

Forging a More Resilient Working Waterfront

Stephen Deal



Beach community in Gulf Shores, Alabama.

As real estate development increases within the nation's coastal communities as a result of tourism, it is easy to overlook the shrimping boats and other smaller fishing vessels that once defined life on the coast. While global shipping and seaport activity continues in America's major coastal cities, the large container ships and modern shipping operations sometimes are incompatible with the smaller fishing enterprises. This leaves the coastal planners caught among the pressures brought on by burgeoning coastal development, the continued expansion of seaports brought on by global trade demands, and the needs of more modest fishing operations. Working waterfront planning, including waterfront lands, waterfront infrastructure, and the waterways used for water-dependent activities, is the answer. By taking additional measures to outline and plan for the needs of private fisherman, seafood processors, and other working waterfront users, cities can support the local economy while assisting the small business owners who depend on the waterfront for a living.

Designate a Working Waterfront District

One component of good working waterfront planning is defining the scope and parameters of a city district that can suitably serve as a receiving area for new or existing working

waterfront activities. Arguably the best regulatory vehicle that exists for this type of planning challenge is an overlay district. An overlay district, or zone, may be defined as a special zone figuratively placed over an existing zoning designation or a combination of zoning designations used for the same area.¹ These type of policy apparatuses are typically used in areas that have a strong, shared cultural identity, such as a historic district, or in places that are defined heavily by a unique activity or enterprise, such as the presence of an airport.

A prime example of using overlay districts to delineate and demarcate working waterfront activities occurs in the City of Gulf Shores, Alabama, where city officials, in conjunction with staff from Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant, implemented a waterfront village overlay. The Waterfront Village overlay district encourages the growth of seafood processing and other traditional maritime uses while allowing other development compatible with mixed use. One concept employed has been a transect zone that is tailored to the unique circumstances of the neighborhood in question.² While a more conventional zoning code would focus primarily on suitable land uses and setbacks, a transect code goes one step further by governing specific aspects of the building's physical form, such as the range of housing types that can be

employed and how the building frontage is to be organized.³ In Gulf Shores, the use of transect zoning allows the district to program different uses and development activities by setting five categories of land uses: waterfront commercial, neighborhood commercial, neighborhood general, green space, and special district. Although many of these categories are not uncommon in transect-based plans, what's notable in the Gulf Shores overlay plan is the presence of a waterfront commercial category.

The waterfront commercial category benefits seafood industry activities by explicitly carving out a space for waterfront commercial activities within the overlay's district land use regulating plan. Waterfront commercial activities would include many of the businesses and operations typically associated with existing working waterfronts such as boat hauling and repair facilities, seafood markets and commercial fishing facilities. Additionally, the urban pattern established by the zone, which includes ground level businesses with residential lodging and offices above, not only provides a strong foundation for mixed-use development to thrive, but will also allow the community to grow in a way that doesn't overwhelm the commercial activities of local fishermen.

Another positive feature of the overlay zone is that it makes water access a use that is allowable by right. This means that potential developers and business owners are not subject to special review and approval by the city of Gulf Shores if they wish to undertake improvements that expand waterfront access to the general public. Such a measure helps expedite the development review process and also functions as an incentive for private businesses to invest in waterfront access points. This level of policy guidance and detail to the waterway village concept is due, in large part, to the overlay district concept, which allows for a greater level of guidance and precision than what is authorized under the basic city zoning code. By implementing an overlay, Gulf Shores not only tailors its zoning categories to meet the demands of a specific district, but it can also provide directives on how the district is to perform and be phased-in as well.

Building Support Capacity for Local Seafood

Once a suitable planning method has been found for working waterfront development, the challenge shifts from being a land use planning question to more of an economic development question: how does the city build additional support capacity for local seafood processors and fishermen?

A zoning plan can sort and distribute real estate value and signal to developers locations where the city will encourage new investment. But zoning by itself can't create value where it doesn't already exist. To build a critical mass of activity in an economic sector, even one with as rich of a history as seafood production, a city needs to be willing to make concrete investments in its infrastructure and workforce in order to attain a threshold or tipping point where an industry can regularly sustain itself over time. A great example of building economic value within the seafood industry occurs in coastal Louisiana, where the Twin Parish Port District, which governs the port for the small town of Delcambre, has taken many notable strides in supporting its seafood processing industry.

The Twin Parish Port District, working through the port of Delcambre, has been actively engaged in improving the marketing and publicity for the local catch. One notable effort that communities could learn from is its Delcambre Direct initiative. Delcambre Direct is an online sales program, which allows seafood customers to place shrimp orders online.⁴ After the first shrimper successfully used the Delcambre Direct program, within 30 days almost every boat at the port of Delcambre started using it. The program also helped eliminate some of the more time-consuming tasks associated with seafood marketing. One shrimper noted that before the program was in place she had to call customers to notify them about the availability of shrimp; now that is no longer needed.


Digital connectivity is only one small component of the support services provided at the port of Delcambre to local seafood providers. Physical proximity still has its advantages, which is why local leaders put considerable time and effort into creating a seafood market. In 2011, the United States Department of Agriculture awarded an \$80,000 grant for the purpose of opening a seafood and farmers market at the port of Delcambre.⁵ In 2014 a new boat launch that can hold up to four boats was built, along with a new 7,500-square foot pavilion where local shrimpers can directly sell their catch to the public.⁶ These investments have paid real dividends in encouraging the general public to buy more local seafood. In the year 2014, for example, it was estimated that more than 4,000 people attended the first seafood and farmer's market of the season.

The advantages of a physical seafood market are considerable for shrimpers due to the nature of the industry, as the Port Director for the Twin Parish Port Commission

noted, “a shrimp boat is not designed to sell retail.” Because a shrimp boat is designed to offload bulk, most shrimpers generally sell their catch to wholesalers, and since wholesalers have to compete with imports, the prices aren’t the best, which depresses the shrimpers’ bottom line. By comparison, when shrimpers are able to sell directly to consumers they are able to fetch a much higher price. By understanding the economic dynamics of their local seafood market, the port of Delcambre has been able to devise a support structure that helps their local seafood producers thrive. The success of a region’s working waterfronts is contingent upon local communities taking an active role in the continued success of commercial fishing, and here in the Northern Gulf of Mexico the work performed at the port of Delcambre is a prime example of what that success can look like.

Conclusion

Maintaining the traditional maritime industries of the Gulf Coast can be achieved. The first strategy is to define a working waterfront zone in the municipal codes and regulations, whether it is an existing one or something that has to be created from whole cloth. Defining a district is simply the foundation though. Once a district has been conceived it is necessary to build support capacity. This capacity may be physical, such as

a newly constructed seafood market to engage in the direct sale of commercial catch, or it can be organizational, like a joint marketing campaign to encourage local seafood consumption. This type of built-in support model is critical to receiving local buy-in. With these pillars in place it becomes possible to keep working waterfronts and carve out a place for the fishermen and seafood processors who help make coastal living possible. 

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Endnotes

1. Elizabeth Garvin, *Making Use of Overlay Zones*, July 15, 2001, PlannersWeb.
2. City of Gulf Shores, *Zoning Ordinance for the City of Gulf Shores*, May, 27 2017.
3. Opticos Design, Inc. *How to Regulate – Missing Middle Housing*, 2018, Missing Middle.
4. Bruce Schultz, *Online Program helps shrimpers reach customers*, April 11, 2013, Louisiana Sea Grant.
5. Port of Delcambre, *USDA Funds Delcambre Seafood & Farmers Market*, April 2013, PortofDelcambre.com.
6. Associated Press, *Delcambre welcomes new boat launch, pavilion*, Sept. 12, 2014, Daily Advertiser.
7. Ashely Hinson, *Shrimp go from boat to public*, June 2, 2015, The Daily Iberian.



IN SUM.

A Summation of the Facts and Figures of Interest in this Edition

★ Red snapper’s rank in Gulf commercial seafood species by value:	9
★ Businesses that don’t use their shares of the commercial red snapper quota:	81/750
★ Allowed catch by recreational sector of red snapper from 1991 – 2014:	87.533 m lbs
★ Actual catch by recreational catch of red snapper from 1991 – 2014:	132.02 m lbs
★ Highest value of tagged red snapper in Great Red Snapper Count:	\$500