast pace of growth, many in St. Lucie County have become concerned for the future of the community. Instead of letting development take the course of least resistance, a number of groups have been proactive in steering growth into a more livable form. There are multiple examples of such efforts.

The citizens in the northern part of the County have come together to create the Towns, Villages and Country sides (TVC) Plan, a departure from existing land development code toward denser, walkable, mixed-use communities with more public spaces. The City of Port St. Lucie is also envisioning a different future by drawing up plans for a new mixed-use downtown. In 2001, the City conducted a study of socio-economic conditions along the US 1 corridor. Findings revealed that the area was developed on unsound growth principles. As a result, the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) has been charged with overseeing a long-term, comprehensive planning process that supports a multi-use, central gathering place to help better define the City's identity.

Efforts are also being made on the regional scale. In a remarkable two years, the Sustainable Treasure Coast Committee formed and completed an in-depth report on a regional vision for St. Lucie, Martin, and Indian River Counties. The South Florida Water Management District also plays a large role in monitoring crucial ecological systems and planning for a sustainable region.

There is also interest and opportunity to promote ecotourism as an economic driver for the County. These opportunities expand beyond the well-known resources like the Indian River Lagoon and can grow to include a broader range of County heritage, such as the Cracker Trail and historic figures such as Zora Neale Hurston that made the County their home. Combined creatively with natural resources, and linked into the tourist economy, St Lucie still has much to offer.



The recent surge of concerned citizen and agency action, combined with a wealth of the County's natural and cultural resources, presents an opportunity for St. Lucie County to begin steering its growth towards a sustainable future. Greenways and bicycle/pedestrian systems cannot do it alone, but can provide the critical linkages—both physical and social—that can start knitting the County into a healthier, more cohesive community.

