The Florida International University Jorge M. Pérez Metropolitan Center is Florida’s leading urban policy think tank and solutions center. Established in 1997, the Center provides economic development, strategic planning, community revitalization, and performance improvement services to public, private, and non-profit organizations in South Florida. Its staff and senior researchers are leaders in their respective fields and bring extensive research, practical, and professional experience to each project. The Center’s research has catalyzed major policy initiatives and projects in housing, economic redevelopment, transportation, social services, and health services throughout South Florida.

FIU Metropolitan Center Study Team:

Ned Murray, Ph.D., AICP
Associate Director

Nika Zyryanova, MSIRE
Research Specialist

Maria Ilcheva, Ph.D.
Assistant Director of Planning and Operations
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of Building Corridors of Opportunity: City of Fort Myers Community Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is to develop integrated short-term and long-range community economic development strategies for the City’s major commercial corridors – Palm Beach Boulevard, Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, US 41 (Cleveland Avenue), Fowler Street, Colonial Boulevard - and the surrounding residential communities.

An important goal of the CEDS is to make the City’s major commercial corridors more functional and efficient. However, in order to be functional and efficient commercial corridors need to create an identity. This can be a challenge as commercial corridors are commonly arterial streets defining neighborhood borders. They are typically seen as passing through neighborhoods rather than as integral neighborhood pieces contributing to livability. How easily and safely residents are able to get from one place to another has a major effect on a City’s quality of life. As such, the CEDS is viewed as a means of connecting people to economic opportunities, social activities, education, and healthcare while offering residents convenient, healthy, accessible, and low-cost alternatives to long commutes.

The CEDS planning process included the valued input from various community, government, and business leaders throughout. The CEDS community engagement process was led by SecondMuse who had staff on the ground throughout the planning process. During the “needfinding” phase of the study, SecondMuse had over 100 meetings with businesses and community leaders and advocates, nonprofit organizations, and local residents across each of the corridors. The outreach included one-on-one interviews with individuals, community focus groups, youth, and large stakeholder groups.

In addition to the on-going community engagement activities, city, business, and community leaders were convened at two important junctures of the planning process – release of the Competitive Assessment, Report I and the CEDS Conceptual Plan. Both planning documents were presented to the City of Fort Myers Economic Development Advisory Committee and business and community leader’s stakeholder roundtables. Input from the Economic Development Advisory Committee and stakeholder roundtables was incorporated into the final City of Fort Myers Community Economic Development Strategy.
APPROACH & METHODOLOGY

2.1 APPROACH

At the request of the City of Fort Myers, the Jorge M. Perez FIU Metropolitan Center and SecondMuse have worked with community and business leaders to complete Building Corridors of Opportunity: City of Fort Myers Community Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) consisting of 1) a “Competitive Assessment – a data-driven assessment identifying the key trends, issues, and strengths defining the City’s economy, and 2) a “Community Economic Development Strategy” detailing key policies, strategies, and investments to position the City’s businesses and workers to benefit from future economic growth and opportunity.

Implementing an effective community economic development strategy relies on a process of recognizing important industrial, market and social trends, identifying opportunities, building on local strengths and addressing local challenges. Development policy plays out in an increasingly complex environment characterized by issues including growing competition among regions, accelerating industrial, technological, and market changes, wage stagnation, income inequality, and a paucity of affordable housing.

The search for new and expanded economic opportunities requires knowing where to look and taking different looks to uncover opportunities that at first blush may not be obvious. This is a growing challenge in the post-COVID economy where supply and demand patterns have been significantly altered. The Competitive Assessment’s detailed analysis provides a full understanding of Fort Myers’ existing economy and where potentially it can grow based on the following analytics:

A dynamic trend analysis: rather than a static snapshot of current economic conditions, the study’s analytical approach incorporates historic and projected economic trends, linking changes in the national and regional economy to local demographic, employment, real estate, business creation, investing and geographic dynamics;

Connecting key systems & markets: analysis that connects economic performance with land use transportation, housing, and redevelopment and how they interact to develop more effective community economic development strategies;

A focus on opportunity & strengths: the analytical approach identifies community economic development challenges, impediments and opportunities that escape traditional economic development analysis. The focus must be on identifying and capitalizing on emerging economic opportunities;

Comparative benchmarking analysis: understanding economic history and performance is greatly complemented by comparative benchmark analysis against peer cities in Florida;

A focus on job quality: cities across the U.S. are facing a difficult structural challenge in an era where total employment has grown pre-COVID, but wages have remained stagnant or are declining. Effective community economic development strategies must focus on propelling and growing high-wage, high skilled jobs as part of its overall employment, occupational and industrial mix in order to increase opportunity, reduce income inequality, stabilize the local economy against economic shocks and recessionary swings, and maximize economic multiplier effects;

A focus on implementation: community economic development implementation strategies, incentives, recommendations and performance targets must be specific, market responsive, highly prioritized, and attainable; and

Leveraging long-term strategy with near-term opportunities: successful community economic development strategies must identify and prioritize small-scale projects, programs or investments that can be immediately implemented. This proven approach builds traction by attaining early development successes.
This input and analysis from the Competitive Assessment and community and business leaders helped establish the following set of guiding principles that are immersed in the Community Economic Development Strategies:

1. Position the City’s Major Commercial Corridors for Economic Growth and Opportunity: The City is already well-positioned to tap into the broad base of entrepreneurial activity occurring in the surrounding trade area. Growing entrepreneurial activity is found in most industry sectors, including professional and technical industries involving high-tech advanced manufacturing. The major commercial corridors create the connection to the larger trade area while providing land use capacity for business development, jobs, and improved connectivity.

2. Expand Economic Opportunity and Upward Mobility: Competitive communities support an expanding supply of jobs and occupations paying competitive wages and skills that provide a platform for upward economic mobility and building household wealth. In addition, competitive communities implement strategies to prepare residents to compete for these jobs by building local human capital.

3. Support Local Innovation: All communities grow through the expansion of local businesses and a steady supply of new businesses to maintain employment and competitive advantages. All successful businesses need to continuously innovate, invest, and update to remain competitive. Successful communities support local business capacity to innovate and adapt new technologies to improve performance and competitiveness.

4. Plan for Stable, Sustainable Long-Term Growth: Large swings in business and housing market cycles can be especially damaging at the local level. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how severe economic shocks can impact local and regional economies. Competitive communities support diversified employment, industry, and occupational growth that are less susceptible to economic shocks and normal business cycle fluctuations, thereby protecting worker incomes and household wealth during such economic downturns.

5. Targeted and Strategic Allocations of Resources to Stimulate Economic Growth: In an era of shrinking federal and state funding, leaders in high performing local economies a) focus and target investments in their local strengths, b) take a disciplined and targeted approach to investments in physical assets, real estate, and infrastructure, and c) focus on high-wage job creation in leading local industries before attempting to attract businesses in entirely new industries.

6. Address Housing Market Imbalances: High performing communities provide equitable solutions to address housing market imbalances that make buying or renting a home inaccessible and placing undue costs that erode incomes, dampen wealth building, and hamper the retention of younger workers. Sustainable and inclusive communities provide a spectrum of housing opportunities and building types.

7. Incentivize Land Use and Zoning: Zoning and land use strategies are the most effective and cost-efficient tools a City has at its disposal. Zoning incentives coupled with relatively modest investments in targeted areas can have rapid, catalytic impacts on investment activity. Creative zoning and land use tools allow the city, residents, and private and non-profit developers to work together in designing development uses and establish an overall growth pattern.

8. Focused Implementation Strategies: Cities must develop implementation strategies, incentives, recommendations and performance targets that are market responsive, highly prioritized, specific, realistic, and attainable. Successful community economic development strategies identify and prioritize small-scale projects that can be immediately implemented. This will allow the City of Fort Myers to “hit the ground running” – positioned to immediately implement its highest priority investments, programs, and projects.
The Fort Myers Competitive Assessment provided data-driven analytics of the City and regional economy and a platform for developing community economic development policies including short-term and long-range planning strategies for the City’s major commercial corridors and surrounding neighborhoods. The analytical assessment applied a variety of public and proprietary data sources to provide the most thorough analysis of the City’s population trends, economy, real estate markets, and industries. Data sources include the U.S. Census, American Community Survey, Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW), Current Employment Statistics (CES), Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS), Occupational Employment Statistics and Wages (OES) and Employment Projections 2019-2027. Proprietary data and information sources include Costar, EMSI, the Florida Association of Realtors, Zillow, and RealtyTrac. The economic and community impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic elevated the need for the most current data analysis and reporting. The Competitive Assessment incorporates all available industry and employment data and provides the Metropolitan Center’s expertise in applying the data to the community and economic analysis.

Benchmarking methods were used to compare the City of Fort Myers with similar size cities in Florida and the U.S. The use of benchmarking performance characteristics with similar communities provides valuable insight into the City’s strengths and weaknesses. The benchmark cities and counties also include a few outliers to give a sense of how Fort Myers and Lee County measure against some of the nation’s best performing cities and counties. Benchmark comparisons also help in longer-term performance review and planning. Easily updated annually, the benchmark comparisons can be used to guide and continuously improve policies and programs in the future.
The “Competitive Assessment” was completed during the first stage of the City of Fort Myers Community Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) planning process and updated as new data and information came available. The main objective of the Competitive Assessment was to identify the potential economic drivers and policies that can potentially attract private investment and enable business growth, job creation, increased tax revenues and expanded economic and wealth-building opportunities for businesses and residents of Fort Myers. The assessment identified economic advantages and disadvantages of the City’s major commercial corridors, local demand conditions, and economic opportunities based on the presence of growth industries, including advanced industries and industry clusters in the trade area that could help drive community economic development in the future.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The following “key findings” from the Competitive Assessment lay the groundwork for the City of Fort Myers Community Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). The findings highlight five major topic areas: 1) Community Economic Development Post-COVID, 2) Building Corridors of Opportunity – A Diverse and Inclusive Economy, 3) The Dynamics of the Local Economy, 4) A Case for Manufacturing, and 5) Calculating the City’s Future Economic Growth amidst the Changing Geography of Work.

1. Community Economic Development: Post-COVID

The economic and community impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic must be front and center to the City of Fort Myers Community Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). The impacts have been severe and will likely endure well into the future. Fortunately, Fort Myers’ and Lee County’s economic recoveries have been strong in recent months. The county has recovered 57,475 of the 71,393 jobs lost in the first months of the pandemic when the county’s unemployment rate spiraled to 14.6 percent.

The county’s March 2021 seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate decreased to 4.1, which was lower than the State of Florida (4.7 percent). However, the City of Fort Myers is still short approximately 860 jobs than in February 2020. Most of these workers, i.e. retail salespersons, building cleaning workers, waiters and waitresses, cashiers, who comprise the City’s leading occupation groups were the most vulnerable to job layoffs during the early months of the pandemic as were contract or “gig” workers. Since the pandemic began, there has been 92,603 unemployment claimants in Lee County. The largest number of job claimants have been workers in accommodation and food services, retail, and the self-employed.

2. Corridors of Opportunity – A Diverse and Inclusive Economy

There is substantial evidence, both nationally and locally, that the health and vitality of neighborhoods and the growth of local and regional economies can be mutually supportive. County and regional economic growth can substantially impact the vitality of neighborhood businesses and residents, while economically vibrant neighborhoods can significantly impact the growth of the larger local economy. Neighborhoods, in fact, are the building blocks of the broader local economy. Small businesses which can serve as the engine of Fort Myers’ and Lee County’s economies need to be concentrated along and within the neighborhood commercial corridors that crisscross the City. Further, neighborhoods are typically home to most of a City’s important business assets such as hospitals, and medical facilities, transit hubs, educational facilities, parks, community centers and other amenities. As such, neighborhood economic development should also be viewed as a critical business investment.

Unfortunately, many of the City’s neighborhoods have become disconnected, both physically and economically, from the larger community and the economic growth and opportunities that have occurred in Lee County over the past five years. For example, many of the neighborhoods located between Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Palm Beach Boulevard are strewn with vacant lots and isolated from businesses and job opportunities. Large sections of the commercial corridors that crisscross
these neighborhoods and others throughout the City are characterized by a fragmented development pattern that is dated and underdeveloped.

Fortunately, the City of Fort Myers has many of the land use and zoning tools in place to stimulate economic development investment along its major commercial corridors. Strategic economic development locations also fall within the City’s Community Redevelopment Area (CRA). The CRA areas of Cleveland Avenue, Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard and East Fort Myers should be the focus of intense community economic development activity. These areas are also part of the City of Fort Myers Opportunity Zone. Opportunity Zones are designed to incentivize new equity investments in low-income communities nationwide. Opportunity Zones are designed to spur economic development by providing tax benefits to investors.

To support the competitive needs and growth of the Commercial Corridor Target Areas, small businesses should be a clear priority strategy. Small businesses are the City’s most important source of employment, one of its clearest competitive advantages, and draws on a clear regional strength. Policies to support small businesses focus on helping them compete in larger regional. In most cases, this takes the form of supporting the economies of scale (business services, technical expertise, financing, labor, and access to supply chains) that large firms have internally.

Access to capital is the greatest barrier to economic opportunity and growth among minority small businesses including contractor businesses and the self-employed. Access to capital is the greatest barrier to economic opportunity and growth among minority small businesses including contractor businesses and the self-employed. The City of Fort Myers, working with a collaborative of investors can remove this barrier, by developing an alternative strategy and sources of capital to serve under-served communities and businesses along the major commercial corridors. The focus will be on new and existing microbusinesses.

The CEDS small business strategy will require the creation of the necessary “intermediary infrastructure” to jumpstart financial lending activity along the corridors. The Intermediary can be an existing organization or agency providing small business financing products or a new small business lending centrally located in the study area. The intermediary will coordinate its lending activities with existing community lenders.

Workforce development and training must be focused on industry sectors, occupations, and technologies that provide the greatest opportunities for local workers. Programs must be tailored to specific learning and skill sets and targeted at the neighborhood level for easy access. Apprenticeships and internships for Fort Myers’ high school students should be formalized and aligned with target and advanced industries and manufacturing skills to build a talent pipeline.

Local governments, educational institutions and workforce development organizations must break free from traditional approaches to workforce development to accelerate workforce development in a more strategic and coordinated approach. The City of Fort Myers CEDS calls for more innovative workforce education and training initiative.

3. The Dynamics of the Local Economy

The City of Fort Myers is strategically located in Lee County and centrally located in the larger Southwest Florida region. The City has excellent highway access along its commercial and industrial corridors with three interchanges along I-75. The City of Fort Myers added 5,706 new jobs to its economy from 2010 to 2018, growing from 26,557 to 32,263 total jobs. With a growth rate over 21.5 percent from 2010 to 2018, Fort Myers’ employment grew 1.3 times faster than Lee County.

Businesses in the City’s Advanced Industries — the 50 industries with the highest levels of skills, knowledge, growth, and value-added productivity — employ 9,639, or 5.4 percent of the City’s workers. Nationally, the Advanced Industries employ 9 percent of all workers. The five largest Advanced Industries in Fort Myers by number of jobs are: Management, Scientific, and Technical Consulting Services; Architectural, Engineering, and Related Services; Computer
Systems Design and Related Services; Medical and Diagnostic Laboratories; and Wired and Wireless Telecommunications Carriers. The City’s Advanced Industries generate nearly $1.6 Billion in local sales, annually. Advanced Industry employment and its importance are discussed in detail later in this report.

Fort Myers, like other local economies, is driven by its Traded Industry Clusters. The three leading Traded Industry growth sectors include Management, Scientific and Technical Consulting Services, Other Amusement and Recreation Industries and Management of Companies and Enterprises. These three industries alone generate over $1.5 Billion in sales, annually.

4. A Case for Manufacturing

In recent years, a resurgence in manufacturing has been taking place in both the United States and abroad. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, real manufacturing output hit record highs in recent quarters pre-COVID and is 75 percent higher than it was 25 years ago. According to the Aspen Institute, access to a highly skilled and educated workforce is the most critical element for innovation and modern manufacturing’s success. Industry recognized certifications and credentials are essential to create a workforce that is prepared and successful in the 21st century workplace.

U.S. manufacturing output and productivity has been increasing while becoming more capital intensive and much less labor intensive. Small and mid-size manufacturers (SMMs) manufacturing continued to be a critical sector. Innovations such as AI, cloud computing, advanced analytics and robotics can increase output and productivity, and allow more flexibility to respond to changes in consumer markets. This has created a growing demand in the post-COVID economy.

The Competitive Assessment found the City of Fort Myers and Lee County have the potential to grow their existing manufacturing base. Currently, there are 322 manufacturing establishments in Lee County employing 4,569 workers. Significantly, Lee County’s manufacturing base consists of 27 industry groups producing a range of products from printing to medical supplies.

Manufacturing, as a targeted sector, will require a heightened level of local industrial development planning and management. It will also require a far more active role for economic development professionals as successful manufacturing can only be achieved through formalized private-public partnerships that comprehend the many aspects of the organization of production, including supply chains, facility planning, logistics, technologies, capital investment, job training and institutional support. The trend is toward smaller manufacturing facilities in major population centers. Creative land use and zoning, business support tailored to the needs of manufacturers, cluster development, local branding efforts, and apprenticeship programs are some examples of strategies that will support and grow the sector.
5. Calculating the City’s Future Economic Growth amidst the Changing Geography of Work

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated structural changes in the workplace that were quickly changing the geography of work over the past decade. The City of Fort Myers is well-positioned to take full advantage of the patterns of office, retail, and industrial development that have been undergoing rapid and fundamental change across the U.S. The practice of employers moving workers out of a central office on a daily basis and either structuring telecommuting or moving satellite offices closer to where their employees actually live is known as workshifting. Workshifting and telecommuting are a hybrid of workplace and office cost reduction, land use and transportation strategies to quantifiably reduce the number of commuter trips workers need to make for work each week. Co-working, shared, home office, and off-site office space are also playing a rapidly growing role in the future of the workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic will surely accelerate remote work as will the increasing congestion and delays of the I-75 commute.

FORT MYERS’ ECONOMIC GROWTH CHALLENGES

Due to unprecedented growth in Lee County over the past eight years, the City of Fort Myers is faced with a number of challenges. Given its competitive characteristics in terms of location and attractiveness, the City must be proactive in planning and managing to balance its established quality of life with strategic economic investments that will enhance the City’s competitiveness and increase prosperity for its local businesses and resident workforce. Structuring the right balance of new economic growth is crucial, so that the City does not become a “victim” of its own success.

Given the surging development trend, population growth, new geography of employment, transportation and land use patterns, the continued development of Fort Myers as a 21st Century Live-Work Community will be based on:

► A Community Economic Development vision and policy agenda for the City of Fort Myers that are clearly in the interests of the City’s small businesses and resident workforce;

► The expansion of existing small businesses employing 20 people or less through innovation and improving competitiveness by making investments in new technology and productivity;

► The development of pools of local entrepreneurial talent who create new businesses;

► Creating low-impact employment generating development that takes cars off the road utilizing incremental redevelopment and re-purposing of existing commercial properties to new mixes of uses, and increasing the percentage of workers and employment accommodated in non-traditional office and work spaces, including co-working spaces, home-based and sole proprietor (self-employed) businesses, and workers making use of regular telecommuting;

► Focusing growth on industry sectors having stronger wage performance and innovation rates. Fort Myers is a compact economy, and its growth potential isn’t unlimited. Therefore, supporting industries with higher-skilled, higher paying jobs provides greater spin-off and economic multipliers;

► Market educational and workforce development programs informing the region and local major property owners of Fort Myers’ advantages and strengths;

► Improving the skills, education, and wages of the City’s resident labor force, providing skilled employees to support the City’s leading industries, and expanding opportunity for workers at the bottom of the income ladder. Growing opportunity for those at the bottom creates income across the economy and income spectrum;

► Providing innovative small business financing products targeted specifically to minority-owned microenterprises and sole proprietorships; and

► Implementing mixed-income housing strategies to ensure resident workers can afford to live in Fort Myers and benefit from new economic growth.
04

THE COMMERCIAL CORRIDORS STUDY AREAS

4.1 OVERVIEW

The commercial corridors study area included the City’s major commercial corridors - Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, Palm Beach Boulevard, US 41 (Cleveland Avenue), Colonial Boulevard, Fowler Street and the surrounding neighborhoods, local businesses, and resident populations. The Competitive Assessment analyzed the transportation patterns, neighborhoods, development activity, community assets, vacant parcels, land use, zoning, businesses, and housing supply. The analysis was performed in relation to the larger economies of Lee County and Southwest Florida.

Due to the length, existing development patterns, and land use variations along the City’s major commercial corridors, the conceptual planning drilled down to segments of the corridors where land use, development patterns, economic opportunity, and connectivity provide the greatest opportunities for (re)development strategies. (Re)development strategies must demonstrate coherence and build on existing assets and competitive advantages. Having coherent strategies in place provides an opportunity for the City to target public and private resources and jump start investment activity.

4.2 COMMERCIAL CORRIDOR CONCEPT TARGET AREAS

Three (3) “Concept Target Areas” were delineated which provide a cohesive starting point for strategic planning discussions including targeting of resources.
I. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard Concept Plan

Boundaries

The Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) Boulevard Concept Plan incorporates the western segment of the boulevard extending from Veronica S. Shoemaker Boulevard west to US 41 (Cleveland Avenue); south to Edison Avenue; east to Veronica S. Shoemaker Boulevard; and north back to MLK Boulevard.

Land Use and Zoning

The Future Land Use Category along MLK Boulevard from Veronica S. Shoemaker Boulevard west to Evans Avenue is Commercial Corridor (CC). The section between Evans Avenue to US 41 (Cleveland Avenue) is Downtown (D/T) to the north and Midtown (M/T) to the south. The Midtown land use extends south to Edison Avenue and east to Evans Avenue. The area north of Edison Avenue east to Veronica S. Shoemaker Boulevard and north to MLK Boulevard is a mix of Low (RLD) and Medium Density Residential (RMD) with Industrial (IND) along Evans Avenue.

MLK Boulevard is zoned Commercial Intensive (CI) from Veronica S. Shoemaker Boulevard west to Evans Avenue. From Evans Avenue to US 41 (Cleveland Avenue) the zoning is a mix of Urban Core and Civic. US 41 south of MLK Boulevard is zoned Urban Core south to Victoria Ave, and Commercial Intensive (CI) south to Edison Avenue. Edison Avenue is zoned mainly Light Industrial (LI) and Commercial Intensive (CI) on the north to Prince Street. The south side of Edison Avenue is zoned Commercial Intensive (CI) on the west near US 41, a mix of residential zoning districts on the south to Royal Palm Avenue. Edison Avenue is zoned Light Industrial (LI) from Evans Avenue to Prince Street and residential from Prince Street to Veronica S. Shoemaker Boulevard. The Edison Avenue and Veronica S. Shoemaker Boulevard intersection is zoned Commercial Intensive (CI). Veronica S. Shoemaker Boulevard is zoned Commercial Intensive (CI) on the west from Edison Avenue to MLK Boulevard and mainly residential on the east.

Community Assets

- Midtown Redevelopment
- Fort Myers Technical College
- Clemente Park
- IMAG History and Science Center
- Franklin Park Magnet School
- Lee County Black History Society
II. Palm Beach Boulevard Concept Plan

Boundaries
The Palm Beach Boulevard Concept Plan follows the boundaries of the East Fort Myers Community Redevelopment Area (CRA).

Land Use and Zoning
The Future Land Use Category along the full length of Palm Beach Boulevard is Commercial Corridor (CC). The land north of Palm Beach Boulevard is a mix of Traditional Community (T/C) and Low Density Residential (RLD). The land south of Palm Beach Boulevard is primarily Low Density Residential (RLD) to the east and a mix of Recreation (REC) and Traditional Community (T/C) to the west.

Palm Beach Boulevard is zoned Commercial Intensive (CI) for the full length of the target area. The area north of Palm Beach Boulevard is primarily zoned Single-Family (RS-6) with a small section of Medium Density Multi-family (RM-12) between Van Buren Street and Marsh Avenue. The area to the south of Palm Beach Boulevard Single-Family (RS-7).
III. US 41 and Colonial Boulevard Concept Plan

Boundaries
The US 41 and Colonial Boulevard Concept Plan extends from the intersection of US 41 and Edison Avenue to the northeast; south to Colonial Boulevard; east to Fowler Street; north to Edison Avenue; and west on Edison Avenue to US 41.

Land Use and Zoning
The Future Land Use Category along US 41, Colonial Avenue to Fowler Street and north to Edison Avenue is Commercial Corridor (CC). The land between US 41 and Fowler Street is Medium Density Residential (RMD) from Hanson Street north to Edison Avenue and a mix of Low Density Residential (RLD) and Traditional Community (T/C) south of Hanson Street to Colonial Boulevard.

US 41 is zoned Commercial Intensive (CI) from Edison Avenue south to Colonial Boulevard and east to Fowler Street. Fowler Street is zoned Commercial Intensive (CI) on both sides north to Colonial Boulevard. The land north of Edison Avenue to Carroll Road between US 41 and Fowler Street is primarily zoned Commercial Intensive (CI). The land north of Carroll Road between US 41 and Fowler Street is a mix of Medium Density Multi-family (RM-12) south of Edison Avenue to Hanson Street, and a mix of Single-Family (RS-7), Medium Density Multi-family (RM-12), and High Density Multi-family (RM-16).

Community Assets
► Lee Memorial Hospital
► Edison Mall
► Unincorporated Urban Reserve Area
► Fort Myers Middle Academy
► Coronado Hugh School
4.3 DESIGN CONCEPTS

In order to jump start and sustain (re)development in the Conceptual Target Areas and other segments of the commercial corridors, the City will need to adopt design principles that promote investment activity that is functional, aesthetic, and compatible with surrounding residential communities. These design principles should state the following:

1. Ensure land use and zoning promote incentives for creative and functional design;
2. Articulate a vision for (re)development along the City’s commercial corridors that is sustainable, functional and attractive;
3. Promote the reuse and revitalization of existing commercial centers by incentivizing private investment activity;
4. Promote quality development in commercial corridors through project approval streamlining, flexible development standards, and a proactive design approach;
5. Encourage intensification of land use on (re)development opportunity sites and in areas appropriate for higher densities, and promote development in certain districts;
6. Ensure that all commercial projects within revitalization areas - such as streetscape improvements, new development, adaptive reuse and rehabilitation - meet standards for design quality, appropriate to the scale, scope, and location of the project; and
7. Create a consistent and transparent project review and permitting process to assist developers, community members, project planners, City staff, and the City Council.

Reinventing retail: Peninsula strip mall wants to add apartments. SGPA Architecture and Planning designed a 179-unit apartment building with 34,000 square feet of ground-floor retail for Kimco Realty Corp.’s Westlake Shopping Center in Daly City.

Nova Place: Reinventing a defunct mall as a high-tech hub. The design focuses on reinvigorating the public spaces to create a new identity and sense of place and re-establish severed connections to the surrounding city. Restoring the historic connection of Federal Street to Downtown as a pedestrian passage, and infusing common areas with restaurants and amenities will breathe new life into the place. It will also include a technology incubator to advance and promote the entrepreneurial community in Pittsburgh.
The following policies, strategies, programs, and initiatives are recommended to jumpstart the implementation of the Community Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) and create sustainable, long-term solutions for stimulating investment along the City’s commercial corridors and creating economic opportunities for local businesses and workers.

1. **Adopt a Clear Industry Focus**

Growing local industrial development capacity in the post-COVID economy is the City’s essential first step. Successful cities and counties will need to take a more aggressive role in supporting the ability of local businesses to innovate, adopt new technologies, even in traditional industry sectors, and improve performance and competitiveness. Local awareness and the capacity to adapt and perform will become the essential requisites of a post-COVID resilient economy. This will require necessary local government inputs, i.e. quality public education, formalized workforce training, targeted infrastructure improvements, regulatory relief, and financial assistance. These local government inputs will require continuous investment, attention, and enhancement to sustain industrial development capacity and competitiveness.

Identifying and focusing community economic development strategies on the growth of target-and advanced industry sectors and occupations will be crucial. The City of Fort Myers has a compact economy, and its growth potential isn’t unlimited. Promoting industries with higher-skilled, higher paying jobs is important to creating economic opportunities for local businesses and workers and sustain the City’s overall quality of life. The growth of jobs in the City’s most competitive, higher-skilled industries provides:

1. greater spin-off with economic multipliers,
2. more opportunities for upward mobility,
3. support for the growth of other service jobs,
4. a higher return on investment of public and private dollars,
5. a more efficient allocation of public resources, and
6. better resistance from cyclical economic swings.

Based on the findings from the City of Fort Myers’ Competitive Assessment, the City should focus on expanding growth and capacity in the following industry sectors: 1) Target Industries, 2) Advanced Industry Sector, and 3) Manufacturing Sector.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Industries</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>City of Fort Myers</th>
<th>Jobs</th>
<th>Wages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management, Scientific, and Technical Consulting Services</td>
<td>3,081</td>
<td>$80,556</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architectural, Engineering, and Related Services</td>
<td>1,808</td>
<td>$64,628</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Systems Design and Related Services</td>
<td>1,024</td>
<td>$70,328</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical and Diagnostic Laboratories</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>$101,464</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric Power Generation, Transmission and Distribution</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>$118,176</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific Research and Development Services</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>$81,370</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Equipment and Supplies Manufacturing</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>$64,287</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Processing, Hosting, and Related Services</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>$97,660</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Emsi Inc.
A measure of Fort Myers’ economic strengths, opportunities, and growth potential is the presence of businesses included in the Advanced Industries Sector. The Brookings Institution, among others, has developed the concept and extensive analysis of what it has termed the U.S. Advanced Industries Sector. Brookings has identified 50 industries across manufacturing, energy, and services that may be critical in the development of regional economies. The analysis has sparked broad thinking regarding the development of these key sectors as an important way to improve American global economic competitiveness, lead the nation’s economic revitalization, build on regional economic strengths, create new employment post-recession, and provide acutely needed high-skill, high paying employment opportunities.

The Greater Fort Myers area has a high proportion of business firms and establishments in the Advanced Industries Sector. The area is home to 584 Advanced Industry establishments and firms providing 9,639 jobs, or 5.4 percent of the area’s jobs. The five largest detailed Advanced Industries by number of jobs are: Management, Scientific, and Technical Consulting Services; Architectural, Engineering, and Related Services; Computer Systems Design and Related Services; Medical and Diagnostic Laboratories; and Wired and Wireless Telecommunications Carriers. These top five Advanced Industries provide 7,267 jobs and 75.4 percent of Advanced Industries employment. The Sector has almost $1.6 Billion in local sales which is 12.5 percent of overall sales in 2019. Fort Myers and Lee County have a growing potential as a leading, high-concentration Florida location for the Advanced Industry Sector, especially in the services area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>City of Fort Myers</th>
<th>Lee County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>Wages</td>
<td>Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management, Scientific, and Technical Consulting Services</td>
<td>3,081</td>
<td>$80,556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architectural, Engineering, and Related Services</td>
<td>1,805</td>
<td>$64,630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Systems Design and Related Services</td>
<td>1,534</td>
<td>$70,325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical and Diagnostic Laboratories</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>$101,464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cement and Concrete Product Manufacturing</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>$53,608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric Power Generation, Transmission and Distribution</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>$118,174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other General Purpose Machinery Manufacturing</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>$61,787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific Research and Development Services</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>$81,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Miscellaneous Manufacturing</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>$40,439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Processing, Hosting, and Related Services</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>$97,660</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Emsi, Inc.
According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, real manufacturing output hit record highs in recent quarters pre-COVID and is 75 percent higher than it was 25 years ago. U.S. manufacturing output and productivity has been increasing while becoming more capital intensive and much less labor intensive. Small and mid-size manufacturers (SMMs) manufacturing continued to be a critical sector. There is projected growth potential of smaller, distributed factories with accompanying ecosystems that serve regional markets.

A number of manufacturing industry groups are expected to grow in the 2020 decade. According to IBISWorld, U.S. Medical Equipment and Supplies manufacturing is expected to see a strong surge in demand from medical care providers and consumers. Flexibility has emerged as a key competitive aspect among today’s manufacturers. Manufacturing flexibility is generally construed as the ability of the manufacturers to respond effectively to changes in the environment. Manufacturing flexibility will become a necessity in the post-COVID economy. As opposed to the rigidities of mass manufacturing with dedicated machinery and standardized products, flexible manufacturing will become a key strategy for efficiently improving market responsiveness in the face of uncertain future product demand. Medical and electronic manufacturers are the most active in this area.

The Competitive Assessment highlighted the growth of the manufacturing sector in the U.S. and the industrial development and growth opportunities for the City given the presence of an existing manufacturing base. Currently, there are 322 manufacturing establishments in the Fort Myers/Lee County area employing 4,569 workers. The manufacturing base consists of 27 industry groups producing a range of products.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAICS</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Establishments</th>
<th>Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3231</td>
<td>Printing and Related Support Activities</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3399</td>
<td>Other Miscellaneous Manufacturing</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3323</td>
<td>Architectural and Structural Metals Manufacturing</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3273</td>
<td>Cement and Concrete Product Manufacturing</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3311</td>
<td>Household and Institutional Furniture and Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturing</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3391</td>
<td>Medical Equipment and Supplies Manufacturing</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3149</td>
<td>Other Textile Product Mills</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3121</td>
<td>Beverage Manufacturing</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3339</td>
<td>Other General Purpose Machinery Manufacturing</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3327</td>
<td>Machine Shops, Turned Product, and Screw, Nut, and Bolt Manufacturing</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fort Myers/Lee County: Top Ten Manufacturing Industry Groups

Manufacturing, as a targeted sector, will require a heightened level of local industrial development planning and management. It would also require a far more active role for economic development professionals as successful manufacturing can only be achieved through formalized private-public partnerships that comprehend the many aspects of the organization of production, including supply chains, facility planning, logistics, technologies, capital investment, job training and institutional support.

Technology is reducing the space needs of manufacturers, and impacting supply chains and location choices, empowering the return of manufacturing to urban areas, known as the industrial urbanism movement. Manufacturing processes are lower impact and cleaner than ever before which reduces the need to isolate them in industrial zoning districts. The trend is toward smaller manufacturing facilities in major population centers. Creative land use and zoning, business support tailored to the needs of manufacturers, cluster development, local branding efforts, and apprenticeship programs are some examples of strategies that will support and grow the sector.

The City of Fort Myers will need to partner with local manufacturers and institutions to ensure the diffusion of technology and the benefits it can bring. Essential to this effort will be worker upskilling. With 62 percent of existing occupations automatable, training and preparing workers for these changes is the essential first step in building a resilient post-COVID local economy that is also inclusive and equitable.

2. Focus on Small-Firm Growth

To support the competitive needs and growth of the Commercial Corridor Target Areas, small businesses should be a clear strategic priority. Small businesses are the City’s most important source of employment, one of its clear competitive advantages and draws on a clear regional strength. Policies to support small businesses focus on helping them compete in large markets and against larger firms. In most cases this takes the form of supporting the economies of scale (business services, technical expertise, financing, labor, and access to supply chains) that large firms have inherently.

Access to capital is the greatest barrier to economic opportunity and growth among minority small businesses including contractor businesses and the self-employed. The City of Fort Myers, working with a collaborative of investors can remove this barrier, by developing an alternative strategy and sources of capital to serve under-served communities and businesses along the major commercial corridors. The focus will be on new and existing microbusinesses.

The CEDS small business strategy will require the creation of the necessary “intermediary infrastructure” to jumpstart financial lending activity along the corridors. The intermediary can be an existing organization or agency providing small business financing products or a new small business lending centrally located in the study area. The intermediary will coordinate its lending activities with existing community lenders. The community-based intermediary will perform the following functions:

- Manage an “economic opportunity mobilization fund” to provide local businesses lines of credit and other forms of start-up capital;
- Provide a platform for matching small businesses with grants and capital including on-line matching services, lender referrals, and loan products; and
- Oversee an “impact measurement and management system” for assessing the social impact of community investments. Impact investing can play a central role in realizing the vision of the commercial corridors by setting and raising the standards for investment practice and generating the tools and data that allow investors to evaluate impact and channel capital to the most effective solutions.
3. Create a Tailored and Formalized Workforce Development Initiative

Workforce development and training must be focused on industry sectors, occupations, and technologies that provide the greatest opportunities for local workers. Programs must be tailored to specific learning and skill sets and offered at the neighborhood level for easy access. Apprenticeships and internships for Fort Myers high school students should be formalized and aligned with target and advanced industries and manufacturing skills to build a talent pipeline.

Local governments, educational institutions and workforce development organizations must break free from traditional approaches to workforce development to accelerate workforce development in a more strategic and coordinated approach. A more innovative community economic development workforce education and training initiative would include:

► Working with local target and advanced industries and manufacturers, design a workforce education and worker training model that can meet the rapidly evolving needs in the post-COVID-19 economy. By directing support toward programs that are aligned with industry needs and have achieved proven results, the City can also provide incentives for educators and trainers and hold them more accountable;

► Create an integrated, system-wide inventory and assessment of agencies involved in workforce development. Workforce agencies and teams can then reinforce one another’s impact by creating a set of cross-cutting goals, supporting initiatives, and funding. This approach begins to break down silos while concentrating funding on a smaller set of priorities;

► Provide support to career shifts, while funding for ancillary support such as child care, transportation, and tuition to help workers to pursue new skill sets; and

► Establish concrete goals for economic development, education (primary, secondary, and postsecondary education), human services, and workforce-development agencies, in many states, workforce development agencies’ strategies and goals are not always complementary or mutually beneficial.

► Develop a local Manufacturing Skill Standards Council (MSSC) training certification program. MSSC is the nation’s leading industry-led training, assessment and certification organization focused on the core technical competencies needed by the nation’s frontline production and material handling workers. MSSC certifications offer both entry-level and incumbent workers the opportunity to demonstrate that they have acquired the knowledge and skills increasingly needed in the technology-intensive advanced manufacturing and logistics jobs of the 21st century.

MSSC is a Founding Partner in the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM)-endorsed Skills Certification System, which has endorsed both Certified Production Technician (CPT) and Certified Logistics Technician (CLT). CPT and CLT are the only national industry certifications, for both manufacturing and logistics, accredited under ISO 17024 (personnel certification) and endorsed by the National Association of Manufacturers.

The many benefits potentially available to companies using MSSC credentials as a hiring preference include decreasing recruitment costs, eliminating remedial training costs, providing a diagnostic tool to benchmark incumbent workers against a national standard and attracting, motivating, and retaining qualified employees.
The City of Fort Myers is well-positioned to host new business accelerator development given the growth of small businesses throughout Lee County. The development of effective, sustainable and profitable business accelerators is difficult and increasingly competitive. The business accelerator industry has become extremely sophisticated and populated by firms and investors with extensive business development and investment expertise. Business accelerators function most effectively when they 1) focus on a limited set of industry specializations, 2) focus on industries with quantifiable local strengths, and 3) are developed and run by experienced operators.

It is critically important to match accelerator programs and internal capabilities to local economic sector strengths. The City of Fort Myers has proven to be a desirable business location. Lee County is also home to significant local entrepreneurial talent with the potential to create a myriad of new and expanding business opportunities in the Commercial Corridor Target Areas. The City should establish a network of business accelerators focused on serving local entrepreneurs and social impact entrepreneurs. Though developing a small network of accelerators may require an initial seed investment or subsidy, the continued costs of operation would be a completely private expense.

Fort Myers’ target and advanced industries and manufacturing sector should be the focus of an accelerator system. Focusing on new businesses either entering or serving these industry sectors will increase the growth and survival rate of companies “graduating” from accelerator programs while providing the services, technologies and innovation for both new and existing businesses. Most accelerators are privately owned, although public and non-profit accelerators are growing. Unlike incubators, accelerator clients are usually paid a seed investment for which the accelerator receives equity. Average seed investment in U.S. accelerators is $22,000. Incubators and accelerators work with firms at either one or all of the early stages of business development and funding. Accelerators can have a sector and/or geographic focus, or support enterprise development across sectors or locations.

Accelerators (and incubators) provide a mixed basket of services, including:

- Expert mentorship;
- Financial support including direct investment funding and/or grants;
- Access to potential investors;
- Infrastructure support (office space, shared back-office services);
- Marketing and brand development;
- Access to an established network of partners and customers (Accelerator Networks), sometimes through formal partnership agreements with impact investors, commercial investors, foundations, governments, and universities;
- Business skills development;
- Technology training and assistance; and
- Post program support, including business performance metrics and evaluation for incubator graduates. Services can last between one and six months post-graduation, up to the life of the graduating enterprise.

Accelerators earn income through a variety of vehicles, including entrepreneur fees, consulting contracts, returns from investment, “success fees” from investment, and philanthropic and grant support. Accelerators provide three primary business development functions:

- By providing support services, mentoring, and education, incubators and accelerators exist to help improve the odds of success for startups, as well as their business longevity. Bloomberg estimates that 80% of all businesses fail in the first 18 months, and 55% of all businesses fail within five years;
- Accelerators are designed to speed up the funding cycle and growth rates of their client companies, helping them achieve significant funding and staffing faster than they would if left on their own;
- By combining services and infrastructure in one...
location, they both are designed to deliver services that obtained separately, are difficult and costly for young businesses; and

► Accelerators help build a more efficient venture capital and business investment market. Well run operations network with hundreds of potential investors, providing efficiency for both companies seeking investors and investors seeking opportunities.

5. **Support Active Workshifting Strategies**

The patterns of retail, office and industrial development have been undergoing rapid and fundamental change across the U.S., and Fort Myers is no exception to these trends. On the demand side, the expansion and development of new commercial space is no longer tied to traditional growth of population and employment. On the supply side, the inventory of available commercial space to accommodate economic expansion is considerably less than it has been in modern industrial history.

Detailed analysis of where residents of the City work and where businesses are located indicate that Fort Myers is exemplary of the deep changes occurring in how we work, where we work, and who we work for. Based on the Competitive Assessment too many working residents of City commute to work outside the City Limits each day exacerbating traffic congestion, degrading quality of life and the environment. According to the US Census Bureau’s Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) data, there is a significant mismatch between the jobs located within the Fort Myers’ Trade Area and where employed residents actually work. The inflow/outflow analysis found that only 26.1 percent of resident workers in Fort Myers actually work in the City limits and 58,004 jobs within the City are filled by workers who live outside and commute into the City each day.

The practice of employers moving workers out of a central office on a daily basis and either structuring telecommuting or moving satellite offices closer to where their employees actually live is known as workshifting. Workshifting and telecommuting are a hybrid of workplace and office cost reduction, land use and transportation strategies to not just move workers into mass transit, but quantifiably reduce the number of commuter trips workers need to make for work each week. Co-working, shared home office, and off-site office space are playing a rapidly growing role in the future of the workplace.

Workshifting is gaining ground across many U.S. cities, particularly in South Florida, as a way to reduce commute times, take commuters off the road, reduce traffic volume and increase worker productivity by reducing or eliminating travel times. Telecommuting has the potential to save employers $10,000 per employee per year due to increased productivity, reduced real estate and facility costs, and reduced turnover. Other benefits include reduced driving cost and time savings for
employees, energy savings, reduced congestion and environmental benefits to the society. Flexible work arrangements are also essential to attract and retain the new generation of labor force.

Given the high percentage of residents who commute in and out of Fort Myers, supporting workshifting or adopting formal workshifting incentive programs could have high appeal. A workshifting program is a combination of strategies including the following:

► Develop targeted marketing program to large employers about the benefits of workshifting to Fort Myers, focusing on occupations and industries making the most use of telecommuting, home work, and home business formation;

► Create incentive programs that encourage employers to develop and implement telecommuting programs that allow employees to work remotely instead of commute to the central office daily;

► Revise local zoning through density bonuses or parking relief to incentivize small office and co-working spaces, especially the City’s existing malls and small retail plazas;

► Develop financial grants or incentives for the development of co-working space;

► Develop, and provide grants to access affordable ultra-high-speed internet connectivity, especially for small businesses.

5. Develop Affordable Housing Strategies Based on Local Demand

Creating a greater mix of housing types along the City’s commercial corridors and surrounding neighborhoods will create a balanced and competitive housing market and a network of livable neighborhoods and districts. Livable neighborhood strategies can be transformative by providing residents access to life, work, and play.

What makes a neighborhood truly livable are the two important qualities of access and convenience. Fort Myers, as a livable community and potential employment hub, is also well-positioned to provide a mix of desirable housing options for its workers.

No single type of housing can serve the varied needs of today’s diverse households. Smart growth represents an opportunity for local communities to increase housing choice not only by modifying land-use patterns on newly developed land, but also by increasing housing supply in existing neighborhoods and on land served by existing infrastructure. Integrating single- and multi-family structures in new housing developments can support a more diverse population and allow more equitable distribution of households of all income levels. The addition of units – through attached housing, accessory units, or conversion to multi-family dwellings – to existing neighborhoods creates opportunities for communities to slowly increase density without radically changing the landscape.

A competitive and equitable housing market will augment Fort Myers’ economic development position in Southwest Florida by offering young and older working professionals a range of housing choices and opportunities. Providing quality housing for people of all income levels is an integral component in any smart growth strategy. Housing is a critical part of the way communities grow, because it constitutes a significant share of new construction and development. More importantly, housing availability is also a key factor in determining households’ access to jobs, transportation, and access to health services and education. By using smart growth approaches to create a wider range of housing choices, communities can mitigate the environmental costs of auto-dependent development, use their infrastructure resources more efficiently, ensure a better jobs-housing balance, and generate a strong foundation of support for neighborhood transit stops, commercial centers, and other
services.

Major demographic, economic, and development trends are impacting the demand for, and future value of, Fort Myers’ housing supply. Strong demand for the area as a place to live has continued to move housing values upward. The City of Fort Myers will need to develop a healthy mix of safe, decent and affordable housing for low- and moderate-income households; produce high-quality living environments and promote the preservation of stable residential and mixed-use neighborhoods. From both an economic and livability standpoint, the City can offer a spectrum of choices within this market framework and hold a distinct competitiveness against other Florida Gulf Coast communities, while providing real-wealth building opportunities for new and existing residents.

The City of Fort Myers’ Affordable/Workforce Housing Strategy should include the following elements:

1. Create a long-term funding source for affordable housing development leveraging federal, state and local funding sources;
2. Raise skill levels, wages, and incomes of residents to deal with changes in the local housing market and upward pressures on purchase costs and rents;
3. Integrate affordable housing development with land use and transportation planning and policies, i.e. equitable transit oriented development (ETOD), mixed-use/mixed-income development; and
4. Support live-work rental development which is currently in short supply in most markets.

“Infill development is smart growth, and done well, has broad benefits for everyone in the neighborhood.” (Kodi Hutchins AIA/CAST architecture)

In partnership with the City of West Palm Beach, Neighborhood Renaissance constructed and sold five 3 & 4BR homes in Pleasant City to low-income homebuyers. These were the first single-family owner occupied homes to be built in Pleasant City in over a decade.
1. A skilled trade contractor on-site job training, mentorship and licensing and certification assistance program to expand the pool of local skilled trades contractors;

2. Offering housing incentives to entrepreneurs and business owners who create a minimum of three new full-time jobs that pay salaries above the median income. Assistance could be in the form of home purchase assistance (grants, low interest loans, down payment assistance, etc.), or rental assistance through a community’s affordable housing agency or through a separate rental assistance program. A unique program such as this would be a powerful incentive to both local entrepreneurs and those from outside the region. Incentives could also be provided to business owners and entrepreneurs in select, targeted, preferred industries and occupations; and

3. Develop new business incubators and accelerators offering short-term rental program assistance to entrepreneurs entering the incubator/accelerator program. Upon graduation, entrepreneurs who successfully obtain venture capital funding and provide employment for three full-time new jobs above the City’s median income would be eligible for the long-term business and entrepreneur rental and homeownership programs detailed above. Paring housing support with new business formation can be especially important to new small ventures, as the founder typically must choose between reinvesting revenues from a new company instead of paying him/herself an income. Providing lower-cost housing alternatives would be an interesting way to launch a small entrepreneurial hub for a wide range of new ventures.

4. Provide land use and zoning incentives

Implementation of the City of Fort Myers Community Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) will require land use and zoning incentives are in place that promote (re)development activity along the commercial corridors. The statement and intent of the land use and zoning strategy should include language that encourages the inclusion of specific land uses the community considers desirable, such as retail stores, entertainment, live-work space, affordable housing, day care and open space.

A “smart growth” approach along the commercial corridors would focus on expanding the retail and business mix along the corridors and increasing the diversity of businesses. Suburban-style commercial strip malls need to be constrained and mixed-use development encouraged. Site design standards for mixed-use development at commercial intersections are critical for establishing both the aesthetic and functional appeal. The vision for the long-term is a vibrant and culturally diverse area with residential densities and commercial intensities that are consistent.
Land use and zoning should be used as a (re)development incentive for each of the Commercial Corridor Target Areas including special area plans (SAPs) and infill development. Special area plans can be an effective tool for acquisition of key parcels in targeted locations along the major commercial corridors. Special area plans (SAPs) are designed to encourage the assembly (5-10 acres minimum) and master planning of abutting parcels. SAPs provide greater integration of public and private improvements and infrastructure, better enable thoroughfare connectivity and to encourage a variety of building heights, massing and streetscape design, and high-quality design elements. SAPs provide an incentive for developers by offering significant increases in housing densities. In turn, the city can require a reasonable portion of units be set aside for affordable/workforce housing, or that a contribution be made to a fund for affordable/workforce housing.

The area within an SAP should be designed to address the City’s challenge of lot depth and compatibility with surrounding lower density residential neighborhoods. A potential SAP would have higher densities and building heights along the major commercial corridors with densities and intensities gradually decreasing toward the edges of the abutting lower density residential neighborhoods.

Enhancing the City’s existing Infill Development Program to create the most efficient and effective tool for the acquisition and disposition of small vacant parcel that could be assembled for scattered-site housing development. This could be a viable program for small, no-profit developers who may not have the staffing and organizational capacity to manage a property acquisition and disposition program.

An enhanced infill development program can expand upon scattered-site residential infill. The program should provide residential densities high enough to support commercial and retail uses along the City’s commercial corridors as well as a wider variety of convenience services and amenities. It can return cultural, social, recreational and entertainment opportunities, gathering places, and vitality to older sections of the commercial corridors and neighborhoods.
Commercial corridors provide many benefits to the City, as a whole, and to the surrounding neighborhoods. Corridors can either connect or separate residential neighborhoods, and they can add to a sense of community pride as corridors serve as gateways into the city for visitors and residents and help establish the City’s image.

Once revitalized, commercial corridors can offer an array of services, shopping, dining, cultural, and entertainment opportunities for residents the City and adjacent neighborhoods. Transportation options — whether walking, driving, or using mass transit — are also a critical element of commercial corridors. To protect and enhance the beneficial qualities of the commercial corridors, the City should adopt design standards that reflect a vision for the corridors in keeping with the purpose and intent of the Community Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). These standards should include:

- General guidelines for commercial and mixed-use building footprints, height, and architectural features;
- Streetscape design guidelines applicable specific commercial corridor locations, e.g. pedestrian lights, detached sidewalks, and street trees;
- Enhance each corridor’s traditional street oriented development patterns, setbacks, and build-to lines, provide a consistent edge to the public street and sidewalk space in order to provide pedestrian scale and access and to encourage pedestrian-oriented activity;
- Provide visual interest and human scale through the use of prominent windows and operable entries at the street-facing facades, and through architectural variation, including form, materials, detail, and color;
- Provide convenient pedestrian access from the public right-of-way to the project and utilize pedestrian-friendly site and building design;
- Minimize the presence of parking areas and parking structures along the corridor edge to limit the conflicts with desired pedestrian activity and negative visual and noise impacts of parked autos on the corridor;
- Design and install “gateway” improvements to help brand the commercial corridor and welcome visitors to the City; and
- Incorporate signs that are readily visible to motorists and pedestrians and that are complementary to the character of the corridor and individual building architecture.

The major urban design project reimagines the city’s iconic Miracle Mile and Giralda Avenue corridors. Coral Gables, FL.

“The City of Clovis has reported that Shaw Avenue is experiencing one of the biggest growth spurts since the late 1980s.”

Conceptual Rendering: City of Vancouver launches planning process to densify the Broadway Corridor.
10. **Adopt a Multi-Point Marketing Strategy**

The City of Fort Myers needs to broadcast its qualities to regional and national markets. It is most likely that many outsiders are unaware of the City’s economic dynamism and size. As such, the City should develop a multi-point marketing program designed to achieve three goals:

- Drive new investment and innovation by Fort Myers’ existing and businesses;
- Drive new investment from outside business owners and investors; and
- Better connecting and networking of Fort Myers’ businesses with one another and businesses outside the City to drive innovation, grow sales, and improve supply chains.

11. **Adopt Sustainable Economic Growth Metrics**

Building local capacity and competitiveness in the post-COVID economy will require elevated standards of professionalism and performance metrics. Adapting and regularly monitoring clear performance metrics is a feature of all good governments. However, adopting new performance metrics within a post-COVID economic framework will necessitate shifting local economic development policies and strategies away from traditional measures performance, i.e., number of jobs, construction square footage, tax revenues, to measures that stress job quality, innovation, technology transfer and a targeted and formalized accounting of worker re-skilling. With these competencies in place, local governments will have the capacity to create entrepreneurial environments that will support and inspire industrial development.

Therefore, it is recommended the City of Fort Myers adopt a new set of community and economic metrics to guide and inform future policy and program development. The City’s “Adopted Policy Metrics” would measure local community and economic conditions across three overarching dimensions:

- A focus on the “quality” of jobs created: implementing strategies that support the growth of high-wage, high-skill, high-income jobs;
- Growing local incomes: improving the incomes of resident workers and households by providing a steady growing supply of quality jobs, and opportunities to grow training, education and skills to compete for those jobs; and
- Creation of community-based projects and programs that directly benefit minority-owned businesses and workers.
The Adopted Policy Metrics Dashboard would collect at a minimum the following economic statistics, updated according to the indicated time frequency:
► Population and business growth along the commercial corridors and surrounding neighborhoods by race, ethnicity, age group, and household income (annual);
► New business establishment and employment growth within the corridors of opportunity by industry sector and occupation, including target clusters, industries and niche sectors (bi-annual);
► Median wages by industry and occupation compared to Lee County and U.S. (annual);
► Median household income by distribution and year-over-year performance (annual);
► Employment, labor participation and unemployment rate (quarterly);
► Educational attainment and age group population trends, especially in the young and mid-worker age segments (20-44, and 45-55 years old, annually);
► City poverty rate (annual);
► City 95-20 ratio (annual);
► Increase in tax revenue (quarterly);
► Measuring return on investment from public expenditures in the City (monetary and non-monetary, including job creation, bi-annual);
► Number of affordable and workforce housing units by location and bedroom distribution;
► Reduction in worker commute times; and
► Land values, specifically identifying underperforming properties, high crime and distressed properties (bi-annual).

The advantages of adopting, maintaining and applying these metrics are as follows:
1. Adopting and maintaining a different set of metrics as the basis for and measurement of success of the City’s policies and strategies; meet local challenges and build on local strengths cited in the Competitive Assessment; and determine the impacts on local businesses and workers;
2. Focusing on the quality of jobs ensures greater upward economic mobility for those at the bottom as higher paying jobs generate greater economic multipliers (local spending and supporting secondary jobs) than low-wage jobs, and an employment base built on higher-skilled jobs is much more resistant to economic downturns;
3. Clearly setting policy expectations and guidelines that manage economic population and growth in a region undergoing unprecedented overall growth and development;
4. Providing a marketing tool to attract investment emphasizing the City’s performance management focus and capabilities.