



A Big Idea...

How one Florida community and major real estate developer tackled the problem of sprawl and saved tens of thousands of acres of environmentally sensitive waterfront in the process.

By Dan Shaw, AICP

Located on the Gulf of Mexico in Northwest Florida, Bay County has had a curious history. One company, The St. Joe Paper Co., has owned nearly half of the county since the 1930s when Delaware industrialist Alfred I. du Pont and his brother-in-law, Ed Ball, began buying up large tracts of pine land to feed the company's paper mill in Port St. Joe to the south.

Over the past seven decades, St. Joe mostly let its Bay County landholdings sit idle. As a result, generations of Bay County residents had come to view the property as public lands, available to anyone for camping, hunting and roaming in off-road vehicles. But a convergence of forces in the late 1990s dramatically changed the landscape, setting into motion the largest, most-comprehensive and conservation-minded land-use plan in Florida history.

The story begins in mid-1990s when officials of the Panama City – Bay County International Airport began investigating options to extend the airport's existing runway to meet new Federal Aviation Administration safety requirements.

The airport, which sits in the city limits of Panama City, is sandwiched between the banks of West Bay, part of the St. Andrew Bay system, and a major state thoroughfare. The airport authority commissioned an environmental assessment study of extending the runway into the St. Andrew Bay. But the project was opposed by environmentalists, worried about the impact the longer runway would have on the bay's ecology. Another plan to extend the existing runway over State Road 390 and into the Forest Park neighborhood is a backup alternative to the relocation to the WestBay site.

Over the next few years, airport officials began looking around the county for alternative sites. The region's commercial flight paths are restricted more than most communities because of two nearby Air Force bases – Eglin and Tyndall. As the airport operators explored their options, one of the best relocation sites to emerge was in the northeast corner of the county. There was only one problem. It was St. Joe land.

While St. Joe officials had shown little interest in developing their vast Bay County holdings over the years, the company was undergoing a major transition at the same time the airport officials came calling. The St. Joe board of directors had decided to shed the

company's industrial holdings (paper mill, railroad, sugar and telecommunications) and begin developing its one million acres of Florida land. St. Joe hired Peter Rummell, a former Walt Disney real estate executive, to oversee the transformation.

A receptive St. Joe not only agreed to explore the relocation of the Panama City - Bay County International Airport with the county, but also promised to donate the land for a new airport. The 4,000 acre site for the proposed Panama City-Bay County International Airport has a nearly 200 year history of economic service to the region, primarily as home to heavy industrial timber operations that replaced virgin forest with densely furrowed rows and planting beds of fast-growing slash pine that was planted, harvested, replanted and harvested again over the years to produce wood fiber for nearby paper mills.

As county, airport and St. Joe officials set about planning for the airport and surrounding commercial and residential, yet another major change emerged that would have a significant impact on the project, named WestBay.

Concerned about out-of-control sprawl spreading across the Florida peninsula, Legislators in 1998 passed a new set of laws establishing five experimental programs for very large land planning.

The Optional Sector Plan process created by Florida's Department of Community Affairs and enacted by the Legislature consists of two main parts: a conceptual long-term build-out overlay, or vision, of an area and, within that overlay, detailed specific area plans that actually change the underlying land use. The sector plan is an agreement between the county and the state. It defines a specific geographic area. It identifies public facilities needed and existing natural resources. The plan also must include the urban form and procedures for intergovernmental coordination.

With the double-digit population experienced in Southeast and Southwest Florida now heading to Northwest Florida, state planning officials recommended that Bay County use the Sector Planning process. Moreover, if the development of the new airport and St. Joe's WestBay project were reviewed and permitted separately, that is in a piecemeal fashion, it could have had a negative impact on the overall quality of life in Bay County, as well as the environmental sustainability of West Bay.

In 2001, Bay County, the airport authority and St. Joe kicked off the West Bay Area Vision Planning process. Over 18 months and dozens of public workshops, an overview of the WestBay Sector Plan emerged. One of the resounding comments and concerns voiced by local residents was the protection of West Bay, an ecological and recreational wonder. To assist in the selection and mapping of proposed conservation areas, the Nature Conservancy was brought in as an independent consultant.

The planning guidelines of the public visioning sessions included: use smart growth with compatible land uses and innovative planning strategies; recognize impact on regional resources; utilize design criteria to achieve livable and sustainable places; identify conservation and preservation areas for parks, buffers and habitat management; focus on

job creation and economic development for an area that has lagged the state-wide income averages; and, provide better air service for area residents and visitors.

The overall result: WestBay, encompassing about 75,000 acres, including the new airport, is one of the largest planned communities in Florida history. The crown jewel of the project is the more than 30,000 acres of mostly waterfront land slated for conservation, making WestBay the state's single biggest land conservation effort by a private company. The preservation area included at WestBay is roughly the same size as all of Bay County's existing cities combined.

Because the project protects so many miles of West Bay coastline and its main tributaries, environmental groups such as Audubon Florida and the Nature Conservancy have been strong backers.

Within the WestBay Sector Plan are, at this point, two Detailed Specific Area Plans, or DSAPS. The airport DSAP includes 4,000 acres for a 12,000-foot runway, state-of-the-art terminal and aviation-related commercial development. An additional 10,000 acres has been identified for mitigation via preservation of valuable ecological areas. The new Panama City – Bay County International Airport will be the first airport built in the U.S. post 9-11 and the first in the state of Florida since Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers opened in 1983.

Meanwhile, the WestBay DSAP is 16,500 acres and includes 4,900 housing units, 4.4 million square feet of commercial, industrial and retail space and 490 hotel rooms and two marinas. Also included in the DSAP are sites set aside for five public schools, parks, libraries, water and sewer treatment facilities and rights-of-way for roadway and other transportation uses.

The advantages of large-scale planning like WestBay are tremendous. The county and its residents know what WestBay's 75,000 acres will look like for decades to come. Most important, WestBay means there will be no piecemeal development in that part of the county, which undoubtedly would have resulted in the loss of valuable bayfront, environmentally sensitive lands.

Residential communities will be connected to each other and retail shops by pedestrian walkways. Retail centers will be located near neighborhoods so residents won't have to drive for miles and miles along congested roadways. Large employment centers will be near residential centers for easier commutes. The design, architecture and "feel" of the communities will be controlled. In short, there will be few, if any surprises down the road.

The WestBay project also employed a novel approach to permitting. Typically, each of the federal and state regulatory agencies would, working independently, issue separate environmental permits. But because of the uniqueness of WestBay all of the pertinent agencies – Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – agreed to work together and issue just one overarching permit for the airport DSAP. By

getting all of the regulatory agencies communicating with one another early in the process, the WestBay Sector Plan resulted in a coordinated effort and enhanced protection of the environment.

The Bay County Commission and the State of Florida have approved the West Bay DSAP and the airport DSAP. Construction on the airport could begin early next year, once a final Environmental Impact Study report from FAA is released.

The sector planning and vision workshops Bay County used for the long-range planning of the WestBay project could be utilized by other counties and communities, regardless of size, for complex development projects involving more one or more uses, to ensure environmental management and sustainability.

In light of recent national trends of communities embracing visioning for large-scale developments, the success of WestBay Sector Plan may serve as a model for future participatory visioning projects.

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