

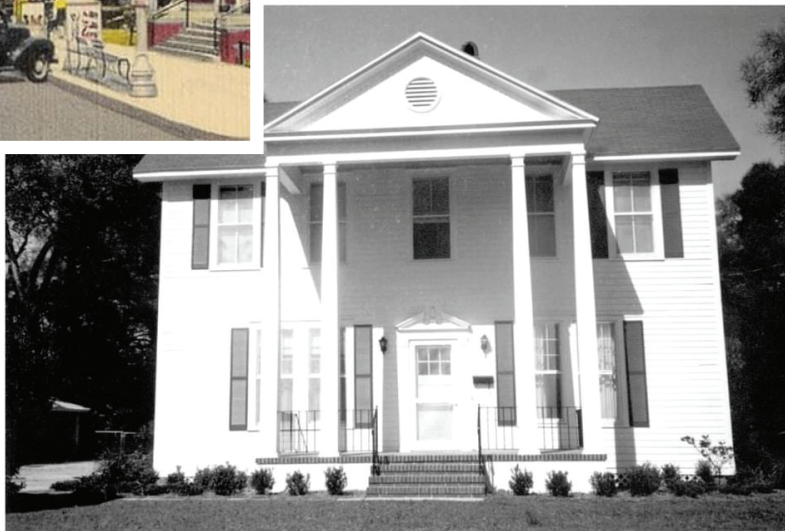
People gather in a dining hall
at Stetson University.

DeLand Wins Award for Digital History Tour



◀ Postcard looks west on Indiana Avenue toward the historic Athens Theatre, with the post office on the right.

▶ The Kilkoff House, built in 1878, is one of the oldest homes in the DeLand area.



By Chris Graham
City of DeLand

The **City of DeLand**, like other cities across Florida, has seen monumental growth in the past decade. As the City has grown, the public has become increasingly concerned about growth, development and maintaining the City’s small-town charm.

DeLand has a rich heritage. It was founded in 1876 and incorporated as a city six years later. DeLand is home to three nationally registered historic districts. Preserving the City’s history is so important that it is a guiding principle in the City’s strategic plan.

As the City was revising its strategic plan, it conducted a survey. The survey asked residents whether they agreed with preserving DeLand’s sense of community, which included the City’s historical assets; 89% of respondents agreed.

The Planning Department asked the City’s Public Information Officer to craft a campaign to help raise awareness of

the City’s historical assets and remind residents that much of the City’s rich history remains. The City targeted May, which is National Historic Preservation Month, to launch the campaign.

PLANNING TO CELEBRATE HISTORICAL ASSETS

The City’s research looked at how other communities celebrate historical assets. One way that caught the City leaders’ interest was to create a history tour. Historical societies often offer these tours for a charge. City leaders considered that many of the City’s historical assets are within a mile or so radius of each other. The tour option made the most sense because the City was presenting this initiative not only to residents, who value the City’s history and activities associated with it, but to visitors. The most cost-effective way to do this tour was to create a map on Google Maps. Not only was such a map free, but



▲ Poster highlights many sites included on the historic tour.

Cities Can Replicate Digital Tours to Show Appreciation For History

The digital history tour created by the **City of DeLand** could easily be replicated by other municipalities, particularly ones facing radical growth and residents who are concerned about maintaining their city's historical significance.

The comprehensive digital history tour was done at no cost to the City other than staff time, which was minimal.

Not only does the tour provide an educational resource for residents, but it can be used by out-of-towners who want to visit significant historical and cultural sites. A digital history tour map can be repurposed in future years if a city wishes to add more sites.

people using the map could navigate to each site using their phone.

The City's strategy was to use traditional and digital media to reach the target audience. Tactics included a news release to traditional media outlets, posters in areas with high foot traffic and social media posts on the City's platforms.

IMPLEMENTATION OF HISTORY TOUR

The City's Community Information team began working with the Planning Department to identify places of significance and gather background on those locations. Twenty-two sites were identified, as well as four historic districts.

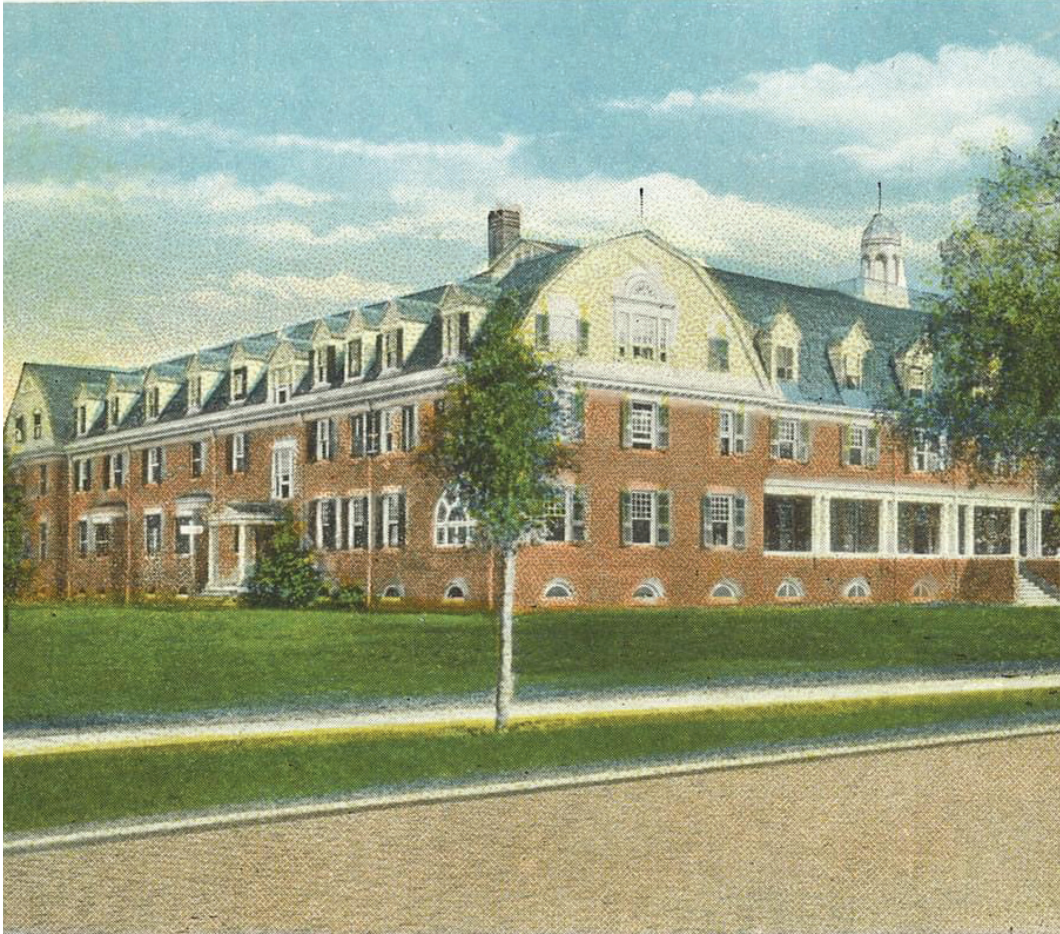
The City adopted an official slogan for the campaign,

"Remembering our past, preserving our future," that was printed on some of the literature.

The City leaders decided to create two maps. The first one allowed people to navigate site-to-site via Google Maps and move at their own pace. The other version was created through Google Earth, which allowed users to view each site via their computer or mobile device. Each location had a brief description of the site's history.

Graphics were created for social media. The graphics featured AI artistic renderings of each site; identified the site, its historic architecture, the year built and a short background; and directed people to the digital historic tour map. A news release was sent to regional media outlets.

Throughout May, social media posts were made via Facebook and Instagram that highlighted sites on the




◀ Chaudoin Hall, Girls Dormitory, Stetson University.

digital history tour. The City also printed flyers with a QR code that linked passers-by downtown to the digital historic tour map.

The City received 5,000 views on the digital historic tour map in May. That number has since climbed to nearly 8,000 views. Twenty-four posts were made on the City’s Facebook page, which reached 206,766 people.

The campaign generated many positive responses from the community. Some reflected on their childhood being spent in some of the featured locations.

For its efforts, the City has been awarded the Florida Municipal Achievement Award for Public Engagement.

Chris Graham is the Community Information Manager for the City of DeLand. 



City of DeLand Wins Florida Municipal Achievement Award

The **City of DeLand** recently received the **Florida League of Cities** Florida Municipal Achievement Award for Public Engagement. The award focuses on a city program that builds a more vital, participative community. The program must develop civic awareness, increase education and knowledge of local government functions or promote active participation among residents, businesses and visitors.



The Oakland Nature Preserve
has a classroom-sized pavilion
on Lake Apopka.

Oakland Awarded For Nature Preserve

By Andy Stewart
Town of Oakland



◀ The Town of Oakland received the Florida Municipal Achievement Award for Environmental Stewardship.

One of the best ways to protect the environment is to promote environmental education and create stewards of all ages engaged in protecting the environment. The **Oakland Nature Preserve (ONP)** in the **Town of Oakland** does just that by inspiring and educating visitors.

The Nature Preserve encompasses about 150 acres of land. It includes a boardwalk to Lake Apopka with a classroom-sized pavilion on the lakefront, as well as a pavilion on a trail. The Preserve also has the Jim Thomas Environmental Education Center that includes a classroom, museum, library and live fish and turtle exhibits.

“The Oakland Nature Preserve is an oasis that not only enriches our Town’s natural beauty but also provides a tangible connection to its past to showcase old Florida,” said **Mayor Shane Taylor**. “ONP provides education and an understanding of Florida’s ecosystem.”

In 2023, about 40,000 guests visited the Preserve, which makes it the largest draw to the Town. The Town was honored with the Florida Municipal Achievement Award for Environmental Stewardship by the **Florida League of Cities**.

The Preserve is host to area schools. These schools have accounted for well over 1,000 student days (days multiplied by number of students) when Preserve staff provided hands-on science and environmental education.

The Preserve has a dedicated education committee that has developed curricula to meet the state science standards in grades K-5. In 2022-2023, the **Oakland Avenue Charter School** was ranked among the top four schools in **Orange County** in scores for the Science Sunshine State Standards test.

The Preserve offers a homeschool series for ages 6-16, provides monthly story time for ages 2-5 and sends staff members for school visits upon request. It hosts six weeks of

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▲ The Preserve includes a boardwalk to Lake Apopka.

summer camps. The Preserve also provides scout troops with a location to work on badges and has hosted Eagle Scout projects and a Girl Scout Bronze project. It partnered with a local foundation to administer the Youth Climate Project. That project challenges high school seniors to learn about the role climate change will play in Florida's future and consider innovative ways to resolve its effects. Also, seven scholarship recipients in 2023 received \$20,000 in scholarship funds from the Preserve.

For adults, the Preserve hosts the Florida Master Naturalist Program with the **University of Florida**. This program is an adult certification program with 45 participants. The Preserve also holds blue hikes, which are group kayak trips, and firefly hikes.

Special events at the Preserve draw thousands yearly. The Nature Fest Wildlife Festival provides the opportunity to meet with members of the environmental community. Nature Fest lets participants join in guided hikes and interact with animals that commonly live in Florida's ecosystems.

"The family-friendly events that ONP sponsors allow visitors to connect and engage with nature," Taylor said. "Firefly walks, the Pumpkin Glow Jack-O'-Lantern Trail and Earth Day celebrations are just a few events that showcase what ONP has to offer."

The Pumpkin Glow Trail takes place annually around Halloween. Walking trails are lined with jack-o'-lanterns carved by members of the community. The pumpkins create an ethereal and beautiful nighttime hike.

The Town and other community partners fund the Preserve. The Town contributes more than \$100,000 annually for its operation. The Preserve represents the largest undeveloped tract



Cities Can Replicate Environmental Education

Other Florida cities can learn from the **Town of Oakland** about efforts to protect the environment by promoting environmental education and creating environmental stewards of all ages. The Oakland Nature Preserve (ONP) is a highlight of the Town's efforts.

"Environmental education is the key to ONP's success," said **Mayor Shane Taylor**. "It provides the visitor with knowledge to carry forward so they can try to implement what they have learned and adapt it to their communities."

The Preserve is a 150-acre sanctuary committed to environmental education, conservation and restoration. With its diverse ecosystems and engaging programs, it lets visitors connect with nature and learn about the importance of environmental stewardship. The Preserve has planted over 4,000 native trees as well as upland grasses.

The Preserve offers recreational and educational opportunities in an outdoor classroom to teach about Florida's ecology and spark interest in environmental protection. The Town's initiative is meant to ensure that its natural beauty and surroundings are preserved for future generations.

Oakland aims to be a model for other municipalities. For more information on the Preserve, visit oaklandnaturepreserve.wildapricot.org.



▲ Summer camps are held at the Preserve.

of land in the Town, and its environmental education and outreach programs are predicted to benefit the community as residential development increases.

The growth of programs for all ages, science scores for the Oakland Avenue Charter School students, active volunteers and visitors show that the Preserve is succeeding in its goals of engagement and education.

Taylor said, "The Oakland Nature Preserve is truly a 'hidden gem' and makes the Town of Oakland a better place to live, work and play!"

Andy Stewart is the Town Manager for the Town of Oakland. [QC](#)



Oakland Wins a Florida Municipal Achievement Award

The **Town of Oakland** recently received the Florida Municipal Achievement Award for Environmental Stewardship from the Florida League of Cities. The Environmental Stewardship award recognizes a city program that promotes environmental sustainability, improves and protects environmental conditions or provides environmental education and outreach programs within a city.



City staff hosted open houses to discuss the need for attainable housing and the proposed density bonus programs.

Sarasota Housing Program Awarded

By Steven Cover
City of Sarasota

Since 2021, the **City of Sarasota** has been working to implement a density bonus program to incentivize the private development of attainable housing units citywide in downtown and along commercial corridors and commercial centers.

So far, there have been five development applications that have come in proposing to use the attainable housing incentive to construct a total of 107 attainable housing units citywide. The **Florida League of Cities** selected Sarasota as the winner of the 2024 Florida Municipal Achievement Award for Local Action.

The City has experienced an affordable housing crisis that was amplified following the coronavirus pandemic. In January 2021, the **North Port-Sarasota-Bradenton Metropolitan Statistical Area** experienced the largest rental rate increase in the country, with a 44.3% increase compared to 2020. Based on data from surveys conducted by the **Sarasota Chamber of Commerce**, attainable/workforce housing (for residents making 60-120% of the area median income) was identified as a clear need within the community. The North Port-Sarasota-Bradenton area rent spike is no. 2 in the nation and increased by 54.8% over the past three years, according to a 2024 article in the Sarasota Herald-Tribune.

“The City of Sarasota has seen a significant increase in the need for affordable housing over the last few years,” said **Mayor Liz Alpert**. “Many young professionals and members of the local workforce are finding it increasingly difficult to find affordable housing near their places of work, resulting in long commutes for workers and difficulties in hiring for local businesses.”

In 2023, the **Sarasota City Commission** adopted the downtown attainable housing density program. The goal of the Commission has been to incentivize private sector developers to construct on-site attainable housing units.

This effort has been accomplished through Comprehensive Plan Amendments and subsequent Zoning Text Amendments to implement attainable housing incentives citywide. In 2024, the City Commission approved a second attainable housing density program that will incentivize the creation of private mixed-use development and require housing for a mix of incomes along the major commercial corridors and commercial centers. It has been a city goal to incentivize transit-oriented development by locating more compact development in the downtown area and along commercial areas.



▲ Briana Dobbs, Chief Planner, received input from residents at the East Sarasota Open House.

Density Bonus Program Can Be Replicated

While density bonus percentages and regulations are city-specific, the fundamental elements of the **City of Sarasota's** attainable housing density bonus program can be used in other cities and provide the foundation for implementation of a housing program.

The simplicity of the attainable housing density bonus program was intentional for developers to easily understand and take advantage of the program and as a model in translating the policy to other municipalities. Other developers have shown interest in using the density bonus program, including a city-initiated proposal to construct approximately 192 attainable housing units downtown.



IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES

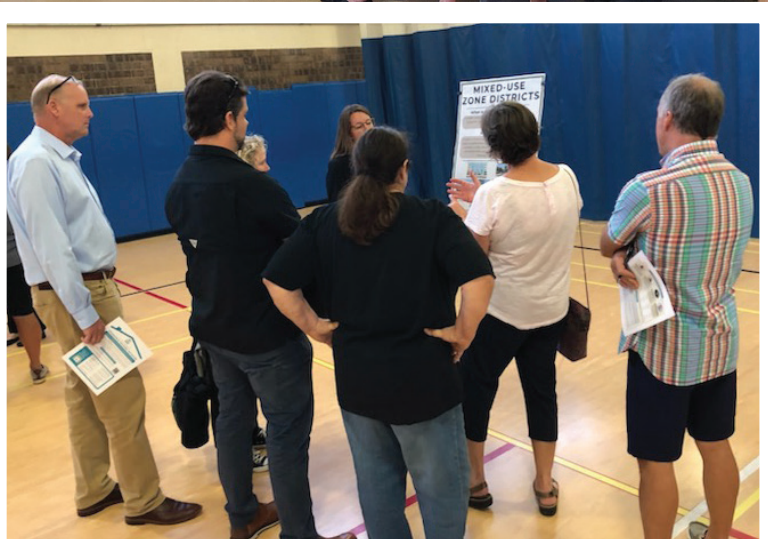
A combination of outreach efforts, multi-jurisdictional communication and research culminated in the final attainable housing density bonus program that has been implemented downtown and in the proposed Urban Mixed-Use zone districts. (See details in article, p. 25.)

The program's success is measured by the increase in the number of attainable housing units provided by the private sector. Since the program's adoption, four projects have been formally submitted that are proposing to use the incentive. The three formal development applications under review will result in about 90 attainable units downtown. Other developers have shown interest in using the density bonus program, including a City-initiated proposal to construct approximately 192 attainable housing units downtown.

State law includes requirements that a local government must fully offset all costs to a developer when requiring a private development to provide a certain amount of affordable housing. Sarasota's program addresses this requirement. The City's program requires the developer to provide a mix of attainable household incomes, allows for rental or owner-occupied attainable housing units and considers the compatibility of the development to the surrounding area.

"The Attainable Housing Density Bonus Program will benefit the entire community of Sarasota and, most importantly, provide opportunities for attainable housing within the City," Alpert said.

Steven Cover is the Director of Planning for the City of Sarasota. [QC](#)



▲ Education and community engagement were keys to the success of the programs.



Sarasota Wins Florida Municipal Achievement Award

The **City of Sarasota** recently received the **Florida League of Cities Florida Municipal Achievement Award for Local Action**.

The award is given to a city for a specific, single citywide effort that successfully addresses a local need.

City Density Bonus Program Timeline

2021

The **Sarasota City Commission** directed Planning Department staff to draft Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Code revisions pertaining to attainable housing incentives.

From 2021 to the present, outreach was conducted to facilitate community input and support across a diversity of stakeholder groups and educate the public on the proposed attainable housing incentive program. Outreach included:

- ▶ Presentations
- ▶ Town halls
- ▶ Open houses
- ▶ Neighborhood association meetings
- ▶ Virtual input sessions
- ▶ Coordination with the **Sarasota Chamber of Commerce**, business groups and developer groups

The City also communicated with other local jurisdictions across Florida that are using attainable housing incentive programs. It also reviewed recommendations from Sarasota’s Affordable Housing Advisory Committee and Sarasota’s Blueprint for Workforce Housing Action Plan.

2022

The City Commission approved 11 ordinances associated with a Comprehensive Plan Amendment to promote the private development of attainable housing citywide. These amendments allow for the following:

- ▶ A predictable approval process via administrative review for developments using the attainable housing density bonus program
- ▶ A density bonus of up to four times the base density when attainable housing is provided on-site
- ▶ A new Urban Mixed-Use Future Land Use classification
- ▶ An ability to achieve an attainable housing density bonus of up to three times the base density of the Urban Mixed-Use Future Land Use classification

2023

The City Commission unanimously approved a Zoning Text Amendment providing an attainable housing density bonus program for specified downtown zone districts.

The program requires that at least 15% of the bonus units above the base density for a development must be attainable to households earning 120% of the Area Median Income (AMI) and below for a minimum of 30 years. The bonus units must be provided on-site.

2024

A second Zoning Text Amendment was approved by the City Commission to create three Urban Mixed-Use zone districts along the commercial corridors.

The districts offer the ability to achieve a density bonus of up to three times the base density of the Future Land Use classification and an option to receive a height bonus of one or two stories, depending on the zone district, in exchange for on-site attainable housing. This amendment proposes a similar attainable housing density bonus and incorporates specifications regarding development requirements for a mix of attainable incomes, affordability, monitoring and design standards to promote compatibility.



St. Cloud Recognized For Economic Assistance Program

By Antranette Forbes
City of St. Cloud

Traditionally, economic developers are focused on creating jobs, strengthening the tax base and improving quality of life through the recruitment and retention of new and existing businesses. But what happens when that plan is tested by a global pandemic, infrastructure project delays and a lulling economy? Many businesses in the **City of St. Cloud's** downtown business community were facing closure.

In response, St. Cloud offered an innovative, multi-layered suite of financial and technical assistance programs for downtown businesses. The Downtown Economic Gardening Program has been awarded the Florida Municipal Achievement Award for Economic Advancement by the **Florida League of Cities**. The Program also won the 2024 Excellence in Economic Development Award (Bronze) for Business Retention and Expansion from the **International Economic Development Council**.

The program was launched to support small and midsize businesses by providing resources to assist in business continuity and sustainability while they were plagued with a lack of sales. The program offered

\$190,000 in assistance, including grants, technical support, fee waivers and marketplace information.

The cultivation of entrepreneurs into small business enterprises that enhance economic growth and sustainability has been the goal of the City for five years. The business community is primarily (99%) made up of small businesses. Of those, 32% are home-based. Many of those home-based businesses look to the downtown monthly market as an avenue to showcase their products and services. Several businesses have expanded from their homes into the downtown footprint.

In 2022, the City embarked on its second phase of the Downtown Revitalization Project along Pennsylvania Avenue from Ninth to 13th Streets. The project scope included new underground utilities, brick paver streets, landscaping, decorative lighting and sidewalk furniture. They anticipated eight months of construction. Due to project delays, the original proposed timeline was extended through the busy holiday shopping season and the first quarter of 2023. Businesses were seeing declines in sales, residents were avoiding the construction zone, and business owners were frustrated.

◀ (Top) Construction crew breaks ground on St. Cloud's downtown streetscape project. (Bottom) Downtown's newly revitalized streetscape.

▶ FLORIDA CITIES



▲ Customers could purchase \$10 downtown shopping vouchers for \$5.

Economic Gardening Program Adaptable to Other Cities

Projects such as the Economic Gardening Program can be duplicated in other communities.

This program is a prime example of how to conduct a team approach for target marketing and maximize resource allocation with assets that are in a city's portfolio. Collaborative efforts using existing resources can reduce costs and will increase the return on investment to the communities being served.

ECONOMIC GARDENING PROGRAM INITIATED

The City's Economic Development Department initiated the Economic Gardening Program. The City focused on local businesses hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic that were facing closure or tasked with drastically reconfiguring operations, as well as new businesses that were just getting on their feet before the crisis hit. The initiatives included grant programs for small businesses and nonprofits, fee waivers for City services, and resources providing technical support and marketplace information. The objective was to create several layers of temporary financial and technical assistance for local businesses to have business continuity.

Economic gardening is an entrepreneurial approach to economic development that promotes companies growing from within your own community structure. It embraces the idea that entrepreneurs drive economies. As the St. Cloud downtown business community consists solely of entrepreneurs, strategies such as gaining access to competitive intelligence, developing new markets and refining business models are at the core of the program's foundation.

The City's strategies concentrated on helping local entrepreneurs overcome obstacles that stunt their business growth and development — not just during construction but into the future. The programs were provided at no cost to the businesses.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS OFFERED

The City provided the following four programs that offered financial assistance:

- ▶ **Cloud Cash.** With a \$100,000 grant from the City, **St. Cloud Main Street** provided its Cloud Cash program. Customers purchased \$10 vouchers on the Main Street website for just \$5 to spend downtown. With the City using a grant to cover the additional \$5 value on the voucher, merchants accepted the vouchers just like cash and earned the full \$10 value on each purchase. The program helped bring customers back to the downtown area, with more than 50 merchants participating in Cloud Cash. All of the vouchers were purchased in two weeks.
- ▶ **Utility assistance.** The utility assistance program provided financial assistance to small and large commercial utility clients who were in good standing before the construction. The City, through its partnership with the local utility providers, made \$35,000 in direct payments to customers' accounts.
- ▶ **Marketing grants.** St. Cloud allocated \$50,000 in grants for marketing to its downtown businesses. The City provided grants of up to \$1,000 each to help those businesses that were impacted by the ongoing construction. The funds were to be used to promote each company and could be used for items such as pay-per-clicks, radio and television spots and print media.
- ▶ **Shuttle and parking.** The City provided complimentary parking via a lease agreement with a local church for the use of their lot during non-service hours. Also, the City provided a free shuttle service on weekdays and special event days. The shuttle was an 11-passenger vehicle with the "St. Cloud Downtown Shuttle" digitally featured on the upper front window. It circulated around downtown and offered several stops. The shuttle service was provided for 10 weeks.



◀ Eryn Russell (right), Member Services Administrator at the Florida League of Cities, presents the Florida Municipal Achievement Award to the St. Cloud City Council and staff.

CITY ADDS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Through a partnership with the University of Central Florida Business Incubator Program, the City offered technical assistance training.

The GrowthWheel pilot program offered one-on-one coaching sessions. The sessions were designed to create and implement economic sustainability and resiliency measures to better position participating businesses for business continuity, preparedness and long-term economic growth. One participant expanded into an additional location.

SUCCESS CAN BE MEASURED

From 2020 to 2023, the total number of downtown businesses within a 1-mile radius increased from 608 to 679, and the total number of employees jumped from 4,324 to 5,091. Retail and hospitality/food service increased by 14%. All programs combined resulted in a 21% increase in total annual consumer spending within a 1-mile radius and 28% within a 5-mile radius, as reported by CoStar, a platform for commercial real estate analysis.

The number of consumers increased, too, as evidenced by the increase in traffic.

The primary piece that makes this program innovative is the creative use of various funding sources in non-traditional uses. Funds from multiple resources, including the City’s general fund, Community Development Block Grant and tax increment fund, were combined and harnessed to create powerful resources.

In the past five years, St. Cloud has experienced many hurdles that included not only the pandemic and construction delays but also supply chain reliability and Hurricane Ian disaster recovery. The City has excelled through these challenges due to its commitment to the businesses and their resiliency, according to **Mayor Nathan Blackwell**.

“With each obstacle, the City has been proactive and intentional about creating programs that not only stabilize but, more importantly, stimulate new economic activity,” Blackwell said. “We are committed to our community – residents and our businesses. It’s that commitment which bred the Economic Gardening Program.”

Antranette Forbes is the Economic Development Director for the City of St. Cloud. [QC](#)



City of St. Cloud Wins Florida Municipal Achievement Award

The City of St. Cloud recently received the Florida League of Cities Florida Municipal Achievement Award for Economic Advancement.

This award focuses on a city program that supports, highlights or partners with a city’s local business community to improve the economic well-being of a city.