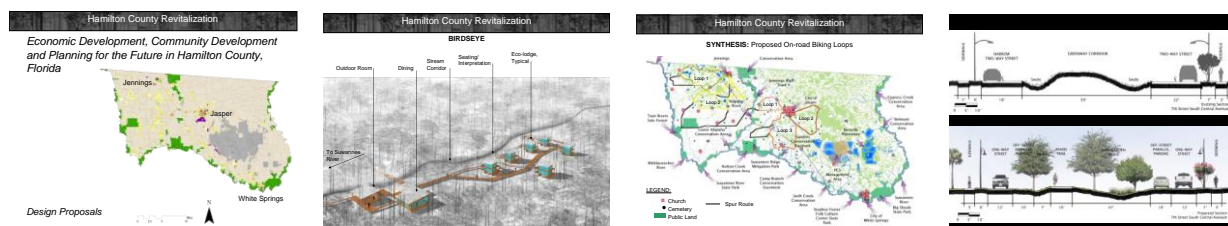


# Building Community and Economic Development Strategies in Hamilton County, Florida

## Final Report on Rural Tourism and Downtown Redevelopment



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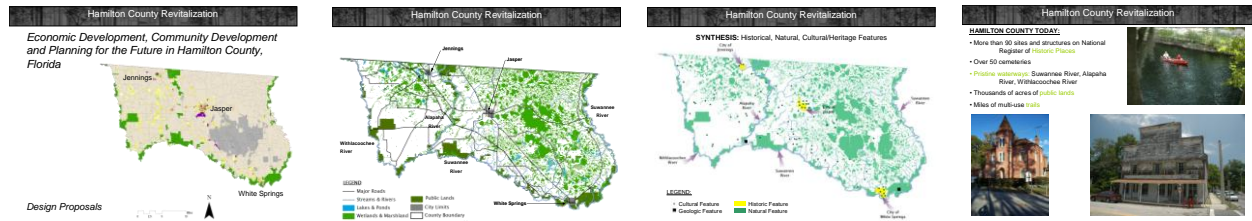
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# Introduction



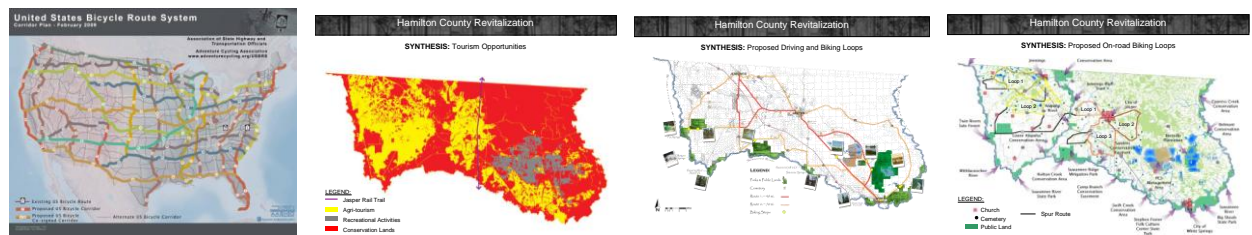
These Rural Tourism and Downtown Redevelopment proposals build on research from the project team, especially from the *Alternative Future Land Use Scenarios* created by team members Paul Zwick and Peggy Carr. These design proposals take advantage of the rural character as well as the historic, cultural and natural assets of Hamilton County and are based on using rural tourism as the economic driving force and catalyst for revitalization and development.

## Rural Tourism



Hamilton County's rural character is unique in the high-growth state of Florida and provides the opportunity to develop a broad range of rural tourism activities in the region including Nature-Based tourism, Agritourism and Cultural/Heritage Tourism. Nature-based tourism is popular in the White Springs area and activities such as biking, fishing, camping, horseback riding and bird watching could be developed in other areas of the county that have the supporting natural assets. Agritourism is relatively undeveloped but has great potential to supplement the livelihood of farmers with such activities as farm/ranch vacations with bed and breakfast options, arts, crafts and product purchases, horseback riding, hay rides and seasonal events. Cultural-Heritage tourism is well established in White Springs with the Annual Florida Folk Festival and could be expanded to other areas throughout the county that have rich historical and cultural resources.

## Driving and Biking Tours

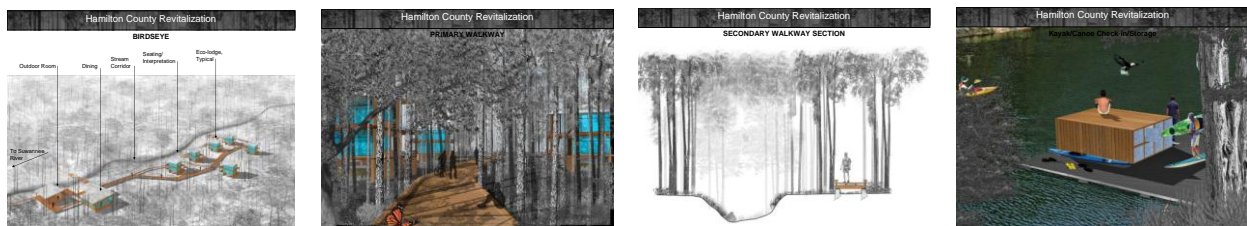


The proposed Hamilton County Driving and Biking Tours draws on the existing tourism market in White Springs and expands it out into the county by linking the historic, cultural and natural features via a network of scenic rural roads for driving and biking touring. Expanding options and length of stay of visitors helps capture more tourist dollars, allowing private ventures to benefit from new tourism opportunities, further stimulating local economies.

The proposed Driving Tour links the three main cities in the county - White Springs, Jasper and Jennings in one major loop, and three minor loops provide additional options to the visitor. A tour brochure (printed or GPS-linked) could be developed that highlights the location and description of historic, cultural and natural points of interests, location of food and lodging establishments, and distance between landmarks.

White Springs has thriving biking organizations with many on and off-road biking events. Other communities in the county could benefit from similar activities. The proposed Biking Tours creates loop trails centered in Jasper and Jennings of varying length and locations, offering a variety of experiences to visitors and locals alike. There is a unique opportunity to expand the biking tourism draw from a larger region by creating linkages to the National Bicycle Route System that runs east-west through this region.

## Low Impact Development



Because the county is mostly rural and not heavily developed, there is an opportunity to ensure that in the future, development is low impact and done in a responsible way to conserve and protect the resources that drive the tourism industry.

To demonstrate the application of low impact development, a design was developed in White Springs for an eco-lodge facility next to the Stephen Foster Folk Cultural Center State Park and the Suwannee River. This approach reduces the impact from development by working with the land to minimize changes to the topography, soils, vegetation and hydrology of a site. It takes advantage of the sun, wind and rain to reduce dependency on external sources of power and water and maximizes the visitor's nature-based experience. Most importantly, it provides protection for the assets that attract the visitors to the area in the first place.

## Jasper Downtown Redevelopment



The Jasper Downtown Redevelopment proposal strives to create a more vibrant urban environment to spur redevelopment and attract infill mixed-use development. Currently there are 208.8 acres of suitable land for infill development, part of which are included in four proposed residential mixed-use redevelopment areas. Working with local citizens, a proposed Historic District was delineated that covers an area of 425 acres and includes 150 contributing structures that are 50 years or older. Having a Historic District can provide tax and other financial benefits, help to protect and improve Jasper's historic resources and be a draw for visitors and residents alike.

Envisioned as the civic heart of the community, the proposed central park is located in the greenway along the railroad corridor that bisects downtown. The county-wide biking trail would be aligned through the downtown greenway park bringing in more tourists and locals to downtown Jasper. Improved access from the city to the greenway would be provided by a proposed green infrastructure network that links the central park to other open spaces, parks and recreation areas in the city through a network of shaded pedestrian-friendly streets. Incorporated into the central park are a proposed civic area at the site of the old train depot, biking and walking trails, trees, and aesthetically pleasing stormwater management strategies in the form of urban rain gardens, rain garden swales and rain garden retention basins to improve water quality and reduce the flooding problems in downtown.

A streetscape design proposal for Jasper's downtown core explores the use of street trees, special paving for sidewalks and crosswalks, on-street parking, lighting, signage and street furniture within the existing roadway design. To maintain the historic character and scale of the downtown, building setbacks would remain close to the street and parking lots would be minimized along the street corridor. Improving the pedestrian environment will attract more people to visit and spend more time and money in downtown businesses.

### Jennings Historic Structures and Farmers Markets



A Historic Structures Report was prepared for two historic brick commercial buildings in downtown Jennings. The result of the survey concludes that the structures, one built around 1900 and the other 1910 suffer from neglect but are generally sound and could be reused. In addition, the site adjacent to the buildings has a floor remaining from a demolished building that could be included in an adaptive reuse.

Based on input from the project's Advisory Committee (composed of local Hamilton County citizens and elected officials) on the need for farmer's markets in the county, two design options were explored for the city of Jennings. One option was located at the entry to town at the interstate, and the other at an in-town location. The interstate option offers the advantage of being located near an entry point to the state of Florida and accessible to both locals and the larger interstate market. It could contain the farmer's market, a restaurant featuring local produce and local southern cooking, and a bike trail hub linked to the proposed biking tour loop. The in-town location option incorporates a central open lawn surrounded by a covered breezeway for a farmers market (and other arts and crafts-type fairs), that can be used for civic activities and other public park functions.

### Tourism County Website

To help stimulate local economies, the Visit Hamilton County website was designed to increase visibility of all rural tourism activities in Hamilton County and help attract more visitors to more areas of the county. It was developed using a free website program

that is easy to update and manage using drag and drop edits and does not require the use of a web master. This allows communities to more affordably and easily market their rural tourism activities.

To see the website, visit <http://visithamiltoncounty.webnode.com>

### **SmartCode**

The SmartCode is a model ordinance. It is a form-based code, a blend of law and design that describes a unified development ordinance incorporating Smart Growth and New Urbanism principles. Its graphic and user-friendly format is a useful tool for local governments to help guide the form of their built environment in order to create and protect compact, walkable and mixed-use developments.

The SmartCode is freeware and available in an editable format from the websites [www.smartcodecentral.org](http://www.smartcodecentral.org) and [www.transect.org](http://www.transect.org). A copy of the downloaded SmartCode is included in the Appendix II of the Jennings, Florida Planning and Design Strategies report.

### **Summary**

The goal of this project was to design economic development strategies for Hamilton County, involving local citizens and elected officials to provide them with the tools to make informed decisions about the future of their community. Our hope is that through the work produced in this project, they are empowered and knowledgeable to embrace this important task.