

NEW URBAN NEWS – NOVEMBER 2005



PORT REDEVELOPMENT OFFERS NEW URBAN OPPORTUNITY

Port Royal is just a small town in South Carolina, but from a new urban perspective, it's a town with a golden opportunity and with the right attitude and tools. The opportunity is a state-owned strip of land of 40-plus acres with over a mile of waterfront on one side and the town's historic core on the other. Soon the land — associated with the port, which is shutting operations — will be sold for development that will transform the municipality of 4,000. The tools and attitude come from nearly a decade of growth guided by a new urban plan and zoning overlay. Port Royal's plan was one of the first to be recognized as a success story by the Congress for the New Urbanism.

"It was an uphill battle overturning the Euclidean [zoning] mindset back in 1995 and 1997," when the plan and zoning overlay by Victor Dover were approved, says Port Royal Planning Administrator Linda Bridges. The 245-acre plan and overlay applied to a historic area with a preexisting urban block and street system and zoning that permitted mixed use. The plan added streetscape and architectural regulations and addressed issues such as the placement of parking; it has dramatically shaped new development in the town, Bridges says.

"There's a perception that development is improving the town, rather than detracting from it," she says. "They probably didn't know it, but the citizens have been living with [principles of New Urbanism] for the last decade and it has become second nature to them," Bridges observes. "So when it came time to develop the port property in 2004, we were already ahead of the game."

The closing of the town's port was brought on by its lack of competitiveness with nearby Charleston. The current zoning of the port land, split between limited industrial and single-family residential with lots of 12,500 square feet, does not facilitate the kind of development that the town would like to see, says Bridges. So last year the town's Redevelopment Commission sought a planner to create a vision that would be in place when the property was sold. The commission interviewed candidates based on their experience with traditional neighborhood development, among other qualities. Design Collective of Baltimore was chosen, and a charrette was conducted in July.

GOALS IN LINE WITH URBAN PRINCIPALS

The planners were delighted to find the town's goals aligned, even before the charrette, with common-sense urban principles. "People wanted to make sure that the grid is extended to the water, so that there is a physical and visual connection to the waterfront," says Matt D'Amico, principal with Design Collective. "Once you land on that idea, everything else is easy to figure out." Another significant concern on the part of business owners along Paris Avenue, the town's main street, was to prevent the commercial energy of the town from shifting to the waterfront. "We created a square on the water at the end of Paris Avenue surrounded by a hotel and shops that would keep the energy at Paris Avenue," he says. "They were totally supportive of that idea."

