

# Breaking Down the (Jersey) Barriers

Building something beautiful and safe on a Florida waterfront. *By Bonnie Landry, AICP*

**I**T ALL STARTED IN FEBRUARY 2011 AS A CHALLENGE FROM MY COWORKER, Edward W. Erfurt IV, an urban designer. He and I were on a site visit to Port Salerno, Florida, on a bridge overlooking a canal where public art was soon to be installed. As my colleague gazed at the site, he commented on the poor quality of the art “canvas,” an 80-foot-long, solid concrete Jersey barrier at the water’s edge. “It’s too bad that we are installing the art there,” he said. “I wonder if we could convince the engineering department to take that barrier down.”

## The challenge was on

Port Salerno, on the east coast of Florida, north of West Palm Beach, is home to the last commercial fishing dock in Martin County. The waterfront community is known for its beautiful water access and is designated as a Florida Waterfront Community by the Waterfronts Florida Program. That initiative helps the state’s coastal communities to revitalize their working waterfronts by providing resources and technical assistance in four priority areas: public access, hazard mitigation, environmental and cultural resources protection, and enhancing the viable traditional economy.

Now Port Salerno is also home to a waterfront pedestrian plaza that has spurred local business development and provided even better access to the water.

The Manatee Pocket Gateway project resulted from an ongoing partnership between a multidisciplinary team and an innovative community redevelopment agency. Government, the private sector, businesses, and residents came together to make this project possible.

## Crafting the concept—and the team

Before approaching the county engineering department, we needed information. What questions would the engineers have? What safety concerns would there be?

As an urban designer and a professional

planner in the Martin County Community Development Department, my colleague and I both saw the potential benefit of opening the access and view to the beautiful waterfront. We were concerned, though, that our engineering counterparts would just see the waterway as a hazard. After all, the Jersey barrier is there for safety: to keep cars and pedestrians from falling into the water.

I asked my colleague to make a rough sketch that could be used as a visual when we met with key decision makers. We met the traffic engineer and deputy county engineer on-site—with the sketch and a measuring tape in hand. At this meeting we determined that the project was feasible if four on-street parking spaces were sacrificed—to make a larger plaza and keep adequate separation between cars and people. The engineers also recommended adding an eight-inch vertical curb for safety’s sake. This first and biggest hurdle went very smoothly—which was encouraging.

We then approached the director of our agency, Kev Freeman. He loved the idea and gave us the green light to proceed with a full design. Enter Keith Pelan, AICP, a planner and landscape architect. Using the original sketch, he developed a more detailed concept and storyboard to use in our meetings with stakeholders.

The idea was this: Replace the solid barrier with a railing that both incorporated

the public art and was transparent enough to let people feel connected to the water. His design also considered required distances between the travel lane, pedestrians, and the waterway. This distance was easy to achieve by transforming parking spaces into a public plaza. The speed limit for this road was already at 35 miles per hour, which would be compatible for the plaza. To provide the new canvas, the sketch suggested dividing the art into two pieces that would attach to a cable railing.

The resulting concept was a 1,580-square-foot pedestrian plaza measuring 117 feet by 13.5 feet. It included key nautical elements such as shade structures shaped as stingrays, bollards shaped as lighthouses, and benches with bridge-shaped base elements that honored the project’s waterfront location.

A water-themed gate would connect pedestrians to the rest of the Manatee Pocket Boardwalk, which wraps around the popular waterway. The consultant also included a cable railing along the water that was designed to meet the engineers’ safety requirements.

The plaza and boardwalk, completed this year, cost \$275,000. Funding came from a combination of tax increment financing and public art grants.

## Consensus building

The key to the success of any project is inclusion of all of the stakeholders. The new plaza would be adjacent to a successful waterfront restaurant, Manatee Island Bar and Grill. What better place to hold the first meeting? In attendance were the restaurant owners, the artist, the urban designer, the landscape architect, the deputy county engineer, and me, the planner.

It was important to put all the concerns on the table and address each one. Not surprisingly, the restaurant owners were concerned about reduced parking (from the loss of four on-street parking spaces). We assured them that the greater visibility and improved access to the restaurant would more than make up for the decrease in parking spaces.

With increased foot traffic and the new access point from the plaza, the restaurant owners agreed to install an additional hostess stand. County staff assured them that the contractor would do the loudest and dustiest portions of construction at times other than the lunch and dinner rush hours.

While stakeholder outreach was proceeding, artist Sue Lampert was busy modifying the artwork to fit the new design. Her original concept involved a solid aluminum gate embellished with various sea creatures that would be welded to the existing Jersey barrier. In the new concept—with the Jersey barrier removed—the smaller fish would be inlaid in the concrete plaza and other sea life would be affixed to the concrete pedestals holding the shade structures.

To marry the new art with the bridge, it was proposed that the artwork be divided into two pieces, creating a gate that would lead to a ramp along the bridge and down to a boardwalk next to the restaurant. While it did take some doing to convince the artist that the change from one solid piece to a two-piece gate would still honor her original design, Keith Pelan's rendering was so detailed that she could easily envision how the art piece would actually be enhanced.

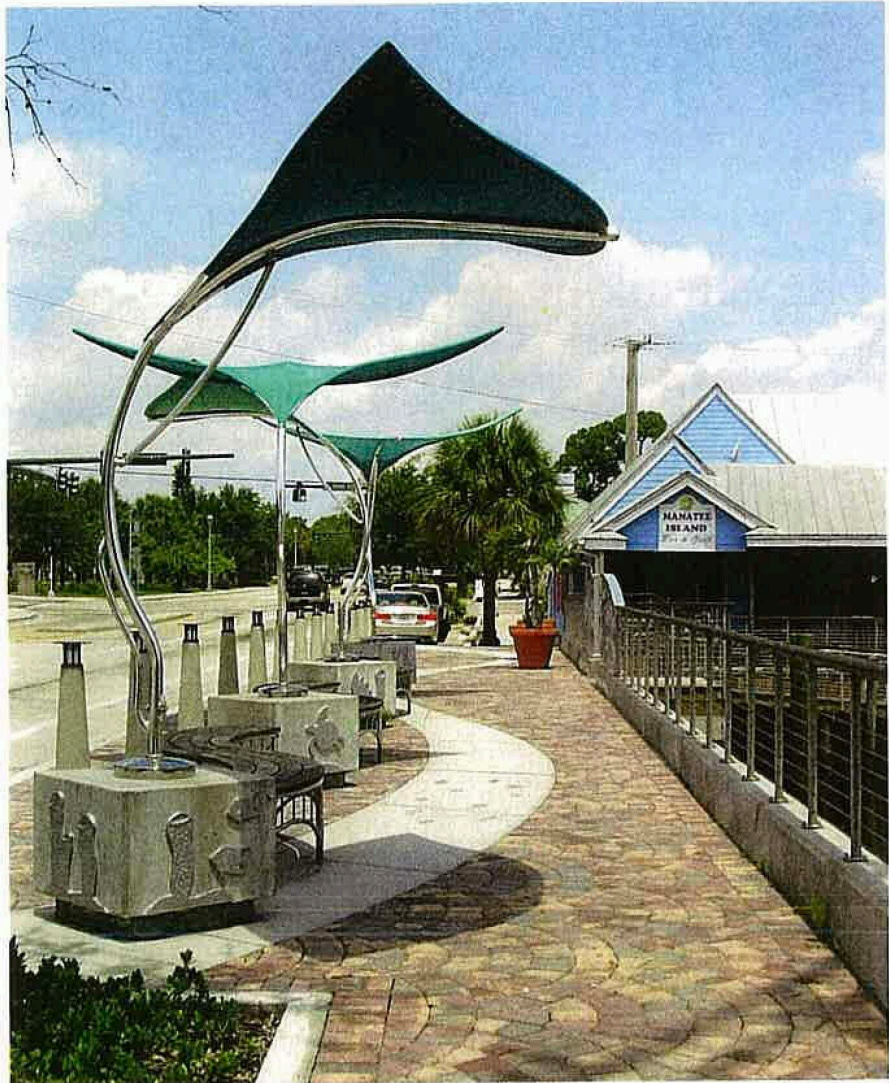
With no new objections from the engineering department, the concept went to the Port Salerno Neighborhood Advisory Committee and the Community Redevelopment Agency board. Both groups unanimously supported the project.

The strong lines of communication between the project manager, the artist, the business owners, the engineering department, and the landscape architect continued as the project progressed. This included daily e-mails, phone calls, and site visits. Without this collaboration, the project would never have been completed.

### Ultimately, a success

Construction got under way in November 2011 and was managed by Sarah Henke, the CRA's civil engineer, who has extensive experience in context-sensitive design. Near the end of construction, I received a call from the restaurant owners. They were so happy with the project that they offered to pay for the construction of a boardwalk next to their business that would end at the newly installed Manatee Pocket Gateway. As the CRA already had plans to construct the extension, the owners benefited from a fully designed and permitted project, while the CRA saved construction costs—a win-win result.

When completed, the project got rave reviews from the residents, elected officials, the artist, the engineers, and the surrounding businesses. The restaurant owners reported a 25 percent increase in business be-



Port Salerno's new plaza is a huge improvement. Ocean-themed public art defines the space and a cable railing opens up views and access to the celebrated waterfront.

cause patrons could enter the establishment directly from the Manatee Pocket Gateway. Now the restaurant owners place several dining chairs along the edge of the plaza, using it as an extension of their business.

This project has taught me a valuable lesson, namely that the key to a successful community project is to include the stakeholders early on and throughout the

process. I also learned that with visioning, partnership, and creativity, opportunities can be found in the most unlikely places. Even a place as mundane as four on-street parking stalls and a Jersey barrier can become something special. ■

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