

# Executive Summary

The City of St. Marys, in Camden County, Georgia, is situated along the St. Marys River, which marks the boundary between Georgia and Florida. St. Marys was originally founded as a Spanish colony in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century and served as a seaport during the pre and post-colonial days. The City now looks to redefine its character and future after losing its major industrial employer in 2002 and seeing its housing boom deflate in the great recession of 2008. St. Marys seeks to retain its small-town charm while fostering a vibrant economy that embraces technology, clean industry, tourism, and service-oriented business.

St. Marys was once the home of the Gilman Paper Company that manufactured paper products for consumer and industrial markets. It is now the home of the U.S. Naval Base Kings Bay (SUBASE Kings Bay), as well as the gateway to Cumberland Island National Seashore. It has a historic district as well as many newly-built homes fronting on creeks and rivers that lead to the St. Marys River and the Intracoastal Waterway. The City of St. Marys has struggled to fill the void left by the closing of the paper mill despite efforts by community, civic and business leaders to do so over the last ten years.

In preparation for the forthcoming update to the Camden County Joint Comprehensive Plan, the Mayor and City Council decided that it was time to create a City-specific Master Plan. In 2015, the City appointed a Master Plan Steering Committee (MPSC) and ordered the MPSC and the City's consultants to present a new Master Plan along with a new zoning code before June 30, 2017. This Master Plan is the culmination of that effort.

During its first six months of work, the MPSC engaged in significant community outreach. The MPSC received over 600 responses to its online survey, met with almost 80 community leaders for in-depth interviews, conducted focus groups with citizens along with several workshops related to community character areas and transportation, and gave presentations to community groups. It also conducted a traffic study to identify needed changes to the transportation network to safely accommodate the current populations as well as projected growth.

During the second six months of work, the MPSC concentrated on evaluating research data and interview notes taken during the first six months as well as looking at transportation issues with the consultant tasked with conducting that study. There were several publicly attended mapping sessions and those efforts produced a new character map for the City. A MPSC sub-committee created a special report related to bicycle, walking, golf cart and waterway trails connected to the City.

The public outreach yielded consistent results. Of those people who answered the survey, 45% had lived in St. Marys for more than ten years. While just over 70% of those responding was over the age of fifty, residents between 18 and 50 answered the survey as well. Irrespective of age, gender, race or background, there was general agreement about the most important priorities for the City.

- ⇒ St. Marys should improve the downtown area and its waterfront to include more restaurants, docks and shopping.
- ⇒ St. Marys should foster development of the old Gillman Paper Company Mill Site.
- ⇒ St. Marys should support living-wage employment opportunities.

⇒ St. Marys needs to keep its small-town ambiance.

⇒ St. Marys needs more cultural, recreational and entertainment activities.

Other priorities and goals identified through the community engagement process included: streamlining city processes for permits and licenses to foster a more business-friendly community; improving store fronts, creating a better tourist experience, developing the Gateway property, providing for pedestrian walkways, bicycle lanes and golf cart lanes, expanding public transportation options for those without automobiles, preparing for sea level rise and conserving natural resources

From those findings and the MPSC's SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis, the MPSC was able to focus on a vision and a set of values around which to construct a new Master Plan. The vision statement below and its supporting values are fully set forth in Chapter 1 of the Master Plan.

**One St. Marys. One Vision. One Future.**

We are a vibrant, welcoming and friendly coastal community where our residents play an essential role in our success;

We cherish our environment, our heritage and our role as the Gateway to Cumberland Island National Park;

We proudly support our nation's security by maintaining a strong relationship with the military forces who are our neighbors;

We believe that all residents should have access to a safe neighborhood, job opportunities, quality education, and community services;

We envision a resilient community with a thriving and diverse economy, mobility, and recreational and cultural activities for all citizens;

**We are One St. Marys.**

With a vision, a set of values and a firm set of goals and principles in place, the MPSC developed a ten-year Community Work Program (CWP) for sound economic expansion, infrastructure improvements and aesthetic changes that will revitalize the downtown and the business corridor from midtown to downtown and result in a more attractive, livable and prosperous community.

By design, the CWP proposes an ambitious schedule of projects over the next ten years. The most important goals for the first three years of the plan are twofold: 1) improve city processes to handle increased business activity and possible residential growth, and 2) focus on economic development. It is imperative that significant progress be realized in developing the mill and the airport sites as well as strengthening the corridor from midtown to downtown as a precursor to many of the longer-term goals in the CWP. Annexation of the unincorporated islands in the City and the area west of the City to Exit 1 on I-95 should be seriously pursued to guide future development and to improve the City's financial bottom-line and customer experience as it relates to City services.

The transportation and mobility needs of many of the City's residents are unfulfilled by the current arrangement with Coastal Regional Coaches (CRC). Many residents who do not have private automobiles need regular public transit service for medical, employment and shopping needs. The Master Plan suggests that the City undertake an immediate review of how it can individually or in cooperation with Kingsland, Woodbine and Camden County address transportation mobility by CRC or through other public or public/private opportunities to alleviate the pressing need for reliable and affordable scheduled transportation services.

In the long term, St. Marys' most significant feature is its downtown waterfront area and its ability to provide access to the Atlantic Ocean, the Intracoastal Waterway and Cumberland Island National Seashore. Cumberland Island receives over 60,000 visitors each year, virtually all of whom use the ferry service from the dock in downtown St. Marys. Leveraging these assets, the CWP identifies action items that can be implemented by the City of St. Marys to offer significant opportunities for visitors and recreational boaters along the east coast. The Master Plan seeks to expand the opportunities for businesses and hospitality vendors to serve the maritime, camping and recreational interests of those who visit St. Marys. The work done by the MPSC on reviewing bicycle and hiking trails and developing guidelines for road sharing and safe streets dovetails with the long-term opportunity to develop the waterfront to allow safe and memorable experiences for residents and visitors alike.

St. Marys offers a warm and inviting ambiance to visitors and residents alike. With sixty percent of its residents under the age of forty, St. Marys provides an educated and employer-ready pool of talent. The City is fortunate to benefit from one of the best school systems in the country and is looking forward to the permanent establishment of a technical college in the adjacent City of Kingsland. This Master Plan comes at a pivotal moment for the City where the opportunity to expand the business and commercial base coincides with a market for residential revitalization and growth. As noted in the Values statement in this Master Plan, we value our people and our small-town atmosphere, which, more than anything else, makes St. Marys a perfect place to live and work.