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2018 WAKULLA COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL



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Springs, creeks, caves and bays are treasured assets, but Wakulla County offers industry, too

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ECOTOURISM
CANNED MULLET

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
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ON THE COVER: Wakulla County can be a study in contrasts — it is home to an ammunition propellant plant and is a way station for migrating butterflies. Its waterways attract people with an interest in spending time below and on top of the water. PHOTOS BY SAIGE ROBERTS (DIVER, PANACEA WATERFRONT); LAWRENCE DAVIDSON (BUTTERFLY); AND ST. MARKS POWDER (INDUSTRIAL PLANT). KAYAKING PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CONNECT AGENCY.

The Natural Place to Be

Wakulla draws fans of the 'Real Florida'

by STEVE BORNHOFT

Wakulla County doesn't have a giant Ferris wheel. No bungee jump.

It has a marine park, of sorts, known as Apalachee Bay, which, depending on the weather, may become a wave pool. Its favorite swimming pool is spring fed. Fully 75 percent of the land that makes up the county is public.

"We're not a tourist-trip kind of destination," said David Moody, a 10-year member of the county Tourist Development Council, who knows that successful marketing relies on knowing your audience. "We appeal to people who like a little slower pace."

Moody explained that the TDC, which promotes Wakulla County as "The Natural Place to Be," targets groups including:

- Vacationers seeking a mellow getaway.
- Travelers who move through Wakulla County to other destinations.
- Seafood lovers.

"If you're in west Georgia or east Alabama, and you want to come to the coast, we actually provide the closest access to the marine environment," Moody noted.

"We get a lot of people, including international visitors, who spend time in Orlando and then come through our area on their way to the big beaches. We want to cause them to stay awhile, enjoy a meal at one of our nice restaurants and, we hope, spend the night."

The activities of the TDC are funded, after all, by a 4-percent tourist development tax (or bed tax) collected on the county's behalf by the state Department of Revenue. For the period July 2017 through June 2018, bed tax collections totaled \$163,548.



The St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge is home to an iconic landmark. Boaters and anglers still look for it when they head for safe harbor.

The TDC works with a Jacksonville firm, Connect Agency, that promotes the county primarily via social media, Moody said. In addition, the county has marketed to group tour businesses and has made billboard, magazine and radio advertising buys. For the potential visitor, the county has put together recommended itineraries that include eateries such as the Seineyard Restaurant in Woodville, Angelo & Son's Seafood Restaurant in Panacea and Posey's Up the Creek Steam Room, also in Panacea.

Countywide visitation steadily increased from 2013 through 2016, growing by as much as 12 percent in a year. It now appears to be leveling off, said Moody, who believes that the county may need to identify new markets to penetrate.

"But for the amount of infrastructure we have, we do pretty well," Moody said. "We don't have any public transportation, and we don't have any tourist attractions, per se. We do have some fishing guide services."

And the county does have two parks, one state and one national, that serve as its biggest tourism draws. Moody is intimately familiar with the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, where he works as a public use officer, answering visitors' questions and coordinating the work of volunteers.

The refuge is a magnet for saltwater ducks, including redheads and scaups, and various puddle ducks, particularly during migratory periods. Moody estimated that 25 species of ducks visit the park, making it a mecca for birdwatchers. Indeed, the TDC has placed ads in a niche publication, *Bird Watcher's Digest*. Many waterfowl overwinter at the park.

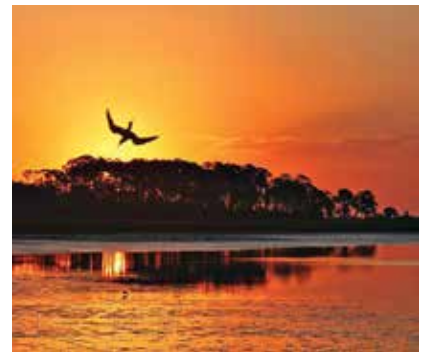
Backcountry fishermen tie into speckled trout, redfish and other inshore species both inside the refuge and on the nearby grass flats east of the St. Marks Lighthouse and off Live Oak Island. Kayaking, Moody said, is "growing tremendously. We have a lot of shallow water that isn't appropriate to power boating."

The refuge is well known as a stopping off point for migrating monarch butterflies and, in fact, sponsors an initiative that encourages people to plant milkweed as a way to rebuild monarch numbers, which have plummeted since 1990. Monarchs lay their eggs on milkweed, the sole source of food for monarch caterpillars. The fall monarch migration is celebrated with a festival each October; it includes a monarch tagging activity and coincides with the St. Marks Stone Crab Festival.

The refuge, according to Moody, attracts about 300,000 visitors annually in addition to folks who just drive through.

“We’re not a tourist-trip kind of destination. We appeal to people who like a little slower pace.”

David Moody, Tourist Development Council



► Birders and butterflies flock to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. It's located along flyways for both mallards and monarchs and is home to year-round populations of wading birds.

PHOTOS BY LAWRENCE DAVIDSON (BUTTERFLY) AND COURTESY OF THE CONNECT AGENCY



EDWARD BALL WAKULLA SPRINGS STATE PARK

Moody distinguishes Wakulla Springs State Park from the refuge given its relative richness in human history and its renowned swimming area.

The park, boasts its website, is home to the world's largest and deepest freshwater springs, where manatees, alligators and other diverse wildlife are known to play. The park's riverboats and its diving platform both make for excellent wildlife viewing towers.

The spring's gin-clear water is 70 degrees year-round, making for invigorating plunges. The Wakulla Springs Lodge, developed in the 1930s by the park's businessman namesake, is an elegant reminder of the "Real Florida," and overlooks cypress swamps where old Hollywood movies including "Tarzan's Secret Treasure" (1941) and "Creature from the Black Lagoon" (1954) were filmed.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the lodge features 27 guest rooms, each with a spacious marble bathroom, walk-in closet, and antique or period

▲ Guests are encouraged to keep their eyes peeled for Florida's state reptile and other wildlife when sightseeing riverboats leave the dock at Wakulla Springs State Park.

► The history of forts at San Marcos de Apalachee mirror the history of North Florida. The site was occupied by Spanish, British and Confederate forces before the U.S. assumed control.



furniture. All rooms have a telephone, but no televisions, making for quiet and relaxing stays. The Ball Room Restaurant, located on the ground floor, overlooks the spring and features modern and Southern cuisine.

Today, visitors swim where mastodons once bathed and take guided boat tours across waters once traversed by native peoples in dugout canoes.

SAN MARCOS DE APALACHE HISTORIC STATE PARK

Fort St. Marks was added as a national historic landmark to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in 1966.

Certainly, it had enough history to qualify. Today, the fort's remains are at the center of a state park.

The Spanish were the first to build a fortified structure at the site, known to them as San Marcos de Apalache, at a time when they were expanding their presence in Northwest Florida. Strategically, they erected a stockade near the confluence of the Wakulla and St. Marks rivers in 1679.

For years, it remained an outpost. Finally, in the 1730s, a small community grew up around the stockade, and the fort was expanded with the addition of a second wooden building in 1753. The installation



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wouldn't last long in its wooden form before it was wiped out by a hurricane.

In 1759, the Spanish built a stone fort, designed to resist bombardment by ships and storms. They abandoned it to Indians for use as a trading post after ceding Florida lands to the British following the defeat of France in the French and Indian War.

Following the American Revolutionary War, the British traded territory with Spain, which took over West and East Florida again. St. Marks was in East Florida; the boundary was the Apalachicola River. Spanish forces reoccupied the San Marcos fort in 1783 and strengthened its defenses.

Andrew Jackson, then involved in the Seminole Wars, had his forces seize the fort in 1818. The U.S. occupied it for nearly a year. The Fort St. Marks military cemetery was established at that time for the burial of men who died at the garrison.

In 1821, the United States purchased Spain's Florida lands, including the fort site. In 1839, during Florida's period as a U.S. territory, the federal government built

a marine hospital at the site, using stones and other materials from the old fort.

During the Civil War, the Confederate army took over the fort after Florida seceded from the Union. U.S. forces regained control of the site in 1865, the last year of the war.

Remains of the stone fort remain in evidence at the site. A museum and visitors center have been built on the foundation of the old hospital. A stone well and a retaining wall have been reconstructed nearby, based on archeological documentation.

San Marcos de Apalache Historic State Park is located off State 363 at 148 Old Fort Road. Online reviewers have written favorably about the park's orientation movie, "classy museum," knowledgeable staff and river views.

ST. MARKS STONE CRAB FESTIVAL

Florida's stone crab fishery may be the state's most unusual. When the crabs are secured, either in baited traps or a diver's hand, only

a claw is harvested and the living crab is released. The approach takes advantage of the stone crab's ability to regenerate a lost claw every time it molts.

So it is that claw consumers might not feel as guilty as someone sitting down to a whole snapper.

The Wakulla County TDC makes a targeted effort to attract seafood eaters, and there may be no local seafood more enticing than the meat of a stone crab — white, flaky and sweet.

At the St. Marks Stone Crab Festival, folks take seats at long tables beneath tents and whack at the claws with a length of wooden dowel until they are breached, revealing the delicacy inside. Friendly competitions develop among people who strive to extract the largest piece of meat from the black-tipped orange appendages.

The claws are powerful enough to attract not just crab eaters, but also musicians and sellers of custom jewelry, handcrafted furniture and other unique items. Festival proceeds are donated to local charities. The event is held each October.



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▲ Starfish, lionfish and sea urchins are among the various forms of sea creatures on display at the Gulf Specimen Lab and Aquarium in Panacea. Jack Rudloe of the lab made his living collecting and selling specimens before the aquarium was opened.

GULF SPECIMEN MARINE LAB AND AQUARIUM

Thirty-two years after it was established in 1963, the Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratory in Panacea expanded its mission to include an emphasis on education, which is delivered via programs for schools, an aquarium and public visitation.

"Giving people an appreciation for the diversity of life in the sea and a desire to protect it is our primary mission," said the lab's founder and managing director, Jack Rudloe.

Doing so involves touch tanks and exhibits

that enable students and other visitors to feel, smell and hear odd and interesting creatures of the Gulf of Mexico. The lab helps cover the cost of aquarium maintenance by selling diverse living marine life from the Gulf of Mexico to schools, universities and research laboratories.

That service, said Rudloe, is essential to researchers all over the United States in many fields of science.

More than a hundred school groups and over 20,000 individuals visit the aquarium each year and view hundreds of species of

local invertebrates, fish and algae as well as sharks and sea turtles from the Gulf of Mexico.

Exhibits are ever changing. The biological supply operation provides a constant flow of animals coming through the lab.

"Whether it's beach combing, digging up creatures on tidal flats, diving or net fishing, we take only what is needed," Rudloe said. "We avoid damaging fragile marine habitats and actively oppose pollution and careless coastal development so the sea will remain healthy and productive." ■

PHOTOS BY SCOTT HOLSTEIN

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Wakulla County administrator David Edwards, left, and Economic Development Council president John Shuff look forward to the completion of a project to widen the county's chief north-south artery, U.S. 319. The impact of the project, Edwards said, "will be drastic."





Promoting its Assets

County hopes to entice new employers

by STEVE BORNHOFT

The president of Wakulla County's Economic Development Council concedes that he is up against a perception problem.

Too many people, said John Shuff, view Wakulla County as a bedroom community for Tallahassee versus an asset-rich community committed to attracting new employers, diversifying its economy and attracting tenants to two industrial parks.

"Like any other county, we have costs for essential services that are either fixed or rising," Shuff said. "If we can attract more investment in the area and more residents to the area, we will have a greater pool of people sharing in that expense, and the pressure to increase individual tax bills should decrease."

In terms of infrastructure, said county administrator David Edwards, Wakulla County is working to become more attractive as a place to live and do business.

The county successfully influenced the Florida Department of Transportation to make the four-laning of U.S. 319 (State Road 369), from the Leon County line to its intersection with U.S. 98, a priority.

Edwards suggested that the project will prove to be the most significant development in the county since the discovery of the oyster.

"The impact will be drastic," Edwards said of the widening of the county's chief north-south artery.

The state's fiscal year 2017-18 budget included \$21 million to kick-start the project, which Edwards estimated will require 10 years to complete.

Project benefits are expected to include improvements in mobility, traffic circulation, pedestrian/bicycle connectivity and public safety. And a county that has worked to promote itself in the absence of a four-lane highway will have to do so no longer.

Widening of U.S. 319 will not have a direct impact on the county's largest employer, St. Marks Powder, said company vice president Jason Gaines. Trucks traveling to and from the plant do not travel through downtown Tallahassee, but Gaines is nonetheless enthusiastic about the project.

"The county is working hard to attract new employers, and the 319 project will open up a lot of

avenues," Gaines said. "We would welcome the arrival of new businesses — the more successful Wakulla County is, the more successful we will be."

Edwards noted that in addition to developing its traffic-carrying capacity, the county is doubling the capacity of its wastewater treatment plant while upgrading it to meet advanced wastewater treatment (AWT) standards. And, with freshwater spring protection funds originating with the state Department of Environmental Protection and awarded by the Northwest Florida Water Management District, the county has embarked upon a septic-system-to-sewer conversion initiative.

"We are heavily invested in our springs," Edwards said. "They are a big part of who we are and we have got to take care of them."

At this writing, some 400 homes that previously discharged waste to septic systems have been brought on line.

With cost-sharing grant funds, Edwards said, the county has been making park improvements and expanding its network of bicycle trails. Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) funds from BP figured in a sand replenishing project at Shell Point Beach and construction of a new boat ramp at Mashles Sands County Park.

The county is investing in what Edwards called its "safety infrastructure," putting on an additional shift at the Sheriff's Office and cross-training its firefighters as paramedics. Too, Edwards has been in touch with cell-service providers Verizon, T-Mobile and AT&T in an effort to ensure that Wakulla County is near the front of the line when 5G, the latest generation in cellular mobile communications, is extended to rural areas.

INDUSTRIAL PARKS

Opportunity Park, located near the Leon County line, comprises more than 240 acres available for lease or purchase and protected by large buffer acreage. The park and adjoining property are owned by N.G. Wade, an investment and commercial real estate company.

Various site development options are available. Leases (15 years, renewals) include options for



▲ The presence of St. Joe Powder in Wakulla County, officials say, serves as evidence of the county's ability and willingness to host industry. The propellant manufacturer is the county's largest employer with more than 400 workers.

build-to-suit improvements and parking areas. Electric power, natural gas, water, sewer and business internet/communications are all in place.

The park is a Planned Unit Development (PUD) zoned for light industrial uses. A six-member Development Review Committee gives final approval to proposed projects. No public hearings are required.

“There’s a lot of green in the Opportunity Park report, and no red.”

Marc Hoenstine,
Duke Energy

“Recently, we partnered with Duke Energy and their Site Readiness Program to prepare and promote Opportunity Park,” said Richard Exline, an N.G. Wade vice president. “The park is suited to a range of industrial and manufacturing companies, with the ideal tenant being a high-tech manufacturer. The park’s proximity to Tallahassee and FSU ensures a large pool of technical and managerial talent to draw upon.”

“Opportunity Park is a special place,” said Marc Hoenstine, Duke Energy’s economic development director for Florida. “We don’t often see a site where so much of the infrastructure is already in place. It received a glowing review from our consultant.”

That review includes a list of site and market characteristics rated green (strengths), yellow (marginal features) or red (weaknesses).

“There’s a lot of green in the Opportunity Park report,” Hoenstine said, “and no red.”

Annually, Duke Energy chooses locations for evaluation by the Site Readiness Program. The economic director for selected counties receives a Request for Information (RFI) from McCallum Sweeney Consulting (MSC), a consultant retained by Duke Energy, seeking detailed information about the site and the county.

Counties are called upon to respond to the RFI just as they would if they were trying to impress a prospective employer. In addition, a design firm gets involved, solicits site particulars and drawings from the economic development director and may produce a preliminary site plan.

“We have an interest in selling power to large users, so it makes sense for us to do what we can to see to it that our communities are competitive in dealing with site selectors,” Hoenstine said.

Wakulla County is home to a second industrial park, smaller in scale. St. Marks Innovation Park is located on the St. Marks River and includes 55 acres zoned for light

industrial uses. Its features include a municipal dock on the river that leads to access to the Gulf of Mexico.

ST. MARKS POWDER

Even as Wakulla County looks forward to the arrival of a four-lane highway, it has demonstrated that it can satisfactorily host a large industrial employer, as its 40-plus year relationship with St. Marks Powder attests.

For the past 18 years, St. Marks Powder has been part of the Ordnance and Tactical Systems unit of the General Dynamics Corp. It is, according to its website, “a leading manufacturer of commercial smokeless powder from .22 rimfire match propellants, which won gold



▲ St. Marks Powder vice president Jason Gaines says that company is poised for growth, domestically and internationally.

PHOTOS BY SAIGE ROBERTS (GAINES) AND COURTESY OF ST. MARKS POWDER

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Fishing and kayaking as attractive as the business environment

A Duke Energy powered parcel



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



▲ St. Marks Powder is home to a large manufacturing facility, pictured, and a robust research and development operation that considers the evolving needs of recreational shooters, law enforcement personnel and the U.S. military.

medals at the Olympics, to clean burning shotshell propellants, to low muzzle flash pistol propellants.”

That is, St. Marks Powder is more than a company that manufactures a product it introduced in 1933 to support the high-performance needs of U.S. armed forces and its allies and for use in areas including law enforcement, hunting and sport shooting. It maintains a robust research and development division that creates specially blended propellants for specific applications, both military and civilian.

Its mission statement speaks to delivering the “finest propellant solutions” to customers, providing “overmatched capability to our men and women in uniform” and furthering the shooting tradition in the United States.

“We are positioned for growth,” said vice president Gaines, “but our business is largely market dependent. Our traditional market space fluctuates depending on supply and demand. These cyclical challenges in our domestic market have led us to pursue new opportunities in the global market.”

The U.S. Army is far and away the largest customer of St. Marks Powder, which also counts as key customers familiar ammunition manufacturers including Remington, Vista Outdoors and Winchester.

The company has slightly more than 400 employees, said its director of human resources, Patrick Hutto, who for two years served as chairman of the board at CareerSource Capital Region. St. Marks Powder posts all of its job openings through CareerSource.

Gaines said that 90 percent of St. Marks Powder employees are Wakulla County residents and that, for the vast majority of them, the propellant manufacturer will be a lifetime employer.

Turnover, said Hutto, runs about 1 percent per year among salaried employees and 3 percent among hourly employees.

“We know that once an employee has worked here for two years,” he said, “he or she is almost sure to be with us until retirement.”

“One of the main incentives of our Economic Council is to provide our younger generation the option to stay in their hometown to work and raise their family after they finish with school,” Shuff said. “The people who live here value our traditional way of life. We cherish strong family bonds and want to see extended families flourish here.” ■

PHOTO BY SAIGE ROBERTS

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GLISTENING SPRINGS, FISH APLENTY

Wakulla attracts outdoor enthusiasts, naturally

by LAZARO ALEMAN and STEVE BORNHOFT



Boasting four rivers, hundreds of miles of undeveloped coastline, a national wildlife refuge and portions of a national forest, Wakulla County offers countless opportunities for birding, boating, biking, hiking, kayaking and wildlife viewing — making it a nature buff's paradise.

"What we have to offer is our natural settings," said St. Marks Mayor Gail Gilman, a member of the Wakulla County Tourist Development Council, one of several public and private interests promoting ecotourism. "We're no Orlando or Disneyworld."

Wakulla, Gilman notes, attracts its share of domestic and even international visitors, with the bulk coming from Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and Louisiana.

Growth in tourism is reflected in steady year-to-year increases in revenue generated by the county's 4-cent bed tax.

As for visitors' home countries, "They range from Argentina to Zimbabwe," said Amy Conyers, the manager at Ed Ball Wakulla Springs State Park, one of the county's biggest visitor draws.

Lesser known places, however, rely on a more localized market, according to Cynthia Paulson, founder of Palmetto Expeditions, a 10-year-old enterprise that connects clients to independent guides and outfitters and also arranges customized group tours for businesses, schools and organizations.

From a tourism standpoint, she sees both positives and negatives to Wakulla's naturalness.

"Our positives are that we're off the beaten track and we're 73 percent natural lands and 85 percent natural coastline," she said. "But that also makes it difficult for people to get here. So, we don't have the mass tourism that larger counties get. That's the challenge."

Marie-Anne Luber agrees. A green-certified river/hiking guide, her clients range from young couples to families with children to foreign visitors and exchange students.

"Mostly it's parents and their kids who want to learn about the area," Luber said. "Also, people in town who want to go kayaking or hiking but are afraid to do it on



▲ Rob Baker, seen on previous page on the water at Shell Point Beach and at his shop in Crawfordville, above, grew up hanging around his grandmother's canoe livery. He has capitalized on the popularity of kayaks among shallow-water anglers.

their own. It's my job to show them the sights and relate the history."

Fortunately, the county's outdoor recreation possibilities are plentiful.

"It's amazing how much water there is around here," Luber said.

All of that water, combined with miles and miles of undeveloped waterfront, makes for some outstanding fishing.

THE OLD FLORIDA

There was a time, decades ago, when the Shell Island Fish Camp, located on the Wakulla River near its mouth in St. Marks, attracted large numbers of duck hunters. But that bird has flown. Now, the camp is all about fishing, and the growing popularity of inshore angling — a product of the expense and the limited seasons/bag limits associated with offshore

trips — has served owners Sherie and Jimmy Bevis and their employees well.

Shell Island "campers" fish year-round, but spring and fall fishing tends to be best, according to camp employee Bucky Odom. "And, if we don't get a lot of rain in the fall (meaning that salinity levels remain high), the trout will bunch up in the rivers in the winter," Odom pointed out, a condition that can make for some fast action for anglers who slow down their lure presentations in the cold water.

The camp, which has been expanded several times through the years, was established in the 1950s and has been in the same family since 1962, Odom said. Many, if not most, other fish camps have closed.

"We're a surviving bit of Old Florida, and there are some people who like a laid-back,

“We’re a surviving bit of Old Florida, and there are some people who like a laid-back, peaceful experience away from the traffic and rowdy crowds. That’s our niche.”

peaceful experience away from the traffic and rowdy crowds,” Odom said. “That’s our niche. We have guests that stay with us and, really, it’s all right by them if they don’t catch one fish or find any scallops. They’re just happy to be here.”

From time to time, the camp entertains international guests who spend time in Orlando and then go exploring.

The camp’s accommodations run from \$68 to \$96 a night and include cabins, motel rooms and “park models,” trailers that resemble stand-alone cottages. If you are looking to reserve a cabin on a weekend when the weather is cool, you may need to call months in advance. The camp has boats for rent, provides dry storage, repairs engines and will even clean your catch.

Odom is a fisherman himself, and he’s a MirrOlure man. If limited to four lures, he said, he would carry three MirrOlure products: Top Dog, Mirrodine and Catch 2000 hard-plastic plugs. And, he would grab a bag of Berkley “Gulp” Jerk Shads.

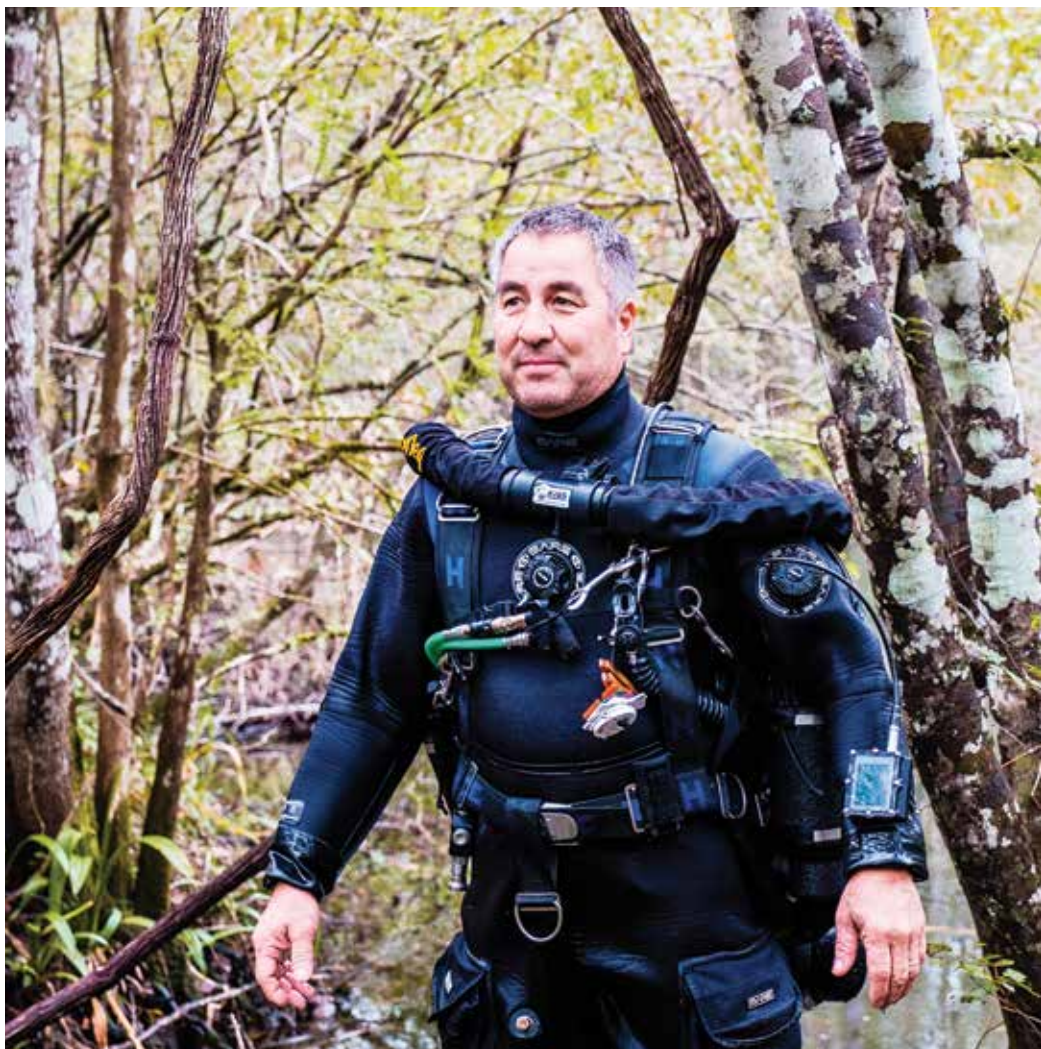
Rob Baker has been around non-motorized watercraft all of his life. His grandmother founded TnT Hideaway Canoe Rental in Crawfordville long before Baker could handle a paddle.

Baker was hanging around TnT and helping out with the business when kayak fishing began to catch on in the mid-1990s. Today, kayaks are his specialty. His shop, The Wilderness Way, located in Crawfordville, sells leading-brand kayaks — Hobie, Jackson, Bonafide — and he leads kayak fishing trips out of St. Marks.

Most trips commence at first light and last four hours. Typical targets are redbfish, speckled trout and flounder, but anglers also tie into tarpon, cobia, tripletail and Spanish mackerel.

“We’re also beginning to see some snook,” Baker said, referring to a sportfish usually associated with South Florida. Snook, it seems, are expanding their range in response to rising Gulf water temperatures.

Baker prefers to use artificial lures, in part because they result in fewer gut-hooked fish and also because he likes to do more than



wait for a float to go under. His arsenal includes topwater plugs, jigs and spoons, and he is especially high on a plug called the Stick Shadd, manufactured by Sebile Tackle.

“I’m open to anglers of all skill and experience levels,” Baker said. “We have tandem kayaks that make it possible for an adult to go with a child. Of course, with children, we may suggest bobber fishing instead of slinging lures around.”

All kayaks are of the sit-on-top variety and are pedal-driven. Hands-free propulsion is a real advantage when casting, reeling and, one hopes, landing fish.

Anglers who like to land trophies and prizes will find competitions in Wakulla County, including the annual fundraising Rock the Dock tournament, staged each spring out of Woolley Park in Panacea. The contest is held in three divisions — Youth, Kayak and Recreation — in both inshore and offshore species categories.

SCALLOPS AND SALAMANDERS

For people who prefer being in the water to being on the water, Wakulla County offers good scalloping, especially in years with relatively low rainfall amounts in the spring, a condition that results in bumper crops. Scalloper seekers gear up with masks, snorkels and fins and pursue their quarry in 3 to 6 feet of water.

Adrenaline junkies may be thrilled to know that Wakulla County is a center of cave diving. Steve Cushman, a native Texan who is no doubt familiar with superlatives, says Wakulla County can legitimately call itself the “Cave Capital of Florida” and maybe the world.

Cushman owns Cave Connections, a Crawfordville dive shop and guide service that offers training in scuba specialties including cave diving. Wakulla County and the surrounding area, he said, offer cave-diving experiences in shallow water, deep water and some even in saltwater.



▲ **UNMASKED:** Steve Cushman, the owner of the Cave Connection in Crawfordville, gets acclimated to the water at Sally Ward Spring near Wakulla Springs State Park. For Cushman, the equipment-intensive sport of cave diving is appealing because it enables enthusiasts to visit places few people have ever seen.

He and his customers frequent a collection of caves with an interesting assortment of place names: Clear Cut, Greyhound, Hatchet, Meeting House, Harvey's Cave, Emerald Sink, Ferrell, Church Sink, Little Dismal and more.

"People say that they could never do cave diving because they are too claustrophobic," Cushman said, "but narrow passageways are comforting." That is, surrounded by walls, a diver easily remains oriented as to up, down, forward and backward.

"But when you find yourself in the middle of a black room that is 20 stories high and 300 or 600 feet wide, that's an adventure."

If you can succeed in quieting your heart rate, Cushman said, cave diving is "peaceful. And knowing that you are experiencing places that few people have ever visited is pretty cool."

The cave diver encounters aquatic life that is specially adapted to life in darkness and

species whose evolution seems to have been arrested tens of millions of years ago.

"We see lots of crawfish that are blind, white and translucent," Cushman said. "And freshwater eels, trilobites and isopods. And we see Georgia blind salamanders. They are the kind with gills that extend outside the head. Near the cave mouths, we'll have the occasional gator or manatee encounter."

Cushman said about 35 percent of his customers are women and he expects that within 10 years, that percentage may reach 50. He has been visited by divers from Russia, Poland, Korea, Japan, South Korea, Great Britain and other far-flung places. Students are trained to handle a variety of scenarios, what to do in the case of a broken fin, for example.

Cushman hopes that officials one day will allow open water recreational diving at Wakulla Springs State Park. He would support taking steps to discourage or prevent divers who lack cave-diving certifications from leaving open water.

"People would come from all over to get certified at the state park," Cushman said. "And, meanwhile, they would stay at the lodge for three or four days.

"It could be the salvation of that lodge," he said, noting that a series of managers

have tried to make it profitable without much success.

HIKING AND BIKING

As for the hiking excursions, their distances and strenuousness vary, depending on the participants' physical conditions and stamina.

"People may not want to walk six miles," Luber said. "In that case, I take them to the sinks. But if they're more adventuresome, I'll take them to Shepherd Spring or the Cathedral of Palms. Those are long hikes but beautiful and great for photography."

To her, ecotourism remains a largely untapped market.

"It's good they've extended the St. Marks bike trail along 98," Luber said. "That has a lot of potential because there are hotels alongside it. But I think more marketing is needed."

Even so, Wakulla County is already reaping economic benefits from ecotourism, said Bob Ballard, executive director of the Wakulla Environmental Institute (WEI), a Tallahassee Community College facility that offers various programs to spur green, sustainable job-creating industries.

Ballard cites as an example the WEI's aquaculture oyster program, which has about 70 oyster leases along Wakulla's



coastline. He quotes an Auburn University study finding “that for every acre of oyster lease, about \$1,500 of income comes into the surrounding communities from the enhanced recreational fishing that happens around the oysters.”

“And the reason is our cages hide little shrimps, crabs and whatnots that fish love to eat,” Ballard says. “So, the whole ecosystem is changed for the better. Not only is the water getting cleaner and clearer, which allows the grasses to grow and helps the fish nurseries, but the cages hide little creatures that attract bigger fish that attract fishermen. That’s a big deal for the local economy.”

The WEI is seeking approximately \$13 million in Triumph Gulf Coast funding (BP oil spill settlement money) to build an oyster hatchery and an oyster processing center to include two lines.

One line, explained Ballard, will freeze oysters cryogenically, giving the product a two-year shelf life. The second line, he explained, will pasteurize oysters, ridding them of bacteria and viruses that can cause illness.



▲ Wakulla Environmental Institute executive director Bob Ballard hits a trail near the institute’s offices in Crawfordville. The institute is seeking Triumph Gulf Coast funding for the development of an oyster hatchery and oyster processing plant.

“This will be the first safe oyster in the world,” Ballard enthused. “The oysters actually come through pasteurization alive; we recommend that they be consumed within 14 days after processing.”

Ballard said Triumph Gulf Coast board members told him that the oyster hatchery/processing plant is an example of precisely the kind of activity they are looking to fund. The facility, if funded, will be built on Dickinson Bay in Panacea.

Already, WEI’s pioneering oyster

aquaculture work has resulted in the creation of 75 businesses.

Ballard is also excited by the St. Mark’s bike trail extension, which brings the trail almost to the WEI’s backdoor.

“We’re working with the trails folks to get it connected to our three miles of trails,” Ballard said. “It’s one more amenity to this campus to promote ecotourism.”

Understandably, it’s all an uphill battle. But bit by bit, Wakulla County is successfully branding itself a natural getaway. ■



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Great Expectations

Wakulla public schools score high marks *by* LAZARO ALEMAN

The Wakulla County School District is a verifiable standout in Florida, underscored by its students' academic and other achievements, high graduation rates (92 percent in 2017), and consistent A and B grades from the Florida Department of Education.

No insignificant feat for a small, fiscally constrained rural county. The secret to the success, school district administrators say, are general buy-in into education; dedicated, largely autonomous teachers; and a collegial, forward-thinking leadership.

"Our focus is on helping students be the best they can be, and that starts with providing them with as many opportunities as possible to give them reasons to buy into their education," says School Board member Melisa Taylor. "And it can't just be based on college-bound students. We had the foresight years ago to add certification or school-to-work programs. Additionally,

we've had nearly 20 students over the last four years graduate with AA degrees."

The two initiatives, the career-and-technical education (CTE) and dual-enrollment programs, plus the high graduation rate, officials say, account in large part for Wakulla County's increased median household and per-capita incomes, as indicated by U.S. Census Bureau data.

Such economic results undoubtedly contribute to the buy-in into education that administrators cite as one of the key ingredients to the district's success.

"We have a tightly knit community and buy-in that education's the most important thing we can provide our children," said School Board member Verna Brock. "And the taxpayers, teachers, administrators, parents and students buy into it."

Superintendent Robert Pearce calls it "a cultural thing."

"It says something about our community

values and the expectations we have for our kids and the school system," he said. "We also have teachers who have high classroom expectations."

Which comes with job satisfaction, another key ingredient.

"Yes, we have standards set down by the state and federal governments," Taylor said. "But we allow teachers as much autonomy as possible, so they can teach creatively and bring a piece of themselves and their love for their subject to the fore, and that also makes for students buy-in."

Added Pearce: "We understand that teachers have set standards, and we do what we can to support them and suggest how they might best get those standards across to students. But we don't script it or tell teachers, 'Here's a box of what you need to do.' That autonomy is very powerful from a standpoint of morale."

A cordial, respectful relationship between the board and superintendent is another critical element.

"Some people question whether we're 'yes people' because we agree on so many things," Taylor said. "But my role is not to argue in front of the public or ask so many questions

that it sounds as if I don't know what I'm doing. It's my job to do the homework and come prepared to meetings."

Brock agrees.

"We have amazing collegiality," she said. "We come from different political and economic backgrounds and have different perspectives, but the thing that binds us is a common goal, and that's to provide what's best for our students, teachers and the community."

◀ Chief academic officer Sunny Chancy and Superintendent Robert Pearce visit student welders at Wakulla High School. Despite lacking the resources that larger school districts have, Wakulla makes good grades with the state.

Pearce affirmed the professionalism and cordiality.

"There is not contention among us," he said. "Does that mean we have 5-0 votes on every item? Absolutely not. But we have intelligent board members who

understand their role, do their homework and come prepared."

And if an item raises concerns, he will pull it from the agenda, revisit it and often resolve or clarify the problem, so that it passes upon resubmittal, he said.

The biggest challenge, all agree, is money.

"Nearly 70 percent of the land is nontaxable," Taylor says. "So, yes, money is always an issue."

"Every year, the state or federal governments change some rule," Brock says. "Because we're small, if you mess with our tax base, it affects everything. That kind of information doesn't sink in with lawmakers. I don't think they mean to hurt us; I think they don't realize what they're doing."

"Consistently, we're asked to do more with less," Pearce says. "And it's been that way for a while."

But no matter.

"We don't sit around and say, 'Well, we're limited in our location, capital outlay dollars, operating dollars, the Legislature's not giving us enough money.' We make things happen."

This goes to visioning and forward-thinking leadership.

Case in point: the millions of BP settlement money from the 2010 oil spill that the district is getting to build a Career/Technical Education Center and a Learning Center at Wakulla High. The first, in partnership with Lively Technical Center, will house two CTE programs initially, with more to be added later. The second, together with TCC, will allow students and adults to pursue AA degrees.


In fact, the \$3.7 million for the first project has already started flowing, with a portion earmarked to buy computer equipment to start industry certification in K-5, says chief academic officer Sunny Chancy, who is spearheading the effort.

"Currently, we focus on industry certification in grades 6-12," Chancy says. "We have yet to infiltrate to the lower levels. So, part of this money will go to build a pipeline for K-5 kids to gain computer skills and get certification at a younger age."

Sums up Taylor: "We're a small district that's always wanted to be and live like a big district. That's why we come up with so many programs and grant dollars."






Other school districts would do well to borrow a page from Wakulla's playbook. ■

PHOTO BY SAIGE ROBERTS



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◀ By “canning” mullet in foil bags like those used by the U.S. military for “meals ready to eat (MREs),” David Moody hopes to substantially extend the shelf life of mullet.

Some 30 years ago, David Moody went fishing with a senior, lifelong Wakulla County resident, Henry Vause.

Vause, in the course of the trip, asked Moody to reach beneath a boat seat and retrieve what he found there.

“It was a pint-size Mason jar, and he had me open it up,” Moody readily recalled. “It popped when I unsealed it, and I drained off the juice and we enjoyed canned mullet on crackers. I had never had it before, and I always remembered how good it was.”

Ever since, Moody has canned fish whenever he catches more than he can immediately consume. He has experimented with different recipes and tried them out on friends.

Mullet has performed especially well in those informal taste tests, beating tuna, Moody said.

“Everyone wants some, and I tell them that I just can’t be giving it away in canning jars — and glass is a little hard to transport anyway,” Moody added.

So, he has begun to can mullet in “retort pouches,” a type of food packaging made from flexible plastic and metal foils.

“It’s kind of like an MRE wrapper,” Moody said, “referring to the meals-ready-to-eat familiar to military veterans. “It’s the same material, when you go the grocery store, that tuna comes in.”

Cannery Roe

Entrepreneur seeks economies of scale

by STEVE BORNHOFT

➤ Mullet have long been the main course at fish fries that bring friends together in backyards, raise funds for charities and replenish the coffers of candidates for office.

Moody has acquired equipment that allows him to bag mullet on a small scale, and he is confident that he is onto something. He has visions of a commercial cannery.

Moody is, as far as he knows, the only person who has worked to develop a mullet-in-retort-bag prototype. He has been talking up the cannery idea with John Shuff, the president of the Wakulla County Economic Development Council, and other “economic development types.”

The retort bag makes the mullet shelf-stable, said Moody, who estimated that the fish should be good for two years or more.

“It’s not like a jar,” he pointed out. “You don’t have to worry about the lid rusting off. My next move is to get U.S. Department of Agriculture approval for a food-grade production process and get some product on store shelves in two to three years.”

But a full-blown cannery? There are some if’s involved. Certain economies of scale would have to be achieved.

Said Moody: “Provided we can get fishermen the gear they need to catch the fish and provided we have enough fish, I think we can have a valuable enterprise. But if mullet is to be maintained as an available, low-cost seafood, we’re going to have to re-evaluate the fishery from a regulatory perspective, especially in terms of harvesting methods.”

There was a time when fishermen using



beach seines deployed from well boats with their engines positioned forward of the stern made livings catching and selling mullet. The activity was especially lucrative during roe season. Mullet was a staple at seafood restaurants and was at the center of backyard fish fries and political rallies.

Then came voter passage in November 1994 of a constitutional amendment commonly known as the Florida net ban, a measure that while hailed by sportfishing interests, dramatically curtailed historic net fisheries including mullet.

The ban limited nets, including beach seines, to 500 square feet in size and a maximum stretch mesh size of two inches.

“It’s hard to catch much fish with that net,” Moody said. “Some commercial guys use them, but you have to get a second boat involved so that you can surround the fish with four nets.”

Too, given the small mesh size, non-marketable fish such as pinfish and undersized mullet get caught in the net, making for a tedious sorting chore.

Moody emphasized that he was speaking personally and not in his capacity as a federal employee with law-enforcement responsibilities when he said he would like to see mullet managed with quotas versus gear restrictions.

An individual fisherman might, for example, be permitted to catch 10,000 pounds in a year and to use any harvesting method within reason. His total catch would be tallied based on individual trips tickets obtained when fish is sold to a wholesaler.

“He’s got a good idea,” Bob Jones, the longtime executive director of the Southeastern Fisheries Association, said regarding Moody’s preference for quotas and relaxed gear restrictions. “There’s just one thing that stands in his way: Article 10, Section 16, of the Florida Constitution.”

Indeed, the amendment provided that “nothing in this section prohibits the establishment by law or pursuant to law of more restrictions on the use of nets for the purpose of taking any saltwater finfish, shellfish or other marine mammals.”

What it didn’t provide for was the relaxation of restrictions.

“Getting that changed is a tough row to hoe,” Jones said. ■

“My next move is to get U.S. Department of Agriculture approval for a food-grade production process and get some product on store shelves in two to three years.”

David Moody

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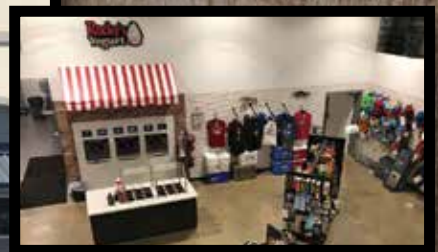
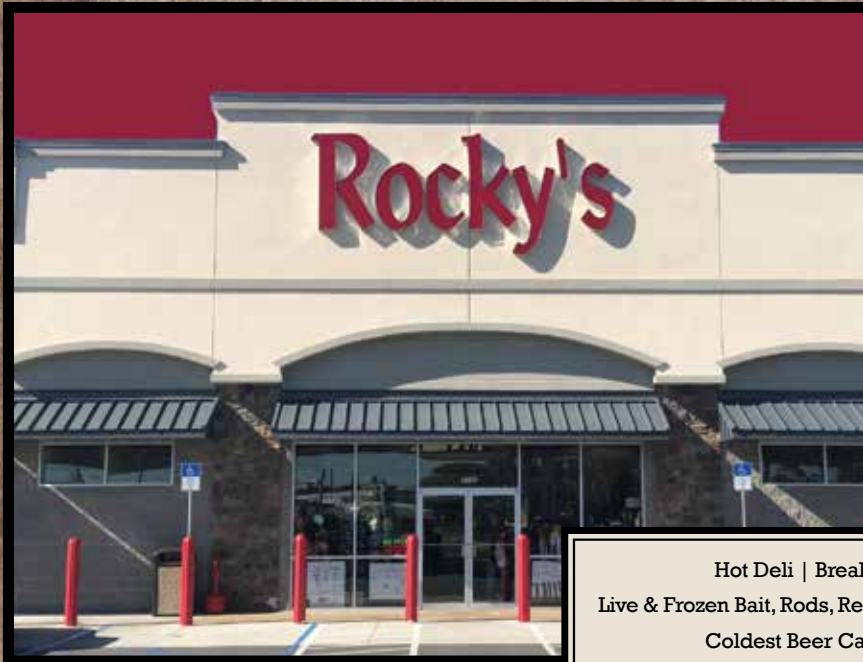
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A STRONG VOICE

Waterfronts board speaks up for Panacea

by STEVE BORNHOFT

Seven years following passage by Florida voters of a constitutional amendment that banned gill nets and limited other nets to 500 feet in size, the community of Panacea was reeling.

For generations, Panacea has been a commercial fishing town, and the net ban kicked the town right in its bedrock. The town was starting to decay. Storefront businesses were closing, and something had to happen to stem that tide.

At the time, Pam Portwood was the grants coordinator for Wakulla County. In that capacity, she wrote an application to the state, seeking a waterfronts community designation for Panacea.

That application process, said Portwood, who today works for the state Office of Economic Development,

caused community leaders to think about Panacea and its future and to articulate a vision for its revitalization and success.

The Waterfronts program also required that applicants establish a permanent board that would work to implement the arrived-at vision and further required that it hire a paid program manager. Portwood became that person.

For two years following its formation, the Panacea Waterfronts Florida Partnership received \$25,000 per year in start-up funds from the state.

It established as its mission, “participating in the development of and guiding the implementation of a comprehensive revitalization plan and strategy that will enhance the natural environment and promote



▲ As a Waterfronts Florida community, Panacea and its Waterfronts Partnership Board are committed to revitalizing the unincorporated town and promoting economic growth while remaining good stewards of an environment that attracts boaters and fishermen.

economic growth of the community while preserving natural, historic, and environmental resources, character and the identity of the area, while also preserving the rights of its citizens and landowners.”

One of the chief benefits of the partnership, said Portwood, “was the opportunity to make trips to other working waterfront communities like Apalachicola, Vilano Beach (north of St. Augustine) and St. Andrews (in Panama City), spend two or three days there and learn about the challenges they were facing and what they were doing to overcome them.”

Priorities for the Panacea Partnership, now 17 years after its formation, include promoting Panacea as a fishing and outdoor recreation-centered destination for tourists — the community looks forward to being linked to the Capital City from the Sea bicycle trail — and realizing community projects by supplying matching funds to the county and other entities.

The partnership saw to improvements at Panacea’s Woolley Park by providing local dollars as a match for county funds.

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PANACEA WATERFRONTS



- ▲ Panacea's recreational assets include docks, parks and trails. Efforts to establish Panacea as a walking community have begun to pay off. Sidewalks are under construction.

For years it has been working to establish Panacea as a walking community and has met with some success that way. Sidewalks are under construction.

Partnership board subcommittees are devoted to community beautification, marketing and event planning. The Rock the Dock fishing tournament is the partnership's biggest fundraiser of the year. Plans for an Oct. 14 Panacea Oyster Festival, which was to have featured farmed oysters, were derailed by Hurricane Michael. The events committee also oversees family-oriented events at Halloween and Christmas.

Rock the Dock tournament proceeds enabled the partnership to endow two \$10,000 scholarships at Tallahassee Community College. They are reserved for students from Panacea and may be used for degree or certificate programs.

The partnership's Economic Development Committee focuses on big-picture considerations including the possible incorporation of Panacea or the formation of a community revitalization area (CRA).

"The partnership board has been a great advocate for Panacea," Portwood said. "Because we are small and unincorporated, we were often overlooked, and the board has given the community a voice."

The board has remained active and membership has grown steadily, according to Portwood.

"The board meets monthly and, at almost every meeting, we have someone who attends for the first time and has an interest in helping out," Portwood has found.

Portwood, while a resident of Crawfordville, served as the partnership's program manager for 10-plus years and remains a Panacea Waterfronts Florida Partnership board member.

"I have stayed involved because I have a passion for working to help people who want to help themselves," Portwood said. "I work hard for people who work hard. And that's Panacea. They've done a lot with a little; they have no dedicated funding. I stay involved because I have fallen in love with them." ■

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