

# Better Bay County Plan 2002-2022



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Gulf Coast Community College  
Citizen Leadership Institute



## **BETTER BAY COUNTY PLAN** **2002-2022**

The Better Bay County Plan reflects the heart and purpose of this project...to focus on the diverse voices of all the citizens of Bay County and to allow their voices to be heard through a comprehensive statement of vision.

The 1997 vision process made great strides toward moving Bay County forward in a focused positive direction.

In 2001, the Citizen Leadership Institute was asked to refine and re-invigorate the 1997 vision.

In January 2002, the first of four town meetings took place.

With an intent to keep the locations neutral and easily assessable to the public, on January 19, 2002, the first town meeting was held simultaneously at:

**Arnold High School**  
**Bay High School**  
**Mosley High School**  
**Rutherford High School**  
**and Gulf Coast Community College**

The vision process was carried to the people and into their neighborhoods.

The objective of town meeting one was to revisit the interests reflected in the 1997 document and to discover if any new priorities had developed over the course of time.

To accomplish this, moderators asked citizens the following questions:

1. What makes Bay County a livable place?
2. Where do you see Bay County twenty years from now?
3. What would you suggest to make Bay County better?
4. If a visitor came here in twenty years, what would you want them to see?
5. Do all of these ideas voiced here tonight, enhance these characteristics that make Bay County a livable place?
6. Do more need to be added/deleted?

These questions allowed citizens to think freely without being led in any particular direction by the moderators.

In addition, citizens voiced their desire to have access through the internet to information regarding the Better Bay County Plan. Subsequently, steps were taken to immediately begin the process of development and implementing the [www.bayvision.info](http://www.bayvision.info) web page.

At the suggestion of the CLI team, the majority of the planning team agreed that the remaining town meetings should be held exclusively at Gulf Coast Community College in an effort to bring citizens of the community together to address issues from a countywide perspective.

Town meeting two, held February 5, 2002, reported to citizens the work that had occurred concurrently at various sites during the night of town meeting one.

Following are the major themes that evolved as the work progressed:

CIVIC INVOLVEMENT  
 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
 EDUCATION  
 ENVIRONMENT  
 GOVERNMENT/SOCIAL SERVICES  
 HEALTH CARE  
 INFRASTRUCTURE  
 LEISURE SERVICES (consisting of recreational and cultural activities)

All of the previous topics remained with some new developments. Some of the interests shifted or were modified as to their intensity.

For instance; the majority of citizens believed that the Quality of Life category specified in the 1997 document could and should be applied to all areas of life in Bay County. Quality of Life, for example, was as much impacted by economic development as by environmental issues.

The work of town meeting three took on an added dimension as citizens broke into theme areas to identify the objectives relevant to that theme. They also revisited the 1997 document to compare the reflections and inputs of citizens in 2002 with those of the 1997 work.

The majority of citizens participated in two breakout sessions, each of which focused on a specific theme. In this manner they were able to satisfy their priority interests and maximize their contributions through participation.

Just as the concerns of the people of Bay County had evolved, so too the vision document itself began to take on a new shape and structure in the early stages.

In town meeting four, March 19, 2002, the citizens were given the eight theme areas with all of the objectives that had been brought forward for each category. Citizens then voted their priorities while a GCCC CLI team tabulated results, one category at a time. The challenging work of engaging in multiple, lengthy meetings, and arduous deliberation proved worthy. A refined statement of vision for the future of Bay County emerged. It reflects the dreams, ideals, and hopes for the quality of life the citizens of Bay County hold paramount for the place they call home.

Citizens of Bay County were unanimous in one thing; they agreed that Quality of Life incorporates every aspect of the community. From education to health care, infrastructure to

environmental issues, all contribute to overall well-being, prosperity, longevity, security, and peace of mind.

A community characterized by green spaces, clean air, abundance of fresh water, economic and educational opportunities, cultural programs, expert health care facilities, safe neighborhoods, fair government, and civic leadership is but a part of what citizens sought and incorporated into a Quality of Life statement.

Idealistic? Absolutely, but it is the capturing of the people's ideals, developing them into a working plan of action, then managing that plan to the fruition of that work, that best describes the purpose of the Better Bay County Plan.

During the fall of 2001, the Bay County Commission contracted with Vital Statistics, Dr. Gerald Doolittle, to conduct a phone survey of Bay County registered voters. The survey is titled "The 2001 Bay County Quality of Life Survey." The survey is based on 400 of the most recent, involved, voters of Bay County. Many of the questions asked on the survey emerged as perspectives made by citizens during the 2002 Visioning Town Meetings. Therefore, the 2001 Bay County Quality of Life Survey is incorporated in the 2002-2022 Better Bay County Plan. A copy of the complete 2001 Bay County Quality of Life Survey is on the projects web page [www.bayvision.info](http://www.bayvision.info).

A crucial portion of the work has been completed but another has only just begun. The initiative must now move forward with the objectives that have been established to secure endorsement of the Better Bay County Plan by the community at large.

For the Better Bay County Plan to become a reality, area businesses, clubs, individuals, and organizations must embrace it.

Citizens must cross the threshold of commitment, accept responsibility for the County's future, and take action to ensure it. To that end, citizens are encouraged to serve on task force committees representing each theme.

Committees will be tasked to design and implement plans of action to move forward so that objectives may be brought to fruition.

## **CIVIC INVOLVEMENT**

### **Vision Statement:**

*We acknowledge an enduring commitment to our community, and we embrace our roles as engaged citizen stakeholders, who are responsible for maintaining and improving life in Bay County.*

It has been said that Bay County is one of the most giving communities in America. Perhaps, that is why the community stands ready to address its issues.

Whether it is volunteering or leadership, new program development or sustaining trusted alliances - our citizens want the county to maintain its small town atmosphere.

To accomplish this task, the community looked at elements that attributed to the Bay County “atmosphere.” In subsequent town meetings they created priorities that would keep these elements intact while the area grows in a positive direction.

High on this list of accomplishment was to develop and maintain open lines of communication among the citizens of Bay County.

In addition, personal responsibility, problem solving, promoting unity, and community building were topics of great concern addressed. As a result, they have become a high priority within the Civic Involvement theme.

One fact is certain; Bay County citizens are ready and willing to take the next step forward to make the difference where it counts the most - home.

### **Objectives:**

1. Encourage regular citizen dialog among all elements of the community.
2. Cultivate a powerful ethic of community volunteerism and local leadership, and encourage participation in community-binding organizations and institutions, such as churches, charitable groups, literacy programs, youth clubs and groups, neighborhood watch programs, among others.
3. Promote citizen awareness of the need for change, how to anticipate it, and how to deal with it constructively with regard to planning, problem-solving, and resources allocation.
4. Make efficient use of resources in support of targeted community groups, e.g., the elderly, retirement community residents, youth, disadvantaged families, as a way of better providing for those needs.
5. Embrace the community’s diversity, and ensure broad-based citizen input for the establishment of common ground.

6. Citizens support the Better Bay County Plan
7. Identify, celebrate, and promote Bay County’s “small town” atmosphere with its unique neighborhoods and communities, while redefining the larger community as Bay County and adopting a vision that is, therefore, broader, more unified, and more encompassing.
8. Maintain strong Leadership Bay and Junior Leadership Bay programs, and actively advance individuals in those programs in Bay County Leadership Bay, as well as other engaged citizen groups.
9. Utilize all media, including the Internet, e-mail, and newsgroups, to provide a comprehensive community calendar listing citizen forums and government-citizen dialogs, as well as other meetings and events, and to provide updates and progress reports on community initiatives, projects, and developments.
10. Nurture pride in Bay County by celebrating its qualities, features, and resources.

## **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

### **Vision Statement:**

*We seek long-term viability, diversity, and sustainability in the economy of Bay County, and using current research data, we will actively attract, support, and expand targeted industries and businesses by developing and maintaining a positive business environment.*

The lifeblood of a community relies to some degree on the ability of the next generation to provide for their families in a stable and promising financial environment.

Bay County recognizes that diversifying its economy is absolutely essential in order to offer a variety of opportunities for it’s graduating and returning young professionals thereby, keeping them as a contributing member of the community.

Professional wages in manufacturing, film and television industries, research and development, along with many others, are some of the examples that citizens see as crucial to the process of sustaining a financially sound community.

These thoughts originated in the 1997 Vision document and the work accomplished during the last five years is in part a result of the focus of that plan. Some examples of the results are:

Trane Expansion: 400 jobs  
 Nextel Partners: 600 jobs  
 Dynasty Technologies 40 jobs  
 Eastern Shipbuilding 70 jobs  
 Berg Pipe: 120 jobs  
 ARA: 50 jobs

In addition, the Small Business Development Center has continued to Flourish and the Business-to-Business support group function were developed by the Bay County Chamber of Commerce. Also, TDC developed a long-term marketing strategy and Eco-tourism and cultural programs were promoted.

The citizens of Bay County were creative in their scope, far-reaching in their possibilities, and positive with their tangible ideas to invigorate the economic side of our community.

**Objectives:**

1. Improve Bay County as an economically viable and attractive place to raise families.
2. Actively recruit businesses that would contribute to the prosperity and well being of Bay County.
3. Develop a diverse economy with professional-wage jobs in industry, manufacturing, film and television, advertising, computer technology, telecommunications, insurance, aerospace, research and development, export trade, and higher education, while continuing to develop military-related businesses and tourism, especially recreational tourism, cruise ship tourism, and eco-tourism.
4. Research successful economic development in communities similar to Bay County.
5. Maintain an educated, versatile, strong local workforce.
6. Develop methods to alleviate economic stresses on the working poor.
7. Encourage local development that recycles financial resources in our community.
8. Improve communications among businesses, local governments, and education-training institutions and create a climate of cooperation.
9. Reexamine local taxes for equitability and effectiveness, e.g., the bed tax.
10. Promote Bay County as a convention and conference destination.

## **EDUCATION**

### **Vision Statement:**

*We, the citizens of Bay County, will provide an accessible, high quality educational system for all people, with attention to the development of personal and fundamental skills leading to a well educated person who is prepared to enter the workforce and contribute to economic and civic life in our community.*

As was the case in 1997, Education emerged as a continuing, primary focus of the community. It was recognized as a cornerstone of quality of life. The collaborative work in fulfilling objectives of the 1997 document revealed how effective the power of visioning can be.

As a result of the 1997 work, 1.8 million dollars in grant funds were allocated for “GEAR UP,” and the program was actualized. The “Mentor Program” supplied over a hundred mentors from businesses, community leaders, and individuals to local schools to make a difference in the lives of others. With strong support of the citizens from the 1997 document, the ½ cent sales tax for school construction was passed and implemented. And among other items specific to concerns of citizens, charter schools, and vouchers became realities.

As always, the area of Education covers many areas from pre-kindergarten/early childhood issues to higher education, library services, and over-all lifelong learning programs in the community. Vocational education, job skills training, and the traditional role of educators were often listed as priorities to many citizens.

One thing is certain, education in Bay County will continue to be a primary concern and receive paramount attention.

### **Objectives:**

1. Research whether the level of funding commitment to the public school system is consistent with that of other similar counties; in addition, look at teacher and school employee salaries, employment benefits and incentives, school density issues, teacher-student ratios, and other features of interest in education.
2. Continue to improve, update, and rebuild existing facilities.
3. Enhance vocational education options, and increase student awareness of education, internship, and training alternatives; provide more school-to-work opportunities.
4. Develop formal mechanisms for business and education partnerships.
5. Increase graduation rates.
6. Address imbalances in funding and teacher-student ratios in special needs programs.
7. Support Gulf Coast Community College

8. Support Florida State University-Panama City Campus.
9. Eliminate illiteracy.
10. Encourage all education and training that leads to a highly trained and capable workforce.
11. Encourage strong parental and family involvement in the education of children, and start “skills-building” at an early age.
12. Increase and improve library services in the county and at public schools; investigate the need and usefulness of 24-hour library service, and investigate the use of existing airport space for a new centrally located library once the airport is moved.
13. Increase the use of paraprofessional for lower grades.
14. Support Gulf Coast Community College’s Environmental Education Center at Camp Helen State Park.
15. Change from an elected superintendent to an appointed superintendent.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

### **Vision Statement:**

*We will ensure that the environment in Bay County is protected and treasured so that our families and future generations can live safely and can enjoy the beauty and environmental richness of the area; in addition, we are committed to working to preserve the environment today to safeguard against loss of a priceless heritage tomorrow.*

From our natural streams and wetlands, from our pine tree forests and sandy beaches, Bay County is rich in ways that many communities are not.

Bay County’s natural resources carry a great responsibility for our citizens and decision makers. Our natural systems diversity and scope demand careful attention should be given to their protection and proper utilization.

The overwhelming response of citizens was to continue to address, incorporate, and reflect on the work that was accomplished in the 2002 vision process with the “Noah’s Ark” project being a primary topic of discussion and information.

The long-term implications of developing a more “eco” based economy that highlights local resources while simultaneously protecting them becomes a huge charge.

Local citizens recognize and treasure the rich resources of Bay County.

**Objectives:**

1. Set aside land for wetland, green space, wildlife habitat, and buffer zones; maintain ecological diversity, water quality and natural productivity of the St. Andrew Bay system by implementing the Emerald Ark-Noah's Ark proposal. The Emerald Ark-Noah's Ark proposal is attached. (pages 18-23)
2. Develop an understandable, simple, uniform through out all cities in the county comprehensive plan that results from great citizen involvement in the development process. The uniformity should include, but not limited to, air quality, water quality, and signage. The plan should recognize that environmental protection and economic development are both necessary to our communities.
3. Encourage the extension of sewage systems into areas primarily served by septic tanks.
4. Continue to beautify and landscape major thoroughfares.
5. Maintain and enforce the countywide sign ordinance, which has as a goal the enhancement of the natural beauty of Bay County.
6. Develop and implement a countywide litter control program, beginning with school and community education advertisements and teach-ins.
7. Research—and where necessary change—codes and ordinances where the environment is unduly damaged or harmed by them; review height and density restrictions.
8. Investigate mandatory garbage collection, and investigate an increase in recycling, with well-advertised drop-off points, community and neighborhood recycling, and curbside pickup.
9. Protect our beaches and seashores.
10. Prohibit infringement of current wetlands and wildlife habitats.
11. Encourage landscaping the uses native vegetation.
12. Promote the development of more marine parks and artificial reefs.

## **GOVERNMENT/SOCIAL SERVICES**

### **Vision Statement:**

*We will establish and maintain an effective Bay County government that is a steward of the public trust and that is responsive to the needs and desires of all citizens.*

Stewardship. Trust. Awareness.

These were some of the words used to describe what the community perceived as critical.

The people asked for more year-round community dialogues between citizens and decision makers.

Citizens voiced that trust in their decision makers was a high priority. They also recognized the need of affordable housing.

In addition, the public had great concerns that new developments would benefit the community.

Citizens also continued presenting their issues from the 1997

Vision document regarding their desires for additional research of the advantages and disadvantages of a consolidated, unified, and coordinated central government.

Although, citizens have a desire to be involved, repeatedly, they understood that some areas could only effectively be addressed through government resources. To that end, working collaboratively with decision makers is essential to accomplish these objectives.

### **Objectives:**

1. Investigate charter government for Bay County, and initiate a public discussion on the advantages and disadvantages; investigate a consolidated, unified, and coordinated government, with consistent, uniform laws and codes and centralized, efficient government facilities for all of Bay County.
2. Encourage and expect every branch of government in Bay County, as well as elected state and federal legislators, to adopt the Better Bay County Plan and to incorporate it into long range governmental planning.
3. Ensure affordable housing for all citizens, and reduce economic stresses on low-income families.
4. Plan for public access to the bay and other county waterways and in light of expected economic development in Bay County.
5. Continue to research demographic changes in Bay County so that we can plan for changes.

6. Build confidence and trust in elected government by sponsoring year-round citizenship functions where citizens and officials engage in dialogue.
7. Use prison labor in clean-up and beautification projects.
8. Expand affordable child-care services.
9. Investigate and, if deemed appropriate, encourage the formation of urban clusters within the county.
10. Require that government engage in land-use dialogue with all stakeholders, including large landowners like Arvida.
11. Ensure that all of Bay County receives proportionally equal services.
12. Decrease rates of child abuse and domestic violence.
13. Review tax rates for equitability and effectiveness.
14. In collaboration with Bay District Schools, ensure a safe zone generally around schools, and create safe walking and biking routes to and from schools.
15. Continue to encourage law enforcement training that results in the firm and fair upholding of our laws.
16. Enforce vagrancy laws, and investigate alternatives to homelessness.

## **HEALTH CARE**

### **Vision Statement:**

*We will provide healthy living conditions and accessible, affordable, efficient, and technologically advanced medical services for all citizens, without exception, always looking for ways to expand health care services to meet the changing needs of our community.*

With the aging of the “Baby Boomer” population, Healthcare evolved as a powerful new focus that citizens believe should stand alone. Accessibility to state-of-the-art medical facilities, provision of geriatric medicine and services, and expert medical treatment for everyone became priorities early in the process.

Many in the community already embraced the issue of Healthcare for the “working poor,” as well as across-the-board health care program development, such as low-cost health care insurance for small businesses.

Bay County is poised to make major positive developments in the health care arena.

**Objectives:**

1. Expand medical facilities to serve all of Bay County citizens and expand in areas of the county where growth is expected, including west of Hathaway Bridge.
2. Promote healthy lifestyles for all Bay County citizens.
3. Encourage small businesses and individuals to provide healthcare insurance.
4. Plan for an increasing demand for geriatric services.
5. Promote the development of an existing or new hospital as a research facility.
6. Adopt an education campaign to decrease unwed teen pregnancy.
7. Provide parenthood information as part of health education in middle school.
8. Promote easy-access healthcare for all children under eighteen years of age.
9. Promote the awareness of women's and men's health issues.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE**

**Vision Statement:**

*We will maintain and develop effective water, sewage, waste disposal, road, and bridge systems that assure our engagement in growth management and that promote economic development and preserve the environment, natural beauty, and quality of life.*

Citizens voiced multiple concerns regarding traffic and transportation and asked that the future planning be a large part of the infrastructure picture.

The 1997 Vision Plan had voiced the desire of citizens for better roads, with improved access to beaches. In the last five years the construction of a new Hathaway Bridge for Panama City Beach access and imminent four-laneing of major highways, such as Highway 98, Highway 79, and Highway 77, are examples of infrastructure planning with subsequent implementation.

Citizens view these works in progress as evidence that their concerns regarding congestion in heavily trafficked areas, coordination of street lights, safety of the highways, and accessibility to international travel will be equally as seriously address. Such progress also underscores the credibility of the visioning process.

**Objectives:**

1. Develop a long-term plan for infrastructure alterations and improvements that acknowledges community values concerning traffic density, road expansion, traffic control, air transportation, rail transportation, water drainage, wastewater disposal, code licensing, building height restrictions, and public utilities.
2. Maintain and, if possible, expand a viable public transportation system that serves the needs of all citizens.
3. Improve the quality of roads and traffic flow.
4. Plan for areas where encouraged growth density requires more infrastructure and, conversely, for areas where growth density is not desirable and thus less infrastructure is required.
5. Promote a new international airport that will improve the economic viability of air transportation to and from Bay County.
6. Coordinate new and existing infrastructure plans with development goals of large landowning stakeholders.
7. Provide public parking and access to beaches and other public spaces.
8. Continue to improve our disaster and hurricane evacuation plans, including publicizing those plans.
9. Coordinate our plans for infrastructure developments with that of neighboring counties.

**Leisure Services**

**Vision Statement:**

*We will ensure that all new and existing public leisure facilities for recreation and cultural programs are family-centered, affordable, accessible for citizens of all ages, and are efficiently used, thereby promoting the health and well-being of citizens throughout Bay County and preserving parts of our natural environment.*

Just as Bay County residents value the environment and other theme areas, they appreciate the natural resources and support the pursuit of cultural activities.

The originality and extent of citizens' input on the subject of Leisure Services is both surprising and invigorating.

Citizens want to see the preservation of "green spaces", which will ensure the recreational activities they find important are provided on a long-term basis. Such recreational activities include natural habitats, horse trails, and bike paths to name a few.

Leisure Services advocates also recognized the correlation between environmental and business themes (ecotourism) with the promotion of artificial reefs, sports complexes, and more cultural activities related to museums and educational programming.

With the inclusion of the vision piece from proponents of Leisure Services, citizens of Bay County can be assured that the elements which provide us with a full, measured and balanced life always will be available for generations to follow.

**Objectives:**

1. Plan and develop a wide range of recreational facilities and resources for every age group and for people of different abilities, resources that include, but are not limited to, artificial reefs, green spaces, natural habitats, leash-free parks for pets, a community swimming pool, a skateboarding and skating park, historical sites, museums, sports complexes, and trails for pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians.
2. Provide a large multipurpose complex with easy access and ample parking for events as diverse as large animal shows, boat shows, car shows, triathlon staging, and music and dramatic performances.
3. Expand and promote art and cultural activities and events; research and apply for appropriate public funding for art and culture projects.
4. Preserve historical sites in light of expected economic development in the area.

The end.

The citizens of Bay County have spoken.