

EXISTING CONDITIONS REPORT

HISTORIC CONTEXT

The City of Green Cove Springs has experienced growing pains. The community first began to take shape in 1816 when George I.F. Clarke established the area’s first large-scale lumbering operation. The area’s main attractor of early settlers and tourists, however, was the area’s warm springs. In the 1850s, the area was often referred to as White Sulfur Springs before being renamed to Green Cove Springs in 1866. A third industry, dairy farming, grew into significance in the early 1900s. Gustafson’s Farm opened in 1908 and became one of the largest privately-owned dairies in the southeast region of the United States.

The extension of the railroad to South Florida in the late 1800s and the American Great Depression in the early 1930s impacted the City. Fortunately, the military installations, Benjamin Lee Field (renamed Naval Air Station Green Cove Springs) and Camp Blanding, encouraged economic recovery towards the end of the 1930s.



The Naval Air Station was decommissioned in 1961 and the land was purchased by the City. It was later sold to Louis Reynolds for the construction of the Reynolds Industrial Park which created many jobs. In 2004, however, the Gustafson’s Farm operation was purchased by Southeast Milk and changes in consumer taste forced the company to close its doors in 2013, which caused a significant loss of local jobs. Reynolds Park remains an important part of the City’s future growth as it is expected to transform into a mixed-use development in the long-term. Similarly, the Gustafson land was recently approved for a 2,100-unit residential development. The construction of the First Coast Expressway is also expected to bring growth to the area. With the expected growth, the City is committed to ensuring the protection and revitalization of its historic downtown. The Downtown study area is partially located within the Green Cove Springs National Register Historic District (Figure 1). Two of the buildings within the district are also listed individually in the register: St. Mary’s Church (c. 1879) at 400 St. Johns Avenue, and the Historic Clay County Courthouse (c. 1889) at 915 Walnut Street, which is part of the county’s Historic Triangle which includes the Clay County History Museum, Railroad Depot Display, Old County Jail and Archives Center. The City, however, does not currently have a local register of historic structures or a historic preservation ordinance that would protect these valuable historic resources.

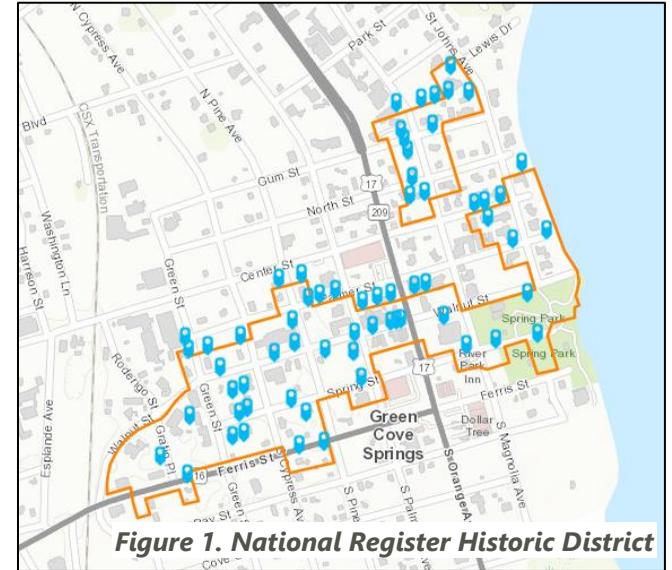
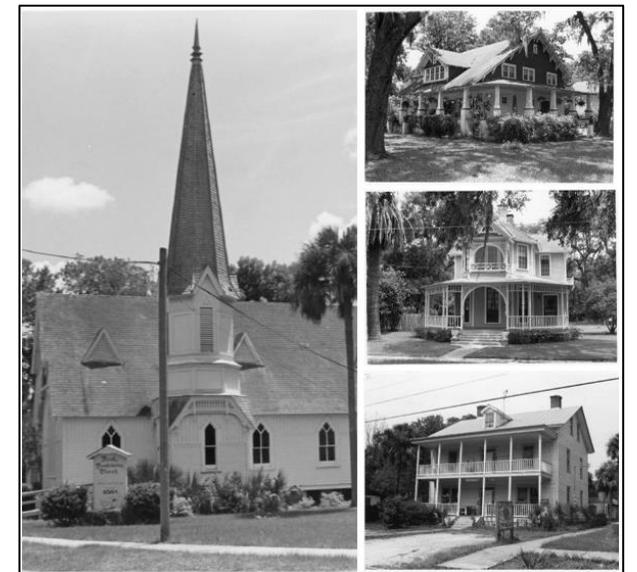


Figure 1. National Register Historic District

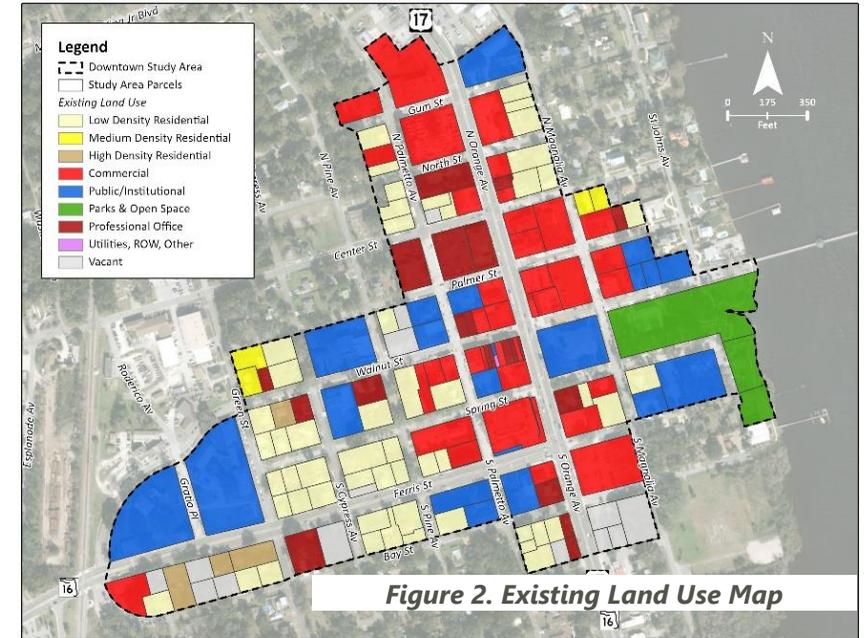


AREA CHARACTER / LAND USE

The Green Cove Springs Downtown study area contains a mix of commercial, public/institutional, and low-density residential uses laid out in a traditional grid pattern of streets and small blocks. The **low-density residential uses** consist of single-family homes located in the periphery of the core. The **public/institutional uses** comprise developed and vacant sites owned by the City and concentrated within the core, several church sites, and various Clay County and School Board facilities. **Commercial uses** are mainly concentrated along Orange Avenue and Walnut Street and are interspersed with some office uses. Spring Park, located on the waterfront, provides valuable open space and access to the waterfront.

There are very few opportunities for multi-family living in the City core: a few duplex units, some single-family homes converted to multi-family, and a couple of multi-family buildings. Except for a single-family conversion on Center Street/Magnolia Avenue, all these sites are found in the west side of Downtown.

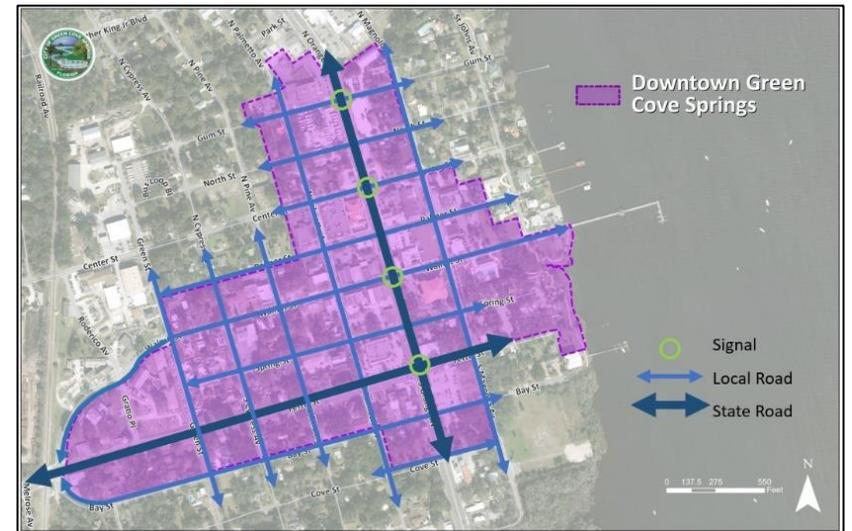
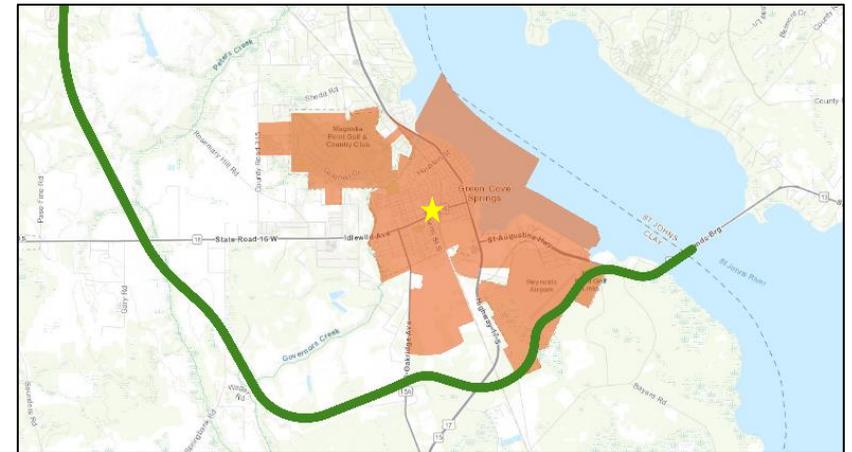
Older developments in the City follow the urban form of the time when the primary mode of transportation was by foot. More recent developments display suburban characteristics such as wider front yard setbacks, larger lots, frequent driveways, and expansive surface parking lots. The City has adopted regulations that guide development into that traditional urban form that is so common in successful downtowns, but as noted in the Policy and Regulations section, needs to be strengthened. There are several vacant and underutilized parcels in the downtown, some of which are owned by the City, offering great **potential for infill and redevelopment** in the near future.



MOBILITY & PARKING

With the advent and popularity of the automobile, the character of Downtown Green Cove Springs changed drastically. It is now bisected by two FDOT highways: US 17 (Orange Avenue) and SR 16 (Ferris Street) which compromise the walkability of the area. These roadways provide connectivity to other regions, so in addition to local traffic, they also carry through-traffic. More recently, a new expressway was built around the City with an interchange on US 17, just south of the city limits. While this highway will help alleviate traffic issues at a regional scale, it is still early to determine its impacts, if any, on the traffic in the Downtown.

The study area enjoys adequate internal transportation **connectivity** with several roads traversing the area: Palmetto Avenue and Magnolia Avenue are the main collectors running north-south, and Walnut Street and Spring Street running east-west. Numerous other local roads traverse the area. The City has been working closely with FDOT to improve the US 17 corridor to make it safer for pedestrians and is committed to making changes in other areas to improve the **pedestrian mobility** in the Downtown. The most recent project aimed at doing that is the Palmetto Trail, a multi-use path planned to be built along Palmetto Avenue which will allow for safe bicycle and pedestrian travel connecting downtown to the County administration building and courthouse complex north of the Downtown.



Parking in Downtown has been identified by City residents as a problem. The City recently retained the services of a parking consultant to quantify parking spaces in the downtown area and determine future needs. The study concluded that the City parking resources within the Core Sub-Area are already fully utilized and likely to experience worse conditions in the future. When looking at future conditions, the study notes that when looking at the Core Sub-Area, there will likely be future parking shortages under normal growth conditions. The on-street spaces and City-owned parking lots that are currently well-utilized, will likely experience full occupancy and parking shortages in greater frequency than they do today.

DEVELOPMENT TRENDS / REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

The City recently updated its Comprehensive Plan. The Future Land Use Map (Figure 2) adopted as part of the Plan shows two key changes south of Downtown, the development of the 2,100-unit Ayrshire residential neighborhood and the future redevelopment of Reynolds Park. The Plan also calls for **redevelopment and infill in the downtown area**, some of it in the form of vertical mixed-use opening the doors to a **variety of housing options**.



To accommodate the future redevelopment and infill in the Downtown, the City created a future land use category specifically tailored for Downtown. It calls for a mix of medium-to-high density residential activities and nonresidential development, including commercial uses, lodging, professional offices and public/semi-public facilities. Residential densities are expected to reach 30 dwelling units per acre, and non-residential developments are allowed at a maximum floor area ratio of 2.0. The four sites shown in yellow on Figure 3 represent sites classified as Neighborhood (primarily residential uses) in the Future Land Use Map.

The Comprehensive Plan and Future Land Use Map set the vision for long-term growth. The Land Development Code and Zoning Map implement that vision. Figure 4 shows the zoning designations in the Downtown area. The majority of sites are zoned Central Business District (CBD), the north and south gateways into Downtown (US 17) are zoned General Commercial Corridor (GCC), and the south side of the Ferris Street corridor and the west side of Palmetto Avenue are zoned Gateway Corridor Neighborhood (GCN). There are a few sites on Magnolia Avenue zoned R-1. Public sites are zoned Institutional (INS).

The **CBD zoning regulations** address uses, parking and landscaping, and rely on existing development to determine development parameters. The **Gateway Corridor Neighborhood standards** include a list of permitted uses (mainly commercial and office) and dimensional standards. The maximum building height permitted along the Gateway Corridor Neighborhood is 35 feet, with an option to go up to 50 feet if additional setbacks are provided. The same section, however, states a maximum height of three stories. The districts also include architectural standards (building materials, colors, entry requirements, façade transparency, roof design, and utility screening).

The **Gateway Corridor Commercial** district allows the same uses as the GCN district in addition to intensive commercial. Allowable building height is 54 feet, or 70 feet with additional setbacks. The maximum number of stories is four. This district does not include architectural standards, but all Gateway Districts are required to orient non-residential buildings to the street (with parking in the rear), allow reduced parking ratios, and require compatibility with adjacent residential buildings.

While the current zoning standards have tried to address quality of design, there is much room for improvement. Development and redevelopment in the Downtown and along the main corridors extending from Downtown (US 17 and SR 16) need to be regulated to ensure the goals of revitalizing the Downtown and protecting the small-town charm are realized. A form-based code for this part of the City would be the best option.

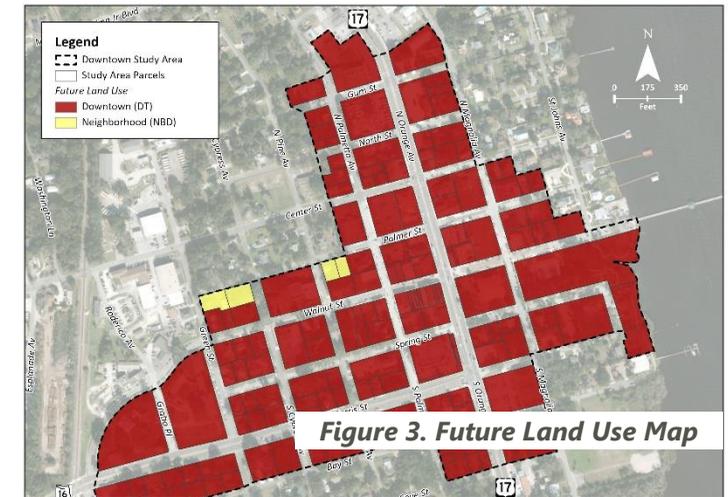


Figure 3. Future Land Use Map

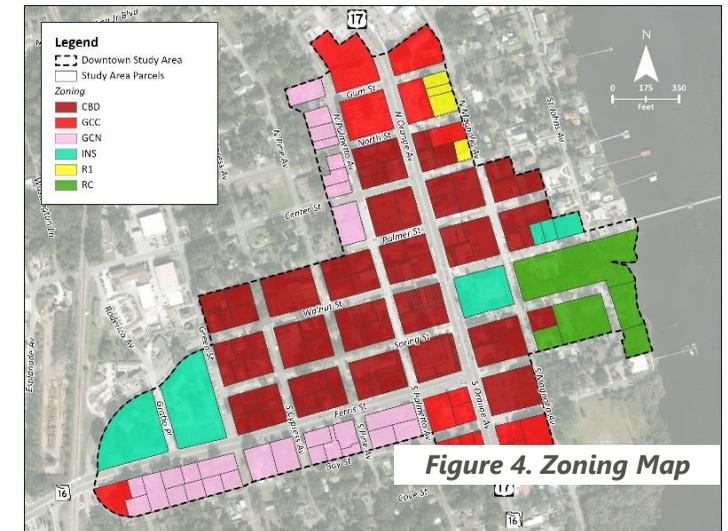


Figure 4. Zoning Map

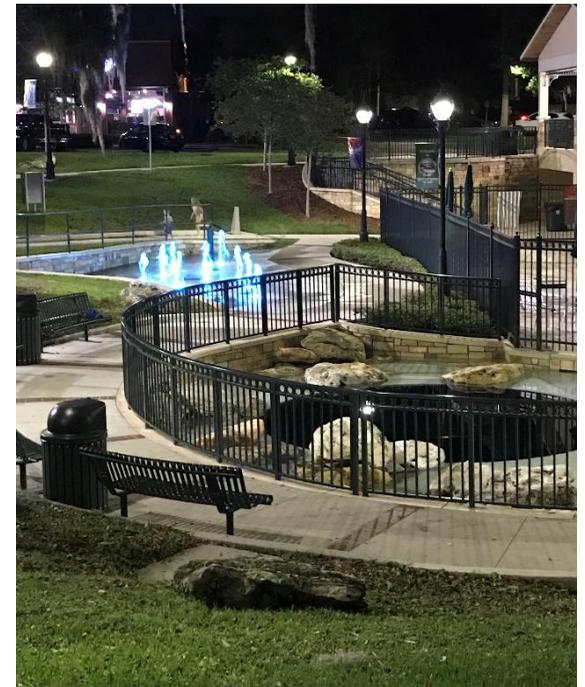
PARKS & OPEN SPACE

The Downtown area contains the most iconic park of the City – Spring Park. Spring Park is a 6-acre community park located on the St. Johns River between Walnut Street and Spring Street. The park offers a wide variety of passive and active recreation opportunities, including the historic Green Cove spring which provides the water to the public swimming pool also located in the park. The park has approximately 562 feet of frontage along the St. John’s River, providing the only public access in the City to the river. Spring Park offers a riverside trail, overlook swings spaced along the trail, a 500-foot fishing pier with eight overnight docking facilities, a 150-foot dock with a kayak launch.

Spring Park is also used for community events: Memorial Day RiverFest, the Parade of Trees, the CalaVida Music and Arts Festival, and the Green Cove Springs Food Truck Fridays, which attracts thousands of visitors.

The only public access to the waterfront in the City is provided at Spring Park. Other potential opportunities in Downtown for public access are the streets that dead-end at the waterfront.

Spring Park is a popular destination but is not well connected to the rest of Downtown. The design of Walnut Street could help make the pedestrian travel from the west side of Orange Avenue safer and easier, and the design of the Orange/Walnut intersection and a wayfinding program need to guide visitors to the park.



UTILITIES

The Downtown area has been in existence for over a century. Some of its buildings date back to the late 1800s. In order to set the stage for redevelopment and infill in the Downtown, the City will need to ensure adequate water and sanitary sewer infrastructure is in place. Similarly, as a waterfront community, it is important to identify and address stormwater issues.

In 2018, the City completed a **Water** Facilities Plan. The plan provides a phased approach to increasing the total system capacity to meet the projected demands within the service area through the year 2040. Also in 2018, the City completed a **Sanitary Sewer** Evaluation Survey of the Core City wastewater collection (underground pipes, manholes, etc.) system. The lines were cleaned and video-recorded, and accurate maps of the system were produced. Areas in need of repair were identified and prioritized, and a strategic capital improvement program created. The City received significant grant funding from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) State Revolving Fund (SRF) to complete this task.

Local area flooding occurs in several areas of the Core City. The City is currently required to follow the NPDES stormwater rules and has completed mapping of the stormwater system. In 2006, a grant was received for **drainage** improvements to the area east of the railroad and north of S.R. 16, which will, renovate existing piping, prevent flooding and install baffle boxes on all outfalls of this fully developed area of the Core City.