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[Health Source](#), [Newcomers Guide](#), [Best of SWFLA](#), [Census 2000](#), [more...](#)

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Cape Coral rediscovers waterfront

Frank D'Alessandro

An emerging trend in Southwest Florida focuses on the redevelopment of urban locations with underused waterfront property. We've already seen this activity in downtown Fort Myers.

Last year, city officials hired the highly regarded urban planning firm of Duany, Plater-Zyberk to devise new ideas for redeveloping the downtown and riverfront areas. Now, Cape Coral city officials are working with planning experts to create a master plan that would use the Cape's waterfront as the focal point for the downtown's redevelopment.

Dover, Kohl and Partners, a top urban design firm, is working with the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) in the Cape. Last September, Dover and CRA officials began hearing from residents and business leaders, and the CRA has since initiated preliminary plans based on the concept of a "vibrant urban village" for all ages.

"We want to move from the existing auto-oriented suburban character to one that is more urban and pedestrian friendly," says Chet Hunt of the CRA.

The CRA's ideas will require an updated redevelopment plan that includes a new corresponding zoning code for the downtown. Current zoning does not allow residential development there. Once plans are completed, with review by the planning and zoning commission, they will go to the city council for final approval. City officials expect Dover to put the finishing touches on the master plan by early summer.

Where's the money coming from to redevelop downtown Cape Coral? The CRA had already budgeted for costs to create the plans. Officials are expecting that investors and public-private partnerships will help pay for projects.

"What's interesting about the CRA District is that any increase in real estate taxes resulting from increased real estate values are spent only in the district. The more successful the plan is, the more money there will be to reinvest," says Gary Aubuchon, chairman of the CRA.

Aubuchon thinks the new master plan will have a significant long-term economic impact. "As developers come in, and have the protection and comfort of a master plan to aid them, it'll allow for more substantial projects in the downtown."

The marquee of the new master plan is the Cape's abundance of waterfront. An illustration released by Dover shows a mixed-use, village-style project featuring waterfront dining and retail on main floors — offices and apartments or condos on upper floors. But better use of waterfront for the rebirth of downtown Cape Coral will offer more than pleasing aesthetics. It increases the value of real estate throughout Cape Coral, which in-turn boosts property tax revenue for the city.

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