

Introduction

Like a trusted friend, the historic center of LaBelle has maintained integrity and familiarity since its beginnings.



Florida Memory Project

Royal Palm Hotel, Bridge Street, ca. 1925



Florida Memory Project

Bridge St. looking south, ca. 1928

Though its treasures and depth may not be apparent to those who have been recently introduced, we have discovered that it remains the heartbeat of the City. Our job has been to learn about LaBelle and craft a plan based on the unique characteristics of both place and context.

Unlike many downtowns across America, LaBelle has not been surpassed or replaced by development that favors the automobile. While there are significant challenges, Downtown LaBelle has most of the components of an idyllic place: historic buildings, parks, waterfront, street grid that encourages walking, pedestrian scale, housing in close proximity, accessibility to major road corridors, and people that are active and engaged.

The Downtown Plan for the City of LaBelle is the culmination of efforts by the Mayor, City Commission and the Downtown LaBelle Committee and the residents and property owners, to chart a course for its future.

In some ways, however, Downtown LaBelle is like a photograph that is out of focus. While the elements are in place, the current vision is not quite clear enough to appreciate. Although there are historic buildings, many remain underutilized and although there is a street grid, the sidewalk network lacks continuity. The right elements are there, but need to be brought into focus.

Economic hardships have closed the doors of some businesses, while others have been lured from the downtown area by newer developments and more convenient locations. Costs associated with trying to make older buildings adaptable to modern business needs have forced many businesses to move to newer locations with fewer associated problems. Some of these buildings remain unoccupied and are not regularly maintained.

The citizens who live and work in LaBelle are concerned about the future of their downtown. Oak-canopied streets and small town charm evoke a sense of love, loyalty and desire to honor the heart of their town.

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EnSite was hired to assist in developing and facilitating a community vision for Downtown LaBelle, and to create a plan with which to implement that vision.

The City was also awarded a visioning grant from Visit Florida through which they received additional plans, layouts and ideas for the development of a successful downtown.

This plan intends to achieve the vision set forth by providing a framework under which the downtown area can begin to rebuild. The plan includes a series of recommendations that incorporate financial strategies, design guidelines and illustrative samples that will guide the City through its redevelopment efforts.



Visioning Exercise for the Redevelopment of Fort Thompson Avenue