

FORT WALTON BEACH COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

**ELEMENT I**  
**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ELEMENT**

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## ELEMENT I ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ELEMENT

### I.1A Overview

The State of Florida has recommended that all local governments write or develop an Economic Development Element as part of their Comprehensive Plan. The Element identifies goals and objectives that can be used for the development of appropriate and sustainable economic growth.

Without a plan, a schedule for implementation, and a mechanism for accountability, economic development will be scattered, efforts diluted, and results poor. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, communities must compete globally to market their areas to potential clients as ideal locations for business activity. At the same time, business retention efforts and resources are devoted to maintaining the existing base of businesses and assisting firms experiencing difficulties, while encouraging the expansion of others.

Economic development is more than a process of attracting business and industry. Economic development is a process of identifying funding sources and developing a suitable, stable economic, social and political environment in which progressive, constructive, balanced growth may be realized over a period of years.

Through this Economic Development Element, the City of Fort Walton Beach is strengthening its 2004 Vision Plan *Focus on the Future*, implementing the 2007 *Fort Walton Beach Community Redevelopment Agency Plan*, and 2006 Waterfront Plan *Charting the Course*; we are broadcasting our stable local economy as opposed to the unstable national market, and committing to the greatest extent possible that governmental policies, procedures and land-use decisions encourage industry innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship for long-term economic prosperity.

### I.1B Economic History

In 2007, the City Council directed city staff to improve and strengthen economic development initiatives. In 2008, the Vision Plan Stewardship Committee determined through corporate sampling that economic development is the most important issue facing our community. Also in 2008, the Local Planning Agency adopted an Evaluation and Appraisal Report which identified the need for economic sustainability in an environment of intense development pressure.

In the 10-year planning horizon, market forces indicate that the Fort Walton Beach area will continue to be the leading center for technology in northwest Florida. Our community stands to weather the economic recession better than most due to an entrepreneurial business climate and global technology-related jobs in conjunction with the Department of Defense. Eglin Air Force Base is the world's largest Department of Defense installation, spanning 724 square miles, and defense contractor companies are established throughout the Northwest Florida region. The Eglin Air Force Base Complex (which includes Hurlburt and Duke Air Force Bases) represents an annual \$7.0 billion impact in the area and an economic multiplier at ten times the national average.

Our professional and technical service industries leverage the extensive government contracting that exists with local military bases. Additionally, Fort Walton Beach has redevelopment plans which provide incentives and minimize the risk for capital investment within its Community Redevelopment Area and Commerce and Technology Park. Also unlike other coastal communities, the City of Fort Walton Beach's coastlines are not monopolized by imposing condominiums and a "soft economy" defined as being disproportionately service-oriented. Our tourists don't define our city - our residents do. We operate a

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365-days-a-year economy that's strong in technology as well as commerce. We like to say we're big city strong and small-town friendly.

### I.2 Introduction

In Fort Walton Beach, character is our commodity. The small-town atmosphere includes eleven traditional neighborhoods, seven of which are located along the shoreline, and each with their own distinct personality and charm. The city boasts nationally top-ranked public and charter schools with a low teacher-to-student ratio. Schools are a part of our neighborhoods, linked by fitness trails, sidewalks and public parks. Our locally-owned and operated businesses enjoy affordability and amenities which embody the city's commitment to providing a positive business climate in which companies grow.

The purpose of the Economic Development Element is to establish a course for strategic economic development until 2020 and beyond. Specifically, this Element provides the foundation for a 5-year strategic economic development plan to be implemented by the city's designated economic development agencies, with annual review by the City Council. This Element emphasizes the strengths of the city's diversified, global economy; establishes a cluster development strategy to identify, maintain and enhance existing business clusters; and also identifies the market potential for new business clusters to promote entrepreneurship and private investment. To our local businesses, this Element is a statement of our City's steadfast commitment to their growth and vitality. To investors and industries caught in a softening national economy, it's also a broadcast that while other cities are struggling to stay afloat, ours is a stable, diversified economy backed by the United States military, global technology industries, a superior education system, carefully planned growth, and unsurpassed natural beauty.

This Element will establish goals, objectives and policies for growth to encourage a "hard economy" grounded in professional services, military and medical technology, and not overly service-oriented. Realizing that according to the Florida Association of Museums, one dollar invested in cultural assets returns seven dollars, and one dollar invested in historic preservation returns ten dollars, through this Element the City will also ensure the availability of prime available lands, infrastructure, and amenities for cultural and educational venues.

Fort Walton Beach will utilize the City's 2007 CRA Plan Update, the 2010-2020 Comprehensive Plan, and Okaloosa County's 2006 *Strategies to Diversify Our Economy*, to strengthen and expand our local economy. This Element outlines projects from public meetings intended to be the cornerstone of an Economic Development Strategic Plan. Such will ensure that our community will remain a favored investment opportunity in a competitive global marketplace through 2020 and beyond.

The planning philosophy outlined in this Element's introduction provides the framework of community values and attitudes regarding economic development. This section establishes the parameters around which future land use and economic development recommendations will be designed. Each development decision should ultimately benefit the shared vision for Fort Walton Beach. Presented below are the goals, objectives and policies for our community, organized under eight headings. They are: Industry Growth and Retention, Economic Development Representative/Agency, Public/Private Partnerships, Sustainability, Creative Arts and Cultural Tourism, Waterfront Development, Military, and Growth Management and Infrastructure.

### I.3 GOAL, OBJECTIVES, AND POLICIES

**GOAL: Promote and maintain orderly and diversified economic growth, increased employment, and investment opportunities, while protecting quality of life through environmental sustainability to ensure competitiveness in today's economy.**

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### **OBJECTIVE I.3.1 - Industry Growth and Retention**

The City will identify, maintain, and promote a cluster industry development approach throughout the city to strengthen existing businesses and interrelationships, and also to create a framework for targeting economic development activities.

**Policy 1:** The City strives for a business-friendly atmosphere which enhances economic diversity by eliciting feedback from businesses and organizations representing the commercial, industrial, culinary and waterfront industries. Email correspondence, personal contact and surveys are among the methods to be utilized.

**Policy 2:** Recognizing that entrepreneurship activity is vital to economic growth, the city will develop a pilot entrepreneur quick-start program by November 2011. The program will act as a one-stop resource to streamline licensing and permitting, and also provide market analysis for site location.

**Policy 3:** By 2011, the City will investigate opportunities to ensure its Commerce and Technology Park is a premier location for industry, including the creation of a Business Improvement District by affected business and property owners.

**Policy 4:** A beautification plan for the commerce and technology park will be developed by November 2010. In addition, the Beautification Committee will explore grants and private sponsorship opportunities to screen unattractive uses such as barbed wire, inoperable vehicles, and trash receptacles on highly visible corridors.

**Policy 5:** By 2013, the City will conduct a land use study of Industrial Park designated lands along Hollywood Boulevard to determine the best course for economic development of that corridor.

### **OBJECTIVE I.3.2 - Entrepreneurship Education**

Programs fostered by local organizations and institutions to teach entrepreneurship skills to interested students and residents will be an integral part of the City's economic diversity strategy.

**Policy 1:** The City encourages diversified economic growth within Historic Downtown by encouraging opportunities for small business start-ups such as culinary studios, seafood and farmers markets, a vendor pushcart program, and encouraging the development of a working waterfront.

**Policy 2:** The City encourages the full utilization by businesses and industries of the economic development enhancement programs implemented by the Legislature for the purpose of the development and expansion of permanent job opportunities, especially for the economically disadvantaged, brownfield designations, tax incentives, community development corporations, and other programs designed to enhance economic and employment opportunities.

**Policy 3:** The City will amend its Land Development Code by 2011 to allow development or redevelopment which is listed on the Targeted Industries List and which also generates a minimum of 15 additional jobs or strengthens existing industries by means of transportation, or labor, or education, or expanded market or materials, to request a waiver of impact fees, or request subsidies, or other incentives by City Council.

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### **OBJECTIVE I.3.3 - Economic Development Representative/Agencies**

The City of Fort Walton Beach will designate an Economic Development Representative/Agency. The representative will serve as the lead agency for implementing this Element and the coordination of City economic development activities and initiatives.

**Policy 1:** The City will develop and annually update the five-year economic development strategic plan to attract appropriate business and industry. The plan will be coordinated with the Land Development Code and the Comprehensive Plan.

**Policy 2:** The City will continue to maintain the following with the resources available:

1. An updated inventory of targeted infill development sites.
2. A record of available electricity, water, sewer, and natural gas capacity and its per unit cost.
3. An inventory of Fort Walton Beach labor force characteristics.
4. Demographic and statistical Fort Walton Beach data to distribute promotional information.

**Policy 3:** The designated economic development representative will be responsible for coordination of visits by prospective business and industry representatives and serve as the liaison with governmental agencies.

**Policy 4:** The City encourages the use of innovative methods of financing for infrastructure and services, wherever possible, to minimize increases in the current and future tax burden.

**Policy 5:** The City continues to initiate efforts and support the efforts of other agencies to obtain grant monies and other funds designed to assist local economic development initiatives to increase employment opportunities.

**Policy 6:** The City, through its partnership with the Okaloosa Economic Development Corporation, will encourage advertising, promotional activities, and other sales and marketing techniques to attract new technology-based business to the commerce and technology park.

**Policy 7:** The City utilizes its various departments for internship opportunities, school visits, and presentations to educate students on the role of government in the local economy.

**Policy 8:** The City, through its partnership with the Okaloosa Economic Development Corporation and Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce, encourages job creation, diversified economic growth, and increased employment.

**Policy 9:** The City, through its partnership with the Small Business Association and the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce, will pursue a regulated pushcart vendor program which will offer local produce, fresh cut flora, and locally-made commerce at The Brooks Street Landing to encourage entrepreneurs and foster a unique, vibrant waterfront village by 2014.

**Policy 10:** The City monitors the Future Land Use Element of the Comprehensive Plan to ensure that appropriate quantities of land are available to support actual/projected commercial/industrial growth.

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**Policy 11:** The City will compile by 2010 and continue to maintain a Targeted Industries List. This list will be reviewed and updated every five years. This list will be made available to the public at the Fort Walton Beach City Clerks Office.

### **Objective I.3.4 - Public/Private Partnerships**

Recognizing the current trend towards decentralization or elimination of federal financial assistance for community and economic development projects, the City will encourage the development of public/private partnerships.

**Policy 1:** The City encourages partnerships between existing and potential businesses and educational institutions to develop programs that will utilize new and existing technologies as they become available and widely utilized in the marketplace.

**Policy 2:** By 2014, the City will explore opportunities for public/private partnerships to establish a bicycle program for participating businesses. In conjunction with the program, the city will adopt a bicycle and pedestrian action plan as a component of the Transportation Element.

**Policy 3:** The City will continue to encourage the presence and expansion of university programs within the City and incorporate specific strategies within the 5-Year Strategic Economic Development Plan.

**Policy 4:** The City will promote a Partners for Parks program to encourage private sponsorships for pedestrian and park facilities through the Recreation and Cultural Services Department.

### **Objective I.3.5 - Sustainability**

Recognizing that sustainability is a critical issue to becoming a first class competitive local economy, the City will promote itself as a “green local government” and continue to expand and promote programs such as alternative modes of transit, greenways along major arterials, xeriscape landscaping practices, and water re-use programs, among others.

**Policy 1:** The City will work toward obtaining the Florida Green Building Coalition’s certified Green Local Government status to promote alternative energies and a cleaner environment and improve environmental performance through measurable criteria, by November 2010.

**Policy 2:** The City will encourage renewable energy industries such as wind and solar to locate in areas designated as non-jurisdictional wetlands by developing a target list of industries and potential sites by 2013.

**Policy 3:** The City will, through consistent implementation of its Land Development Code, protect its environmental resources and will seek to maintain and improve its recreational resources to provide an attractive environment for businesses and industry and their employees.

**Policy 4:** The City ensures that the types of new and expanding business and industry in Fort Walton Beach will contribute to maintaining a clean environment by meeting all applicable local, state and federal guidelines.

**Objective I.3.6 - Creative Arts and Cultural Tourism**

The City will continue and strengthen cultural tourism, recognizing that the creative arts and cultural heritage industries play a major role in building and sustaining economically vibrant communities by generating jobs, revenue and tourism, and also realizing that the City offers a unique heritage to the State and the Country.

**Policy 1:** The City, through its Community Redevelopment Area, will investigate the idea of a prominent gateway feature that might include art or sculpture, at the base of the Brooks Bridge, to draw attraction to the Brooks Landing, and also create a vibrant gateway into the City's cultural center by 2012.

**Policy 2:** The City promotes its rich military heritage by encouraging and promoting the development of a Military Heritage Tour--a network of military tributes along City gateways--by November 2014.

**Policy 3:** By 2014, the City will support the designation of the Emerald Coast Florida Birding Trail in conjunction with the Senior Center, the Florida Game and Fish Commission, and the National Audubon Society's Great Florida Birding Trail, to target specific marketing efforts to the birding community worldwide.

**Policy 4:** The City will study the feasibility of establishing a destination-type pedestrian attraction which promotes local maritime history, celestial navigation programs, and a maritime museum along the waterfront to enhance tourist appeal. The designated economic development representative will complete essential studies and provide a report to the City Council by 2016.

**Policy 5:** The City will study the feasibility of establishing a destination-type culinary niche which promotes the Okaloosa Applied Technology Center's relationship with the Culinary Art Institute, to provide a unique and interactive culinary experience. Essential studies and report will be provided to the City Council by 2015.

**Policy 6:** The City promotes local heritage by encouraging the development and expansion of Native American-owned business and industry. Established businesses which meet this definition may request a reduction of business and permit fees from the City Council.

**Policy 7:** Many historic treasures are located along First Street, including the Fort Walton School House, the Indian Temple Mound, and churches which are nearly a century old with the finest acoustic settings and internationally recognized musicians. Therefore, the City encourages the clustering of cultural enrichment venues in proximity to the Indian Temple Mound and First Street, and supports the promotion of this heritage and cultural area to tourists.

**Policy 8:** In conjunction with the promotion and enhancement of the Heritage and Cultural Arts Cluster, the City will incorporate a historic walking tour on First Street as part of the CRA's adopted schedule to improve the streetscape. The tour will include markers and a "walk of fame" which profiles the city's most significant early residents and structures.

**Policy 9:** The City supports and promotes the ethnic services industry along Beal Parkway by encouraging innovative techniques for promotion and entrepreneurship within the 5-year Strategic Economic Development Plan.

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### **Objective I.3.7 - Waterfront Development**

The City will continue to implement the 2006 Charting the Course Fort Walton Beach Waterfront Vision Plan in conjunction with the Fort Walton Beach Waterfronts Florida Partnership Committee.

**Policy 1:** The City, through the CRA and the FWB Waterfront Committee, will improve access to the coastline for all residents and tourists by continuing to provide incentives to property owners who provide boardwalk easements from Brooks Bridge and the Brooks Street Landing to Liza Jackson Park. The CRA will provide funding for the construction and maintenance of the boardwalk or develop incentives for the property owner to construct and/or maintain the boardwalk.

**Policy 2:** The City will develop a waterfront strategic plan by 2014 in accordance with the 2006 *Charting the Course* Fort Walton Beach Waterfront Vision Plan which will encourage and promote water-dependant businesses along the Sound and also require future marinas to obtain a Florida Clean Marina Status.

**Policy 3:** By 2014, the City will develop criteria for selection and funding to acquire properties which contain special features and/or shoreline and water-use access.

### **Objective I.3.8 - Military**

Recognizing the vital economic and cultural relationship between the City of Fort Walton Beach and the military, the City will continue to promote the mission of Eglin Air Force Base.

**Policy 1:** The City will promote and encourage the development of an Eglin By-Pass from Santa Rosa County to Walton County to ease traffic congestion, reduce hurricane evacuation times, minimize military encroachment, and support the base mission.

**Policy 2:** The City, through its Recreation and Cultural Services Department, will promote a Local Town Heroes program by 2010, which will enable families and donors to sponsor pedestrian and park facilities in honor of local veterans.

**Policy 3:** The City encourages military-themed small businesses as a niche strategy for infill development..

### **Objective I.3.9 - Growth Management and Infrastructure**

The City of Fort Walton Beach will work actively to provide a diversified and desirable environment necessary to attract and retain the commercial/industrial and businesses sectors serving existing industry, tourists, seasonal residents, and the permanent population while maintaining a high standard of living. To attract businesses which strengthen existing industry, the public services and City characteristics that will be supported include an exemplary public education system; moderate local tax rates; adequate utilities, improved bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure; consistently enforced land use regulations, quality parks and recreation facilities; quality health care; environmental resources; and effective public safety.

**Policy 1:** The City of Fort Walton Beach will implement the objectives and policies of this Economic Development Element through appropriate administrative policies which include careful evaluation of proposed City actions for conformance with the policies in this Element and land use regulations.

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**Policy 2:** The City will plan for sufficient public infrastructure to serve the growth needs of new and expanding business and industry.

**Policy 3:** The City encourages the location of business and industry in areas designated for future infrastructure improvements in the City's Infrastructure Element and Capital Improvements Program.

**Policy 4:** The City will develop a strategy to purchase/improve/sell-back and/or lease-back property to encourage ideal infill development and the expansion of business and industry.

**Policy 5:** The City vigorously pursues State and Federal grant funds that may be applicable to recreational and infrastructure improvements as well as other activities that enhance the City's competitive position in attracting new business and industry.