

MARCH 6, 2024

GATEWAY ACTIVITY CENTER ASSESSMENT REPORT

CITY OF NORTH PORT



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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this assessment is to describe the existing conditions in and around the Gateway Activity Center, as well as conditions in the City of North Port overall that impact the activity center, and to present the issues and opportunities that will inform the development of a Gateway Activity Center Master Plan. The assessment covers land use, environmental, stormwater, transportation, and economic development characteristics of the study area. The final section sets up a strategic framework that will be used to develop land use scenarios for the Master Plan.

The City of North Port’s designated Activity Center 3, also known as the Gateway Activity Center, is a 177.8-acre area that has been identified as a future activity center in the North Port Comprehensive Plan. The Gateway Activity Center is one of nine Activity Centers in the Comprehensive Plan (Figure 1). Activity Centers are defined as lands “designated to provide an area for coordinated development of industrial, commercial, professional office, residential, public, and recreational uses.”

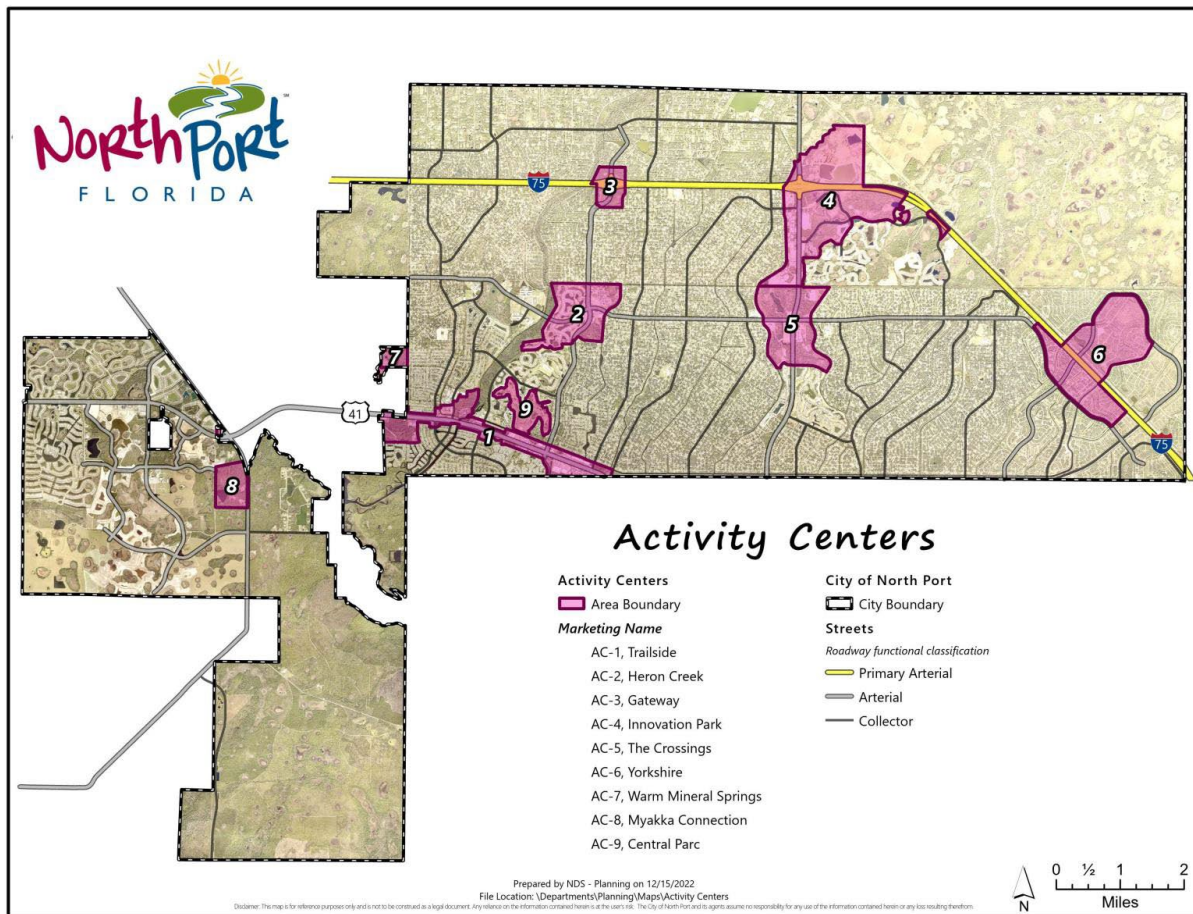


Figure 1: North Port Activity Centers. Source: City of North Port

The Gateway Activity Center is set to develop quickly due to its prime location at the Sumter Boulevard and Interstate 75 interchange, as well as the plans in progress to construct a 100-bed hospital on the southeast quadrant. The City of North Port has begun the process of developing a master plan to ensure that this area develops in a way that addresses the area's needs and opportunities for hurricane resilience, goods and services, economic development, transportation, and infrastructure.

ASSESSMENT

STUDY AREA

The Gateway Activity Center is comprised of the undeveloped parcels of land surrounding the I-75 interchange at Sumter Boulevard. The study area for the Gateway Master Plan includes the Activity Center itself, as well as some additional residential land to the north, east, and southwest. The western boundary of the study area is Myakkahatchee Creek (also called the Big Slough Canal), a tributary of the Myakka River.

The location of the study area within North Port is shown in Figure 2, and an aerial view of the land within the study area is shown in Figure 3.

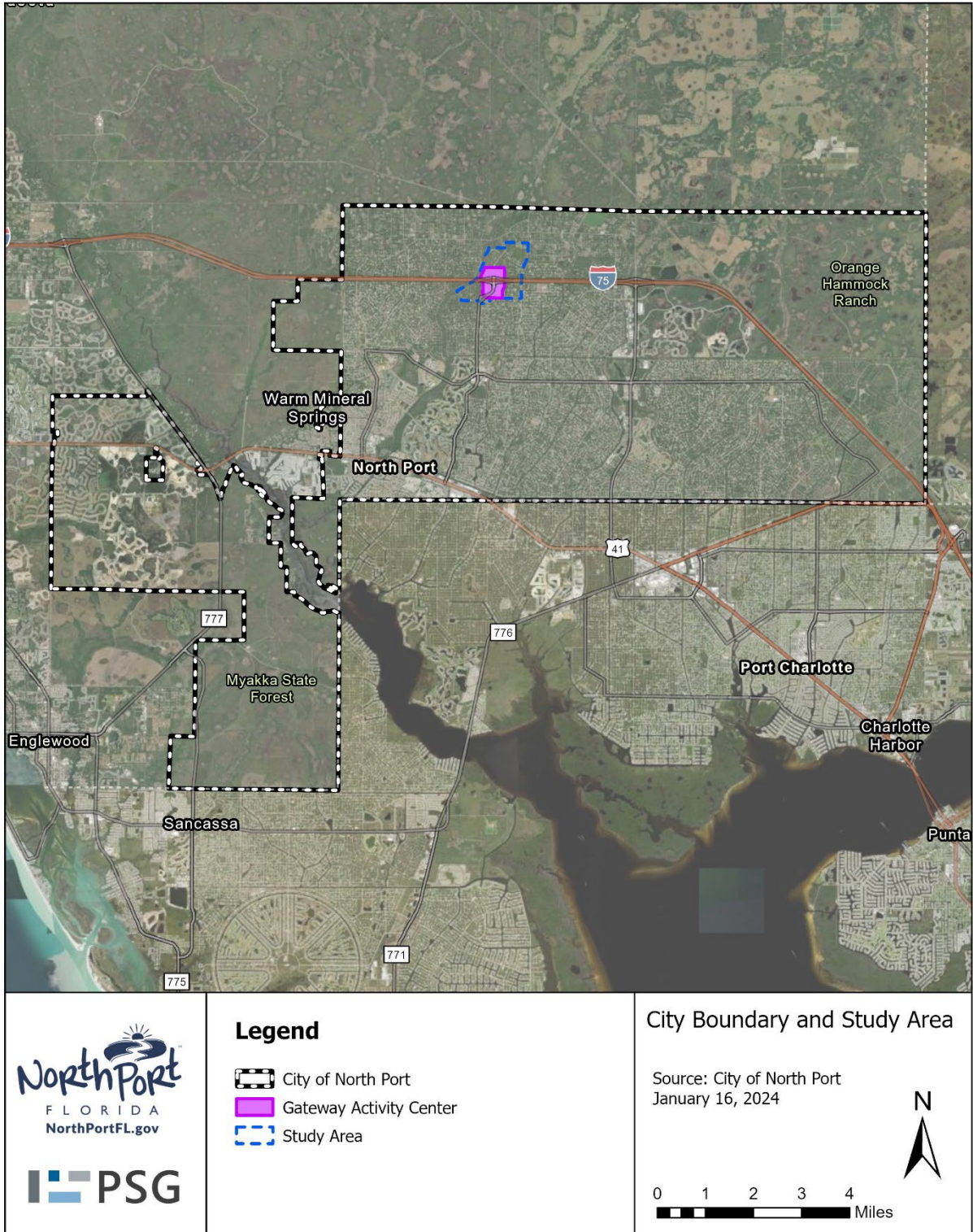


Figure 2: City Boundary and Study Area



Figure 3: Aerial Imagery of Study Area

LAND USE

EXISTING LAND USE

Figure 4 shows the existing land use recorded for the parcels in the Florida Department of Revenue tax assessment rolls. Building footprints are also displayed on this map. The parcels within the Activity Center are currently undeveloped, but are assessed as commercial parcels, with one institutional parcel where the hospital is planned to be built. Most of the study area outside the Activity Center is low-density residential land. The parcels are pre-platted, and a majority of them are vacant. The land along Myakkahatchee Creek, shown in green, is conservation land.

The City of North Port has a “one dig” policy for infrastructure (i.e., sewer and potable water) as well as broadband services, and a recent utility expansion occurred along Sumter Boulevard, south of I-75. The water main was extended 1.5 miles and the sewer main extended 2.2 miles. The project was funded by the American Rescue Plan Act, or ARPA, and is awaiting certification before being finalized. These infrastructure improvements will provide sewer and water connections to the southern parcels within the Gateway Activity Center. The utility expansion does not continue north of I-75, which means the northern parcels will not have water and sewer in the near term.

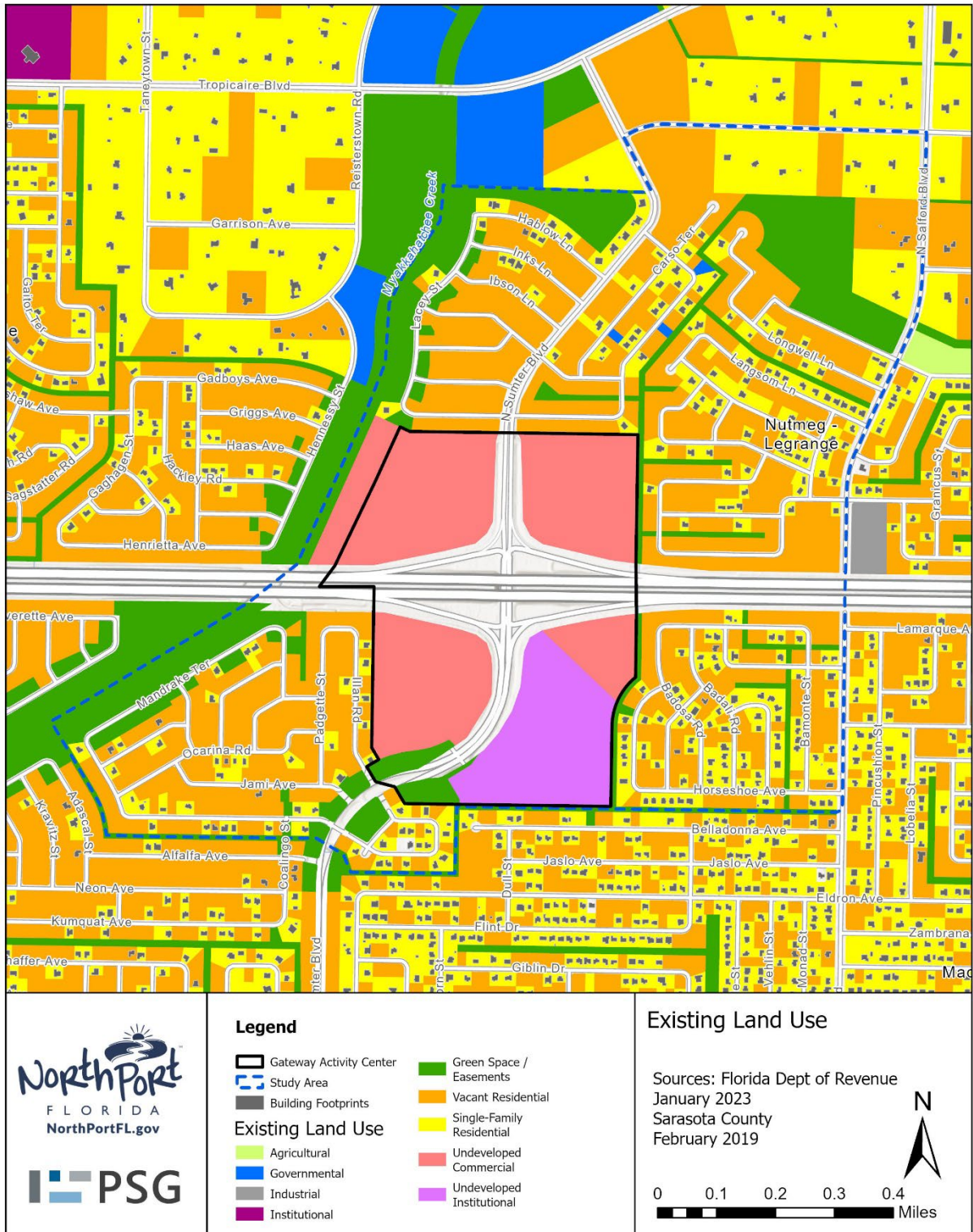


Figure 4: Existing Land Use

ZONING AND FUTURE LAND USE

The Gateway Activity Center has its own unique regulations within the zoning code and the Comprehensive Plan. The intent of the Activity Center is set out in Policy 2.3.1: “This Activity Center shall be established to provide for highway uses such as motels, and restaurants or other highway uses primarily serving interstate commuters, and for economic development.”

North Port’s Unified Land Development Code and Comprehensive Plan are both undergoing extensive updates. This assessment will focus on the updated versions, as they are likely to be in effect when the Activity Center is developed.

The mix of uses currently permitted in the Activity Center is professional office on up to 23% of the land, commercial on up to 75% of the land, and industrial on up to 2% of the land.

Existing permitted principal uses and structures are as follows:

- Auditorium and convention center
- Brewery
- Brewpub
- Commercial recreation establishments
- Child care
- Distillery
- Gas station
- General office
- Government
- Hospital
- Hotels
- Light industrial establishments (outdoor storage is allowed as part of this use)
- Medical
- Microbrewery
- Microdistillery
- Microwinery
- Motel
- Parking lots and parking garages
- Personal services
- Recreation, active and passive
- Research and process laboratories
- Restaurant
- Service station
- Sports arena
- Theater for live stage productions
- Travel centers
- Truck stops
- Wholesale club
- Winery

Any use or structure not explicitly permitted, or permitted by special exception, is not allowed in the activity center. [Sec. 55-27](#) of North Port’s Unified Land Development Code provides a list of prohibited uses for emphasis.

The proposed update greatly expands allowable uses, and now explicitly allows for Retail Sales and Services, Medical and Dental Offices, Travel Centers, Electric Vehicle Charging Stations, Transportation Terminals, Places of Assembly, Large Scale Recreation Establishments, and others. Special exception uses include Museums and Galleries, Residential Single-Family Attached, and Residential Multi-Family. These new allowable uses and special exception uses grant the ability to create a true gateway to the city, that would not be solely defined by hospital-adjacent and highway-adjacent development. Notably, industrial uses (both light and heavy), as well as Residential Single-Family Detached, will be no longer permitted. The proposed update establishes Activity Center 3 as an area supportive of commercial, medical, and residential uses.

Figure 5 shows the proposed update of the boundaries of the Activity Center, extending beyond the current boundary (black line), mostly to the north and slightly to the west. As low-density residential is not a permitted use in the Activity Center, no more single-family homes would be constructed in the neighborhood to the north following this change.

The tracts on the northeast and southwest corners of the interchange are designated as receiving zones for transfer of development rights, which would allow them to exceed the permitted density by purchasing development rights from elsewhere in the city. There is currently no process established in North Port for implementing the transfer of development rights.

Development density and intensity in the Activity Center is regulated using floor area ratio (FAR). Non-residential uses are currently allowed up to a floor area ratio of 0.95 in the existing plan. In the proposed update, the maximum FAR is 3.0 for non-residential and multi-family residential, and 1.0 for single-family attached, which is defined as "townhouses or a similar product."

Figure 5 is a map of the proposed Future Land Use categories in and around the Activity Center. The map shows the existing boundary of the Activity Center (black line), the proposed expansion to the north, and the residential area to the southwest that would be recategorized as High Density mixed-use (in purple). The guidelines and permitted densities for these categories are provided in Table 1.

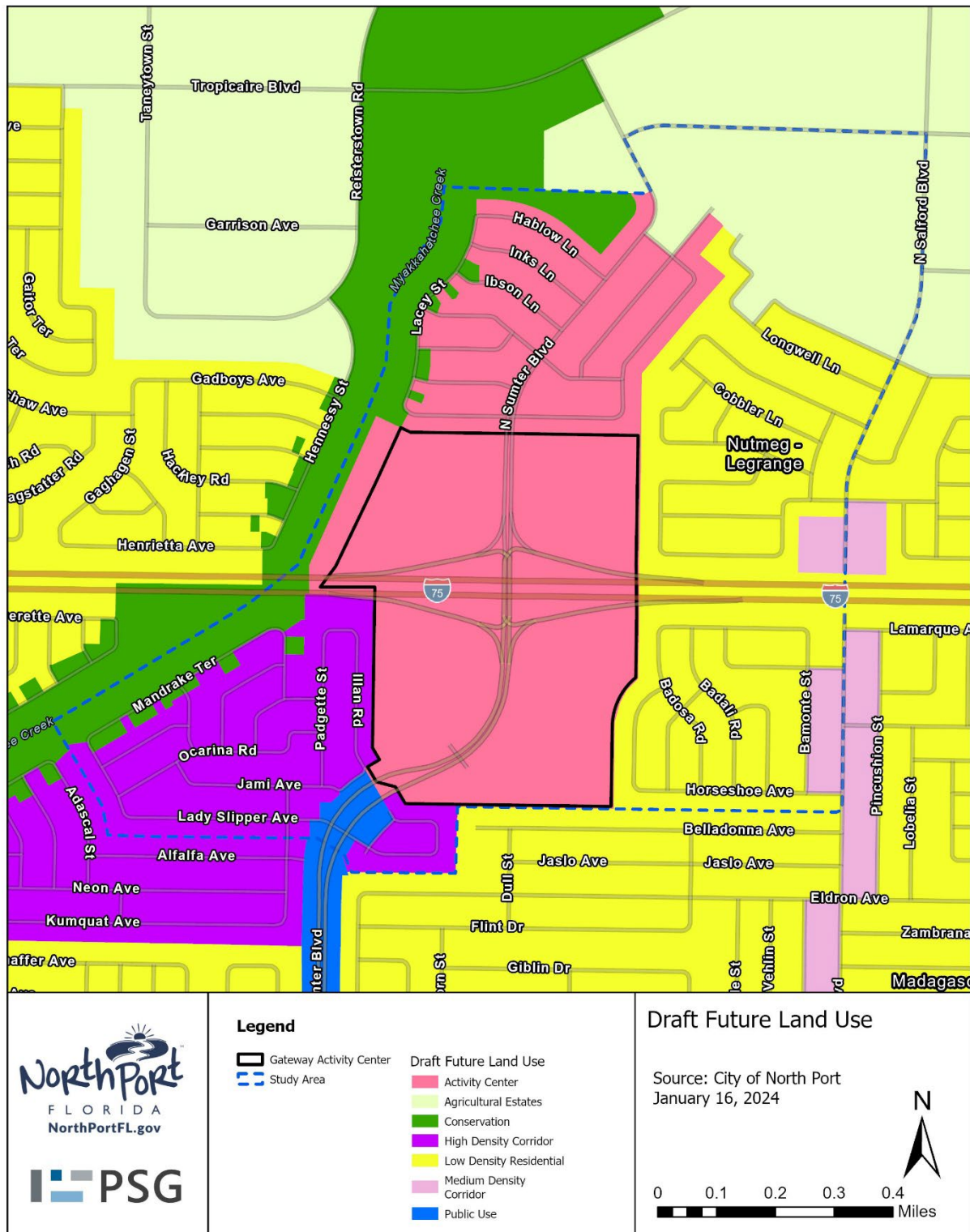


Figure 5: Draft Future Land Use

Table 1: Future Land Use categories

Land Use Category	Guidelines
Agricultural Estates	Agricultural uses, very low-density residential development (max 1 unit/3 acres). Solar facilities permitted.
Low Density Residential	Low density residential areas (max 4.3 units/acre for platted lots, 4.0 units/acre for unplatted areas).
Medium Density Residential	Medium density residential areas (max 10 units/acre). Low density residential also permitted.
High Density Residential	High density residential areas, focus on multi-family use (max 15 units/acre, excluding bonuses).
Professional Office	Professional/business offices, institutional, cultural, residential uses (0.95 FAR, 15 DU/acre, residential use not exceeding 50% floor area).
Commercial	Trade, retail services, commerce, and residential uses (0.95 FAR, 15 DU/acre, residential use not exceeding 50% floor area).
Industrial	Light manufacturing, processing, storage, warehousing, wholesaling, distribution. Residential uses prohibited (0.95 FAR).
Conservation	Protection of environmentally sensitive lands, no uses permitted except necessary facilities for human life protection.
Recreation/Open Space	Active/passive recreational uses, same density/intensity as Low Density Residential. Wetland protection required.
Public	Governmental, educational, and public activities, solar facilities permitted.

ENVIRONMENTAL

This section discusses the natural and physical characteristics of the Study Area. The following resources were consulted to obtain the best available data:

- USDA Web Soil Survey (2024)
- Florida Department of Revenue, Existing Land Use (February 2019)
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Land Cover (January 2017)
- Sarasota County, Stormwater Infrastructure and Utilities (April 2023)
- Federal Emergency Management Agency, Flood Zones (December 2023)
- Florida Department of Transportation (DOT) Efficient Transportation Decision Making (ETDM) Environmental Screening Tool (EST),
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National ESA Critical Habitat Mapper,
- Florida Land Use, Cover and Forms Classification System (FLUCCS) Handbook (January 1999), and
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s (FFWCC) publication, Florida’s Endangered and Threatened Species List (Updated December 2022).

SOIL TYPES

Soil types are a mix of upland and wetland soils. A patchwork of hydric soils is present including Holopaw, Delray, & Bradenton. These soils are all poorly draining soils which are indicative of areas that frequently flood. According to data from the NRCS Soil Survey, all of the soils types in the study area are identified as “unsuitable” and “less suited” for gopher tortoises. See Figure 6 for additional details.

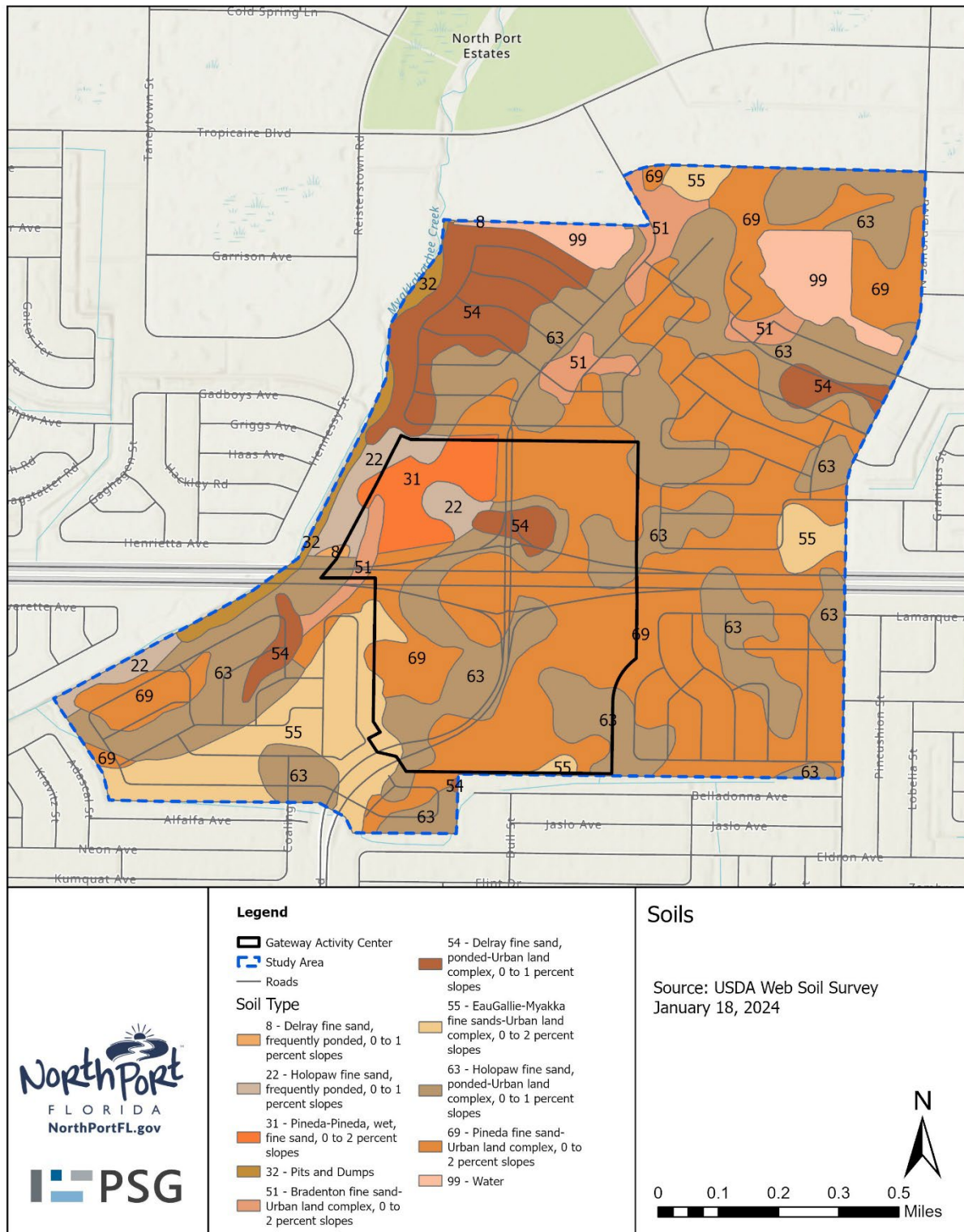


Figure 6: Soil Types

SURFACE WATERS AND WETLANDS

The surface waters within the Study Area include a series of man-made canals associated with Myakkahatchee Creek, previously permitted stormwater features and isolated wetlands. The most prominent hydrologic feature is the Myakkahatchee Creek. A series of canals drain toward this creek, which then ultimately discharges to the Myakka River, a Florida-designated Wild and Scenic River. The northernmost canal runs east/west, south of Kalish Avenue, and north of the natural areas in the Northwest and Northeast quadrants of the intersection. The canal travels south, under I-75, and flanks the east and south sides of the Southeast quadrant of the Study Area. Within the core area of the interchange and right-of-way, previously permitted stormwater features are present. Much shallower roadside swales are present at the north, east, and south sides of the Southwest quadrant. Figure 7 depicts Surface Waters and Wetlands, but not all surface waters are visible in this layer, especially roadside swales and canals.

The location and conditions of the isolated wetlands within the undeveloped areas were documented in the field on January 29, 2024, and can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Wetland conditions in the Gateway Activity Center

SW Quadrant	Description
Wetland 1	Marsh is dominated by broom grasses, maiden cane, xyris, red root,
Wetland 2	Marsh is dominated by centella, broom grasses, and musky mint. Some shrubs, Peruvian primrose willow, and Carolina willow.
Wetland 3	Shrubby march dominated by caroling willow and laurel oaks. The understory consists of pepperweed and cattail.
SE Quadrant	Description
Wetland 1	Large marsh dominated by maiden cane. Some broom grasses and St. John’s wort are present in the deepest portion. Ringed by red maples and laurel oaks.
Wetland 2	Mapp marsh is dominated by pickerelweed, chain fern, and mermaid weed. Some shrubs at the edge include wax myrtle and Carolina willow. Some melaleucas.
NW Quadrant	Description
Wetland 1	Large, highly disturbed surface water, devoid of vegetation due to vehicle disturbance.
NE Quadrant	Description
Wetland 1	Large scrubby system buffered by a sabal palm strand.
Wetland 2	Small, open system with little to no vegetation, prevalent vehicular damage.

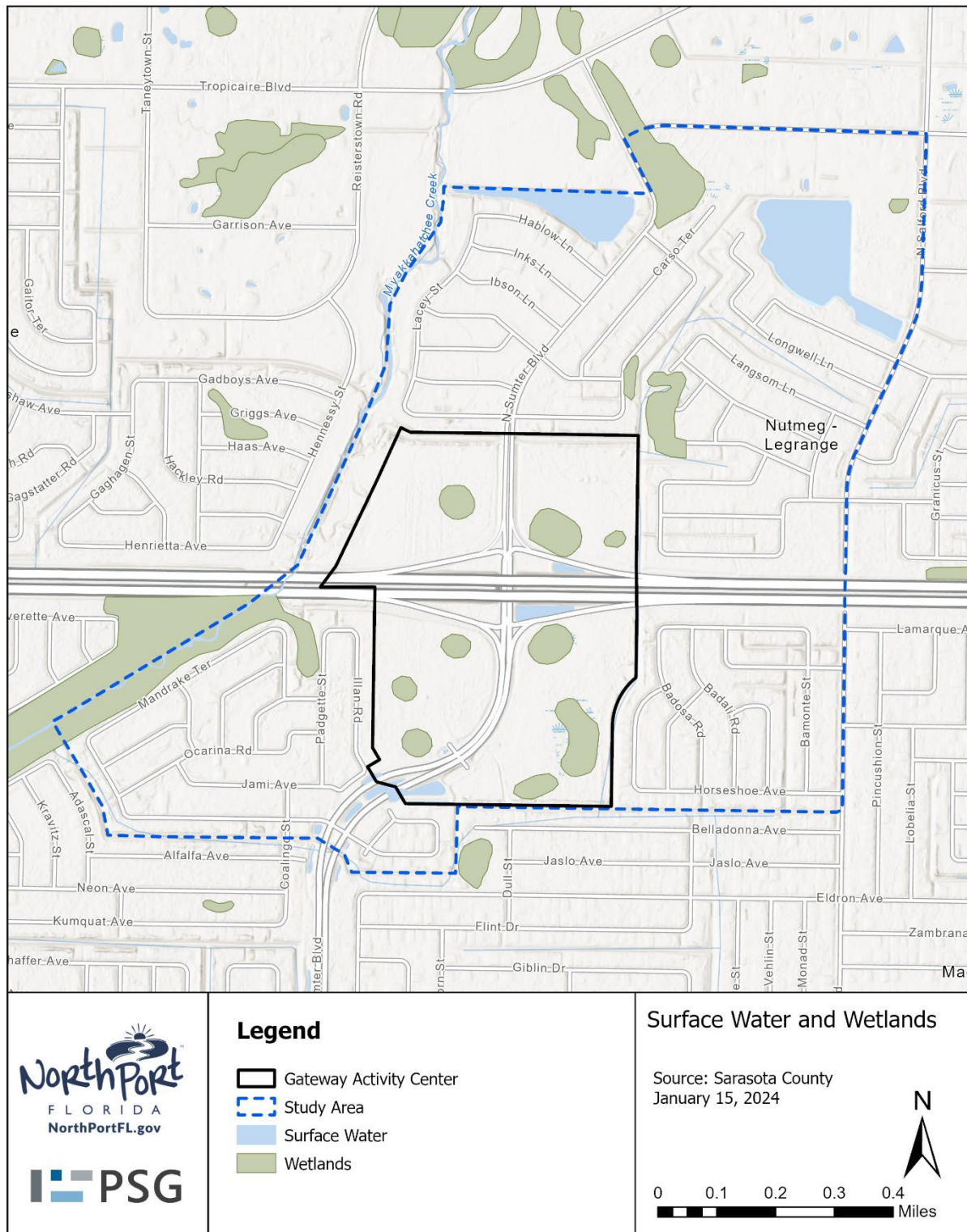


Figure 7: Surface Water and Wetlands

LAND USE AND LAND COVER

Figure 8 depicts land cover within the Study Area. After ground-truthing the area, the land use mapping appears to be accurate. Of note is Oaks Park, which is a Sarasota County Park, located along Myakahatchee Creek.

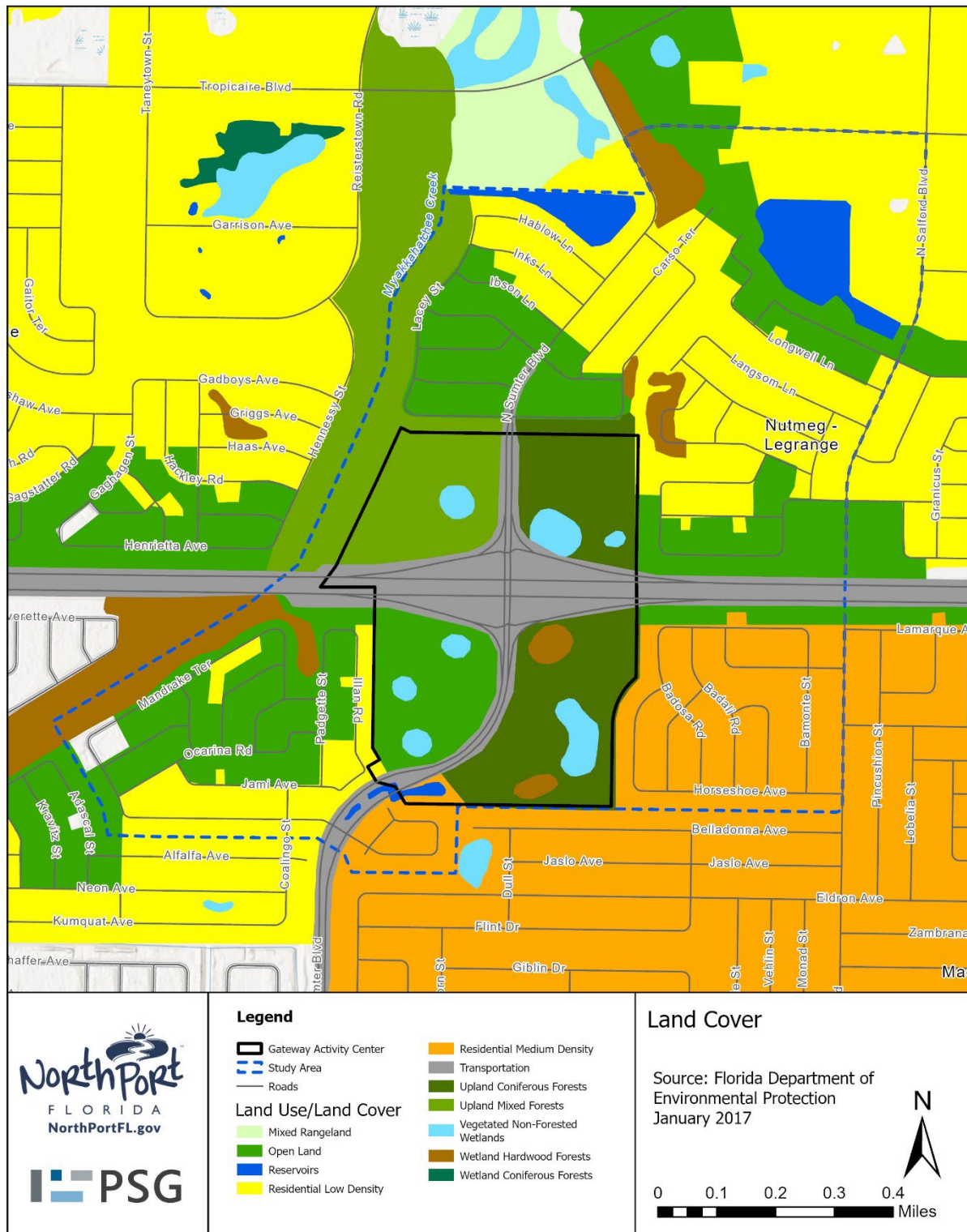


Figure 8: Land Cover

STORMWATER

Nearly the entire Study Area north of I-75 within the 100-year floodplain and is designated as the Special Flood Hazard Area, Zone AE by FEMA. The southeast quadrant of the roadway is almost entirely outside the 100-year floodplain and is classified as Zone X. Figure 9 depicts the flood zones throughout the study area. As expected, the floodplain radiates outward from the Mykahatchee Creek and follows a series of canals. The 100-year floodplain is the land that is predicted to flood during a 100-year storm, which has a 1% chance of occurring in any given year.

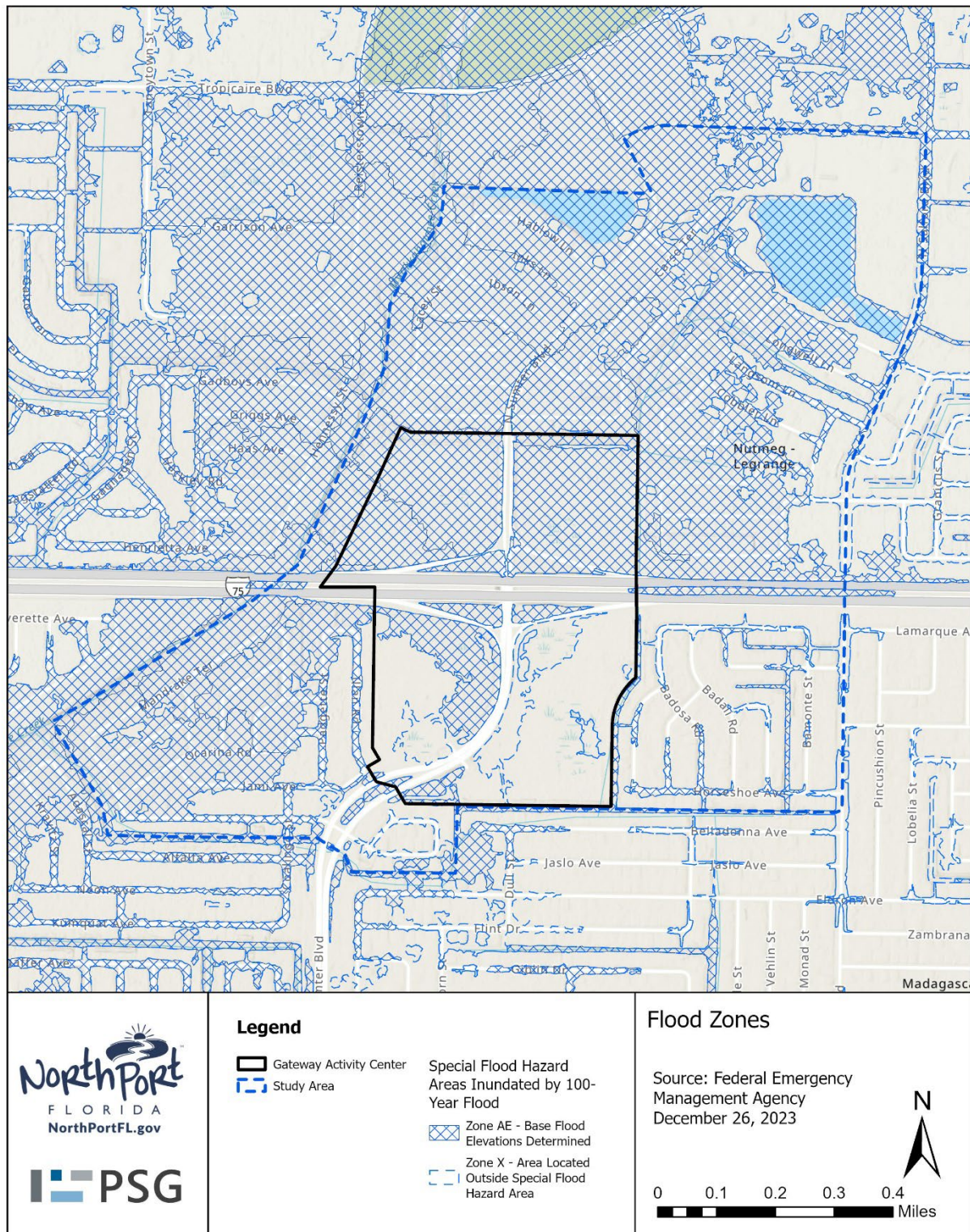


Figure 9: Flood Zones

The City of North Port commissioned a study of the Big Slough Watershed in 2014. According to that study, North Port is subject to three types of flooding problems: local road flooding, which occurs commonly during smaller storms; major road flooding, which occurs in 25-year and 100-year storm events; and flooding of residential areas near Big Slough (called Myakkahatchee Creek in the study area), which occurs in 100-year storm events. All of these flood types occurred following Hurricane Ian in 2022.

The modeling done as part of the 2014 study estimated that in a 100-year storm event, about 75 habitable structures would flood, and nearly 20,000 feet of emergency route roads would be inundated in North Port, as well as 7,000 feet of evacuation route roads..

The 2014 study evaluated best management practices to reduce the harmful impacts of flooding. The study recommended that the City purchase the 74 properties likely to flood in a 100-year event, some of which are in the Gateway study area. FEMA implements a Repetitive Loss program which is part of the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). This program is designed to identify and address properties that have experienced repetitive flood losses and as a result have placed a significant burden on the NFIP by repeatedly requiring flood insurance claim payments. The city could use this proactive approach to mitigate future impacts to properties that are likely to flood.

In 2019, the City of North Port commissioned another study, the Big Slough Flood Reduction Study. The study presented a stormwater management plan for the Big Slough Watershed within North Port. The I-75 area of Myakkahatchee Creek was one of the study areas designated for evaluation in the study. Localized solutions to recurrent flooding were found to be ineffective in the project area in a previous feasibility study, and therefore future flood reduction planning focused on larger-scale solutions. Regional solutions are often more effective due to the interconnected nature of water systems and the shared impacts of stormwater runoff. The very nature of the area including the prevalence of the 100-year floodplain and interconnectedness of the wetlands and surface waters are a testament to why this sort of approach is best suited to the area.

Figure 10 shows the extent of flood inundation for the mean annual, 10-year, and 100-year storm events. This map from the 2019 study was based on storm event modeling using the existing conditions at that time.

The recommended improvements in the 2019 study were generally large-scale improvements outside of the Gateway study area. The major components were:

- Construction of a new bypass canal parallel to Myakkahatchee Creek between Tropicaire Boulevard and Price Boulevard,
- Increasing conveyance capacity through canal widening and upsizing pipe culverts in the R-36 retention ditch/conveyance system along the northern and western boundary of North Port,
- Restriction/reduction of high flow into Myakkahatchee Creek near the north city boundary, and
- Localized improvements near Dorothy Avenue (another study area).

To effectively combat the impacts of flooding on the Gateway study area and beyond, a regional stormwater management approach is needed. The city has already conducted studies and has arrived at this conclusion. A combination of regional and local strategies can be employed to mitigate the impacts of potential flooding. This can take the form of promoting green infrastructure within new developments, retrofitting existing stormwater infrastructure, building new stormwater infrastructure, preserving wetlands that naturally store water, and raising evacuation and emergency routes.

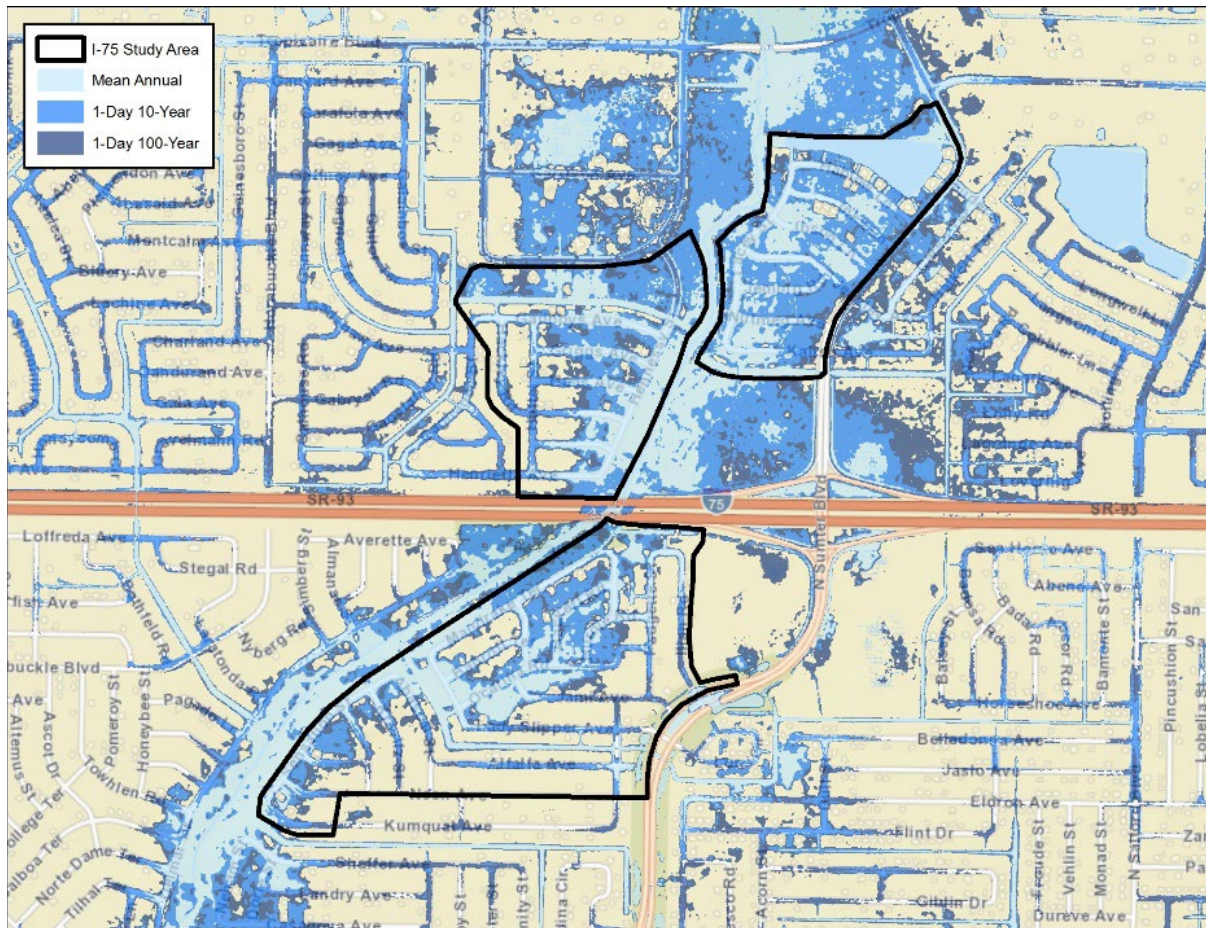


Figure 10: Historic Flooding Near the I-75 / Sumter Blvd Interchange. Source: City of North Port Big Slough Flood Reduction Study, 2019

Existing surface drainage features in the activity center include natural sloughs, creeks, and manmade ditches and canals. Open channels are shown in Figure 11.

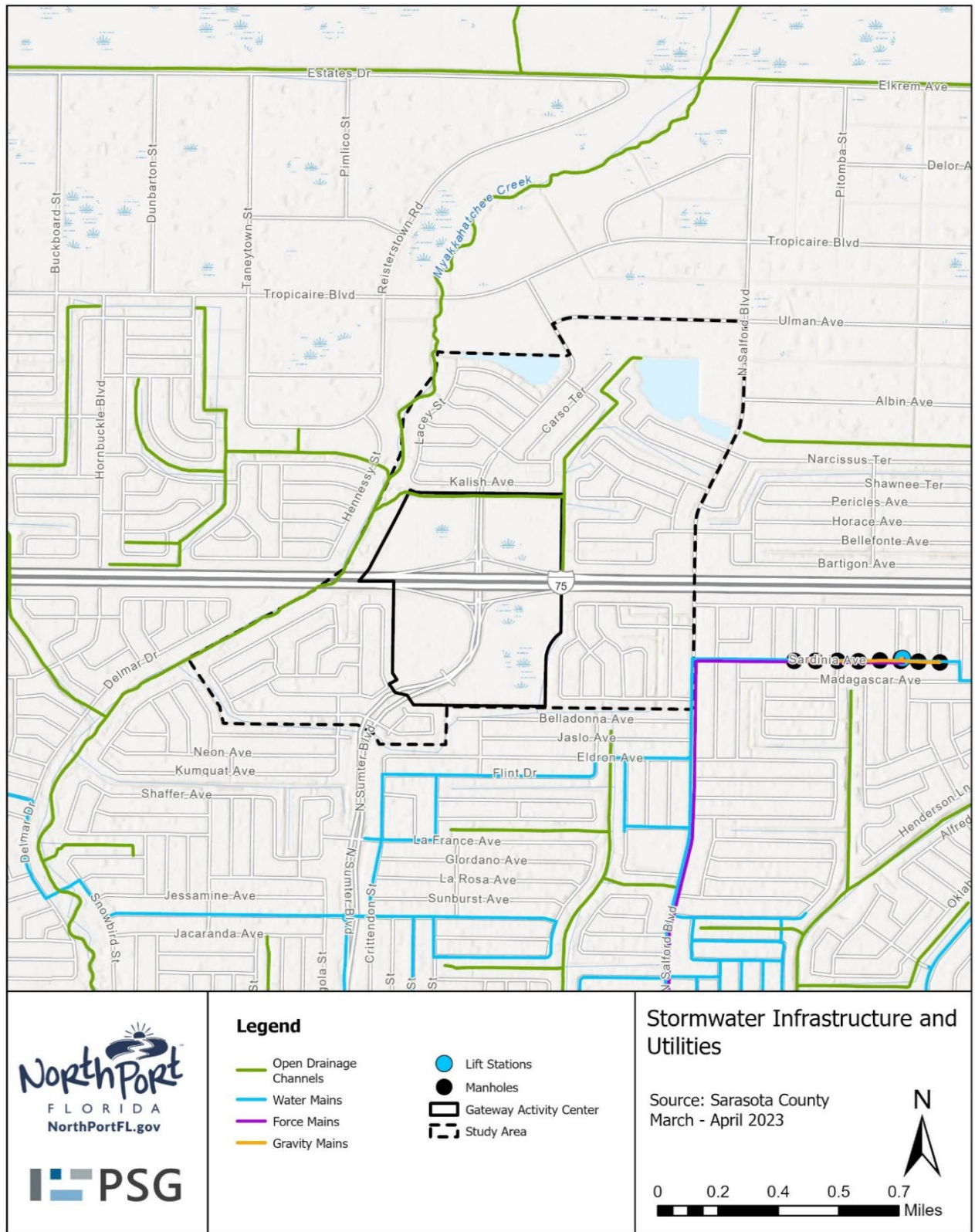


Figure 11: Stormwater Infrastructure and Utilities

TRANSPORTATION

This section reviews the existing transportation conditions within the City of North Port, the Gateway Activity Center, and the study area. Existing conditions include bicycle, pedestrian, and public transportation network connections and gaps along with upcoming near-term improvements at the I-75 and Sumter Boulevard interchange.

ROAD NETWORK AND CONNECTIVITY

The City of North Port currently lacks East-West connectivity. The three main east/west corridors include I-75, US 41/Tamiami Trail, and Price Boulevard. Improving East-West connectivity of the City's transportation system by widening Price Boulevard is a priority within the 2022-2025 Strategic Vision Plan, and the project kicked off in March 2023. Some elements of the design are being revisited because of lessons learned during Hurricane Ian. Currently, the project includes widening Price Boulevard from two lanes to four lanes between Toledo Blade and Sumter Boulevards with all traffic signals to be interconnected and synchronized.

Annual average daily traffic (AADT) on I-75 as reported by the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) reaches up to 75,000 vehicles. Sumter Boulevard is a North-South four-lane major arterial with a posted speed limit of 45 mph and an AADT of just above 16,000 vehicles.

SHORT-TERM IMPROVEMENTS

In the heart of the Gateway Activity Center, the City of North Port is working with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) to signalize the intersection of I-75 at Sumter Boulevard at both the northbound and southbound ramp termini intersections. The signalization will include pedestrian call buttons for the crosswalks across the interchange ramps, but no pedestrian crossings are planned to be added across Sumter Boulevard. This interchange project includes an additional northbound left turn lane and receiving ramp lane plus widening the northbound entrance ramp to allow for two receiving lanes. The cost for the intersection improvements is being shared between the City and FDOT and is currently in design. Construction is expected in 2025/2026.

The Cosmic Waterway Connector Bridge is also underway to provide an alternate travel route between Sumter Boulevard and Toledo Blade Boulevard, the interstate interchange directly to the east of the Gateway Activity Center. The connector bridge is currently in design with construction expected to begin in 2025. The needed properties have been purchased for the project and is projected to be complete in 2026.

PEDESTRIAN AND BICYCLE NETWORK

There is a need for more pedestrian connectivity, bicycle facilities, and safe crossings within the Gateway Activity Center and study area. The existing pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure within the study area consists of the sidewalks on both sides of Sumter Boulevard within the I-75 interchange and a sidewalk/shared-use path on both sides of Sumter Boulevard south of the I-75 interchange, near the North Port Park and Ride parking lot. However, there is a gap of about ¼ mile between the interchange sidewalks and the shared-use path. There is also an unprotected bike lane along Sumter Boulevard. There are currently no sidewalk facilities within the northern portion of the study area.

Developing multimodal connectivity to historical, cultural, and recreational locations, including neighborhoods and environmental greenway and blueway points of interests, is a priority of the City's Strategic Vision Plan. One way the Vision Plan aims to improve the pedestrian experience is by designing and filling gaps identified in North Port's sidewalk network beginning in Fiscal Year 2025.

Figure 12 identifies the existing pedestrian and bicycle network and opportunities to create connections within the study area. The City developed a master plan for the Myakkahatchee Creek Greenway, a recreational corridor along the creek that would extend from Myakkahatchee Environmental Park north of the study area to US 41 (Tamiami Trail) south of the study area. The Greenway would be adjacent to the Activity Center and could provide a walking and biking connection between the two western quadrants under I-75.

Other opportunities identified in the map include:

- City-owned property in the study area that could be used for trail connections, including connections between the Myakkahatchee Creek Greenway and neighborhood streets;
- The potential for closing the gap between the sidewalks in the interchange and the shared-use paths on Sumter Boulevard, as well as creating a high-quality pedestrian crossing of Sumter Boulevard as part of future development;
- An opportunity to create a new pedestrian connection for the neighborhood on the south end of the study area using an existing road stub on Lorri Circle.

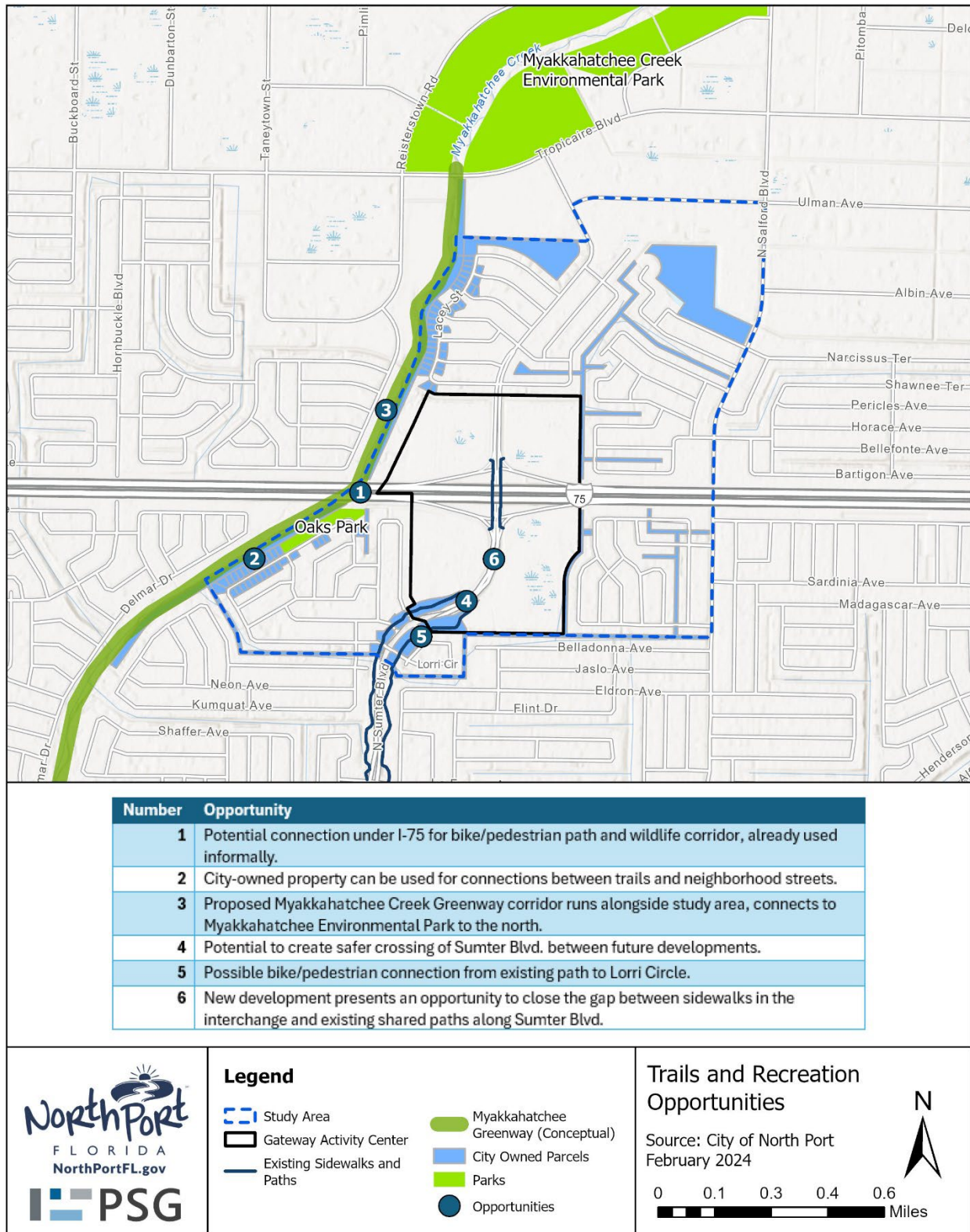


Figure 12: Trails and Recreation Opportunities

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Additionally, there is no public transportation in the Gateway Activity Center. The closest transit stop is located at City Hall Boulevard, over a mile and half south of the I-75 and Sumter Boulevard interchange. However, Sarasota County’s transit agency, Breeze, operates an east/west route along US 41/Tamiami Trail (known as Route 09 Venice/North Port) which connects North Port City Hall and Park & Ride, located off Sumter Boulevard, to Downtown Venice.

REGIONAL TRAIL NETWORK

The City of North Port is part of a growing regional trail system. Sarasota County’s multi-use trail, the Legacy Trail, extended to North Port in the spring of 2023. The extension, known as the paved North Port Connector Trail, is a segment of the Gulf Coast Trail. The trail has 700,000 annual users and will be part of Florida’s longest trail once completed. North Port is also home to over 80 miles of freshwater canals and is making improvements to its canal system to open more blueway trails.

A NATIONAL TREND: TRANSPORTATION SAFETY

In Smart Growth America’s 2022 Dangerous by Design Report, the North Port-Sarasota-Bradenton area was among the top 20 most dangerous metropolitan areas in the country for pedestrians, ranked at 19. Sarasota County and neighboring municipalities are working on strategic actions to reduce and eliminate death and serious injuries on its roadways.

According to Sarasota County’s 2021 Strategic Safety Action Plan, prepared in conjunction with the Sarasota County Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, more than 2,500 fatal and serious injury crashes occurred in Sarasota County between 2015 and 2019. These crashes resulted in the death of 275 people and injuries to an additional 3,313 people. Although only one pedestrian and bicycle crash occurred within the study area in this timeframe, 6 to 10 crashes (referred to as a “crash cluster” by the Sarasota County Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan) occurred along Sumter Boulevard less than two miles south of the study area.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

This section reviews key factors influencing economic development opportunities within North Port and the Gateway Activity Center. Existing conditions are summarized, both generally and specifically related to hospital-oriented development.

CITYWIDE CONTEXT

North Port is an extremely fast-growing bedroom community. The 2022 Census estimated a population of 85,000, nearly 10,000 people (13%) higher than just 2 years prior. This rate of population growth makes it the 5th fastest growing city in the U.S. (among cities 50,000 people or larger), and the single fastest in all of Florida.

Residential Context

Table 3: North Port growth ranking

Geographic Area	Population Estimate (as of July 1)			Rank
	2020	2022	2-year change%	
Georgetown city, Texas	68,293	86,507	26.7%	1
Leander city, Texas	60,848	74,375	22.2%	2
Queen Creek town, Arizona	60,895	70,734	16.2%	3
New Braunfels city, Texas	91,621	104,707	14.3%	4
North Port city, Florida	75,487	85,099	12.7%	5
Maricopa city, Arizona	58,851	66,290	12.6%	6
Buckeye city, Arizona	93,754	105,567	12.6%	7
Port St. Lucie city, Florida	206,808	231,790	12.1%	8
Conroe city, Texas	91,247	101,405	11.1%	9
Cape Coral city, Florida	195,408	216,992	11.0%	10

According to the University of Florida’s Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR), Sarasota County is forecasted to grow another 125,000 people by 2050, though their higher-growth forecast increases this number to 250,000. North Port could reasonably be assumed to be a major beneficiary of that countywide growth.

Data on household incomes from the latest Census American Community Survey reveal that incomes of the typical North Port resident are relatively high, as evidenced by median incomes being higher than both Sarasota County and Florida as a whole. However, mean incomes are substantially lower than the county or state, due to far fewer very wealthy households in North Port.

Table 4: Income Summary

Location	North Port	Sarasota County	Florida
Median Income	\$78,587	\$78,341	\$69,303
Mean Income	\$88,610	\$116,410	\$99,349
Percent of Households Earning \$150,000+	9.8%	19.1%	17.2%

Business Context

Jobs in North Port lag far behind population. As of 2021, the Census’s Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics dataset showed only 9,200 jobs within City limits. Employment opportunities are clustered in three primary locations, to the south and east of the Gateway Activity Center.

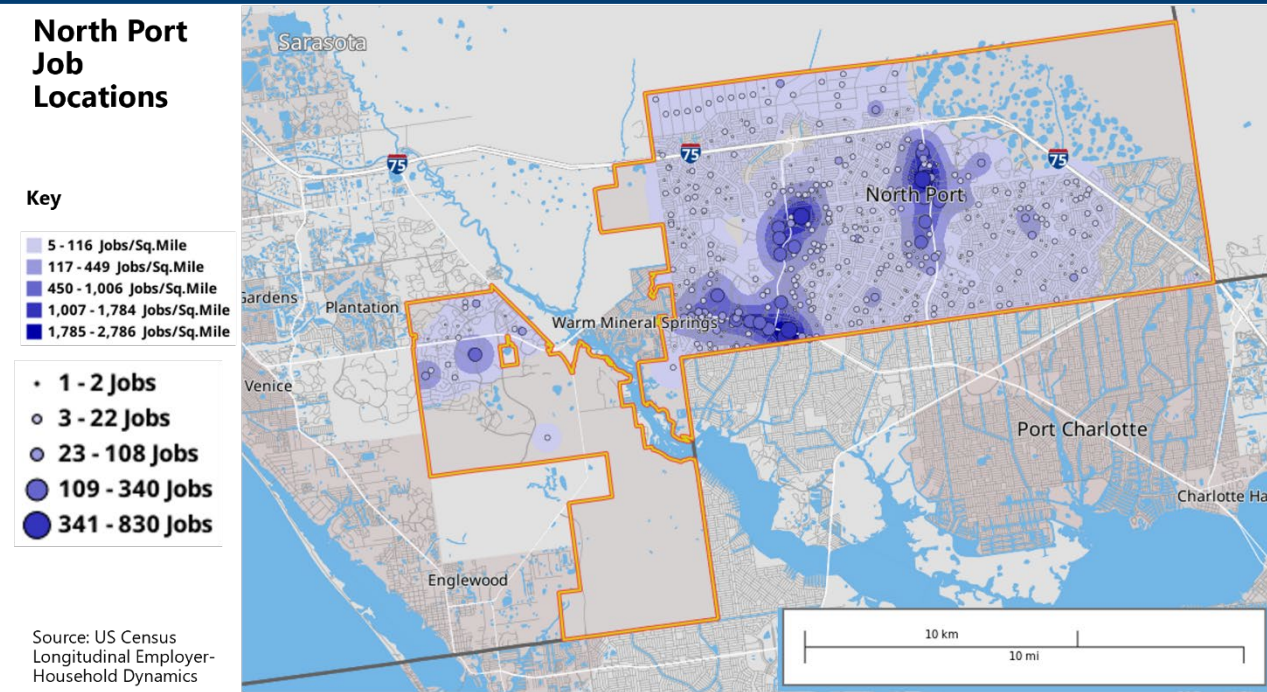


Figure 13: Job Locations

Notably, employment growth has kept pace with recent population growth, at least on a percentage basis.

Table 5: North Port Employment Trends

	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2011
Total Jobs	9,209	8,473	8,438	7,834	7,230	6,927	4,653
Annual Percent Change	8.7%	0.4%	7.7%	8.4%	4.4%	9.8%	-

Among working North Port residents, very few work in North Port. Barely 10% of employed North Port residents have their job in North Port. This pattern has been true for at least the past decade, though the proportion of residents living and working in North Port has risen by 1-2 percentage points since 2021.

Table 6: Employment Locations for North Port Residents

Living / Working Locations	2021		2016		2011	
Workers Living in the North Port	27,738	100.0%	21,983	100.0%	18,603	100.0%
Living in North Port but Employed Outside	24,896	89.8%	19,591	89.1%	17,016	91.5%
Living and Employed in North Port	2,842	10.2%	2,392	10.9%	1,587	8.5%

This ratio of 90% working residents employed outside of the city is among the lowest of nearby comparable communities. Only North Fort Myers has equivalently low numbers of people living and working in the same community.

Table 7: Employment Locations for Peer Communities

Living / Working Locations	North Port		Port Charlotte		Bradenton		Venice		N. Fort Myers	
Workers Living in the Selection Area	27,738		21,841		22,183		6,789		14,235	
Living in the Selection Area but Employed Outside	24,896	89.8%	17,610	80.6%	17,993	81.1%	5,527	81.4%	12,945	90.9%
Living and Employed in the Selection Area	2,842	10.2%	4,231	19.4%	4,190	18.9%	1,262	18.6%	1,290	9.1%

The city also has two tourist attractions that bring seasonal visitors to the area. According to the North Port Prospectus, the city’s guide for investors, Warm Mineral Springs attracts 130,000 annual visitors, and CoolToday Park (host of Atlanta Braves spring training) brings another 70,000 annually.¹

PROJECT AREA

Activity Center 3, also known as the Gateway Activity Center, is intended to act as the “gateway into the city”, due to its location at the busy interchange of I-75 and Sumter Boulevard. There are four vacant commercial parcels surrounding the future location of the new hospital in the Gateway Activity Center, as illustrated in Figure 13.

- The southwest parcel (Parcel A) contains 1,076,367 million square feet of vacant commercial land and was assessed at \$915,400.
- The southeast parcel (Parcel C, bordering the future hospital) contains 392,475 square feet of vacant commercial land and was assessed at \$343,750. This parcel is currently inaccessible.
- The northwest parcel (Parcel E) contains 1,528,956 million square feet of vacant commercial land and was assessed at \$782,500.
- The northeast parcel (Parcel D) contains 1,080,288 million square feet of vacant commercial land and was assessed at \$556,900.

The four parcels offer a combined 4,078,086 square feet (or around 94 acres) of vacant commercial land.

¹ The North Port Prospectus: Southwest Florida’s Best-Kept Secret. City of North Port, May 2023. <https://23629439.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/23629439/The%20North%20Port%20Prospectus.pdf>

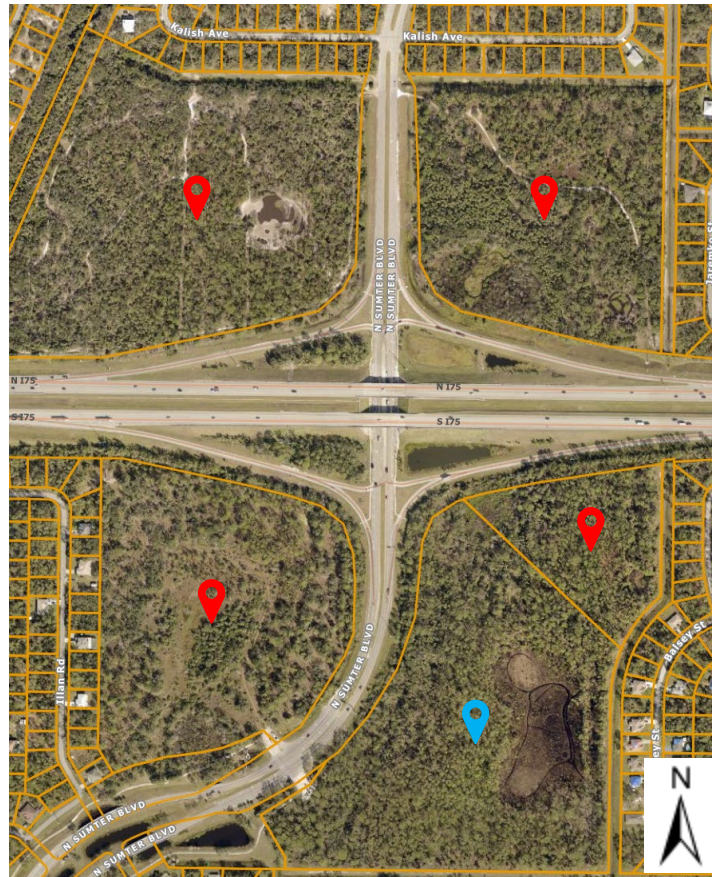


Figure 14: Future Hospital Parcel (blue) and Vacant Commercial Parcels (red)

Existing Economic Conditions

Using the Sumter Boulevard overpass at I-75 as a midpoint, economic analyses were done on the area in and around the Activity Center. The analysis evaluated current business conditions, especially as they relate to the Activity Center’s future zoning and land use.

Existing Residential Context

Economic analyses were performed on relevant characteristics of existing residents. Generally, these analyses use a 5-mile radius from the Activity Center, which roughly approximates a sphere of potential frequent visitors to Activity Center developments. Per ESRI’s Business Analyst, there are just over 60,000 people in this catchment area, with forecasted growth to 68,000 people in 2028 (around a 13.3% increase). The overall average disposable income of this group is \$74,900. Average incomes are highest among households with middle-aged heads of households, reaching as high as \$87,000.

Notably, the area closest to the Activity Center is more sparsely populated. Currently there are under 3,000 residents within one mile of the midpoint. This area is forecasted to grow more slowly than the rest of the 5-mile catchment area, only reaching 3,150 in 2028 (a 5% increase). These residents have similar spending power to the rest of the catchment area.

Existing Businesses Context

There are currently more than 230 businesses within a two-mile radius of the Activity Center. Many among them are local industrial and business services, but there is a small handful of retail businesses, including:

- Food/Beverage retail - 10 establishments
- Clothing retail – 2 establishments
- Fitness center – 3 establishments
- Gas station – 2 establishments
- Grocery store – 1 establishment

Current food and beverage retail consists of casual or fast-food establishments such as Starbucks, Waffle House, and McDonalds. Overall, there is a lack of family restaurants. Additionally, there appear to be no breweries or brewery-adjacent businesses, which make up a significant portion of the allowable uses in the expected zoning revisions for this site.

Automobile Traffic

I-75 is a major driver of activity in the study area. Annual average daily traffic (AADT) on I-75 as reported by Florida Department of Transportation reaches up to 75,000 vehicles. While robust, this is significantly lower than other areas of I-75; areas around Sarasota have AADTs of 140,000 while peak AADT around Fort Myers approaches 120,000.

Sumter Boulevard is a major north-south arterial street, with an AADT of just above 16,000 vehicles. Sumter Boulevard has slightly lower traffic volumes than the parallel Toledo Blade Boulevard, which acts as a complementary north-south roadway connecting I-75 to the rest of North Port.

Traffic volumes of these amounts are often economic development attractors in their own right, regardless of existing residents or businesses.

Market Potential

The Spending Potential Index (SPI) looks at how much households in an area are spending on different products or services relative to expectation. The SPI of local households is slightly below average in some key retail industries, per ESRI Business Analyst, including food away from home, alcoholic beverages, and entertainment and recreation. This suggests that there may be some untapped spending potential to support these business types.

This is supported by other retail and restaurant market potential indexes. These indexes identify a potential gap in family restaurants. The indexes note that local households have a higher propensity than the U.S. average to spend money at family restaurants on a regular basis, but that the supply of such restaurants is limited within the catchment area.

Hotels

North Port has one small, two-story motel, and one hotel, a 100-bed Hampton Inn located off US-41 (Tamiami Trail). Average room rates routinely range in the \$160 - \$180 range, though occasionally as high as \$230. This is below the county average of \$239 as reported in The North Port Prospectus. However, it

is above the expected discount hotel rate, suggesting a potential level of demand higher than the number of rooms currently being supplied.

Occupancy rates for the hotel are currently unknown. The county average occupancy rate per The North Port Prospectus is 74%.

A map of regional hotel locations shows a visible gap in and around North Port, especially along I-75. However, there has been interest in building a new hotel near I-75 on Toledo Blade Boulevard.

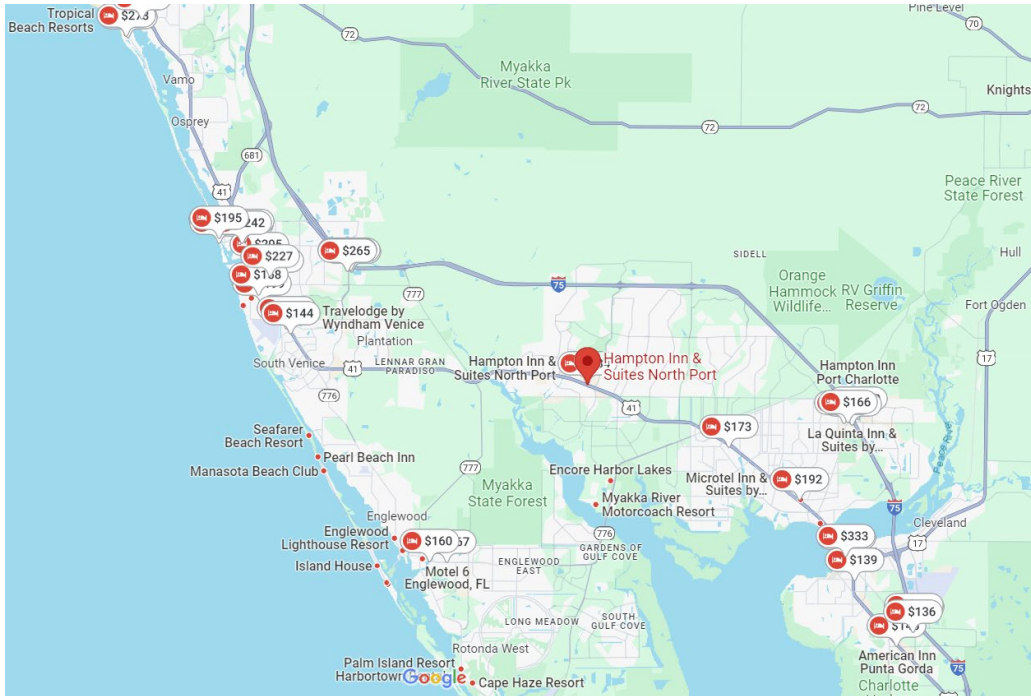


Figure 15: Regional Hotel Locations

Hospital-Oriented Development Findings

While the previous section reviewed the existing conditions relevant to economic development decision-making, the pending Sarasota Memorial Hospital development is itself a significant driver of future Gateway Activity Center growth. This section discusses the impact of hospital development in spurring further economic activity.

Two brief case studies were conducted and are summarized below. Two comparable hospital projects, in Fort Myers, Florida, and Statesboro, Georgia, spurred significant commercial development that services staff, patients, and visitors of the hospital, suggesting that the new Gateway Activity Center is very likely to be heavily influenced by a hospital.

Case Study: East Georgia Regional Medical Center – Statesboro, GA

East Georgia Regional Medical Center opened with a staff of 60 doctors on July 16, 2000. Today, the Center has over 800 employees and more than 100 physicians on staff, representing a wide range of specialties. The Center has 149 available beds, and in 2022 the Center boasted 271,000 patient encounters. The Center estimated that they contributed \$193.5 million in community benefits in 2022,

including capital projects, property & sales taxes, payroll, charity & uncompensated care, dollars spent locally, and donations & outreach.²

Pictured below is aerial imagery from February 1999, during the construction of the hospital. As shown, much of the surrounding area was undeveloped, aside from some low-density residential to the east and to the south. At that time there was virtually no commercial development in the area.



Figure 16: Hospital Site in 1999

Since then, numerous commercial developments have been constructed, many of which serve staff, patients, and visitors of the hospital. By 2005, several restaurants had opened, as well as a medical supply store. By 2013, a pharmacy, a hotel, and several other medical practices had been constructed. By 2015, a grocery store was in place.

Pictured below is a map of the area surrounding the hospital as of January 2024.

²"2022 Community Benefit Report." East Georgia Regional Medical Center, 2023. <https://www.eastgeorgiaregional.com/>.

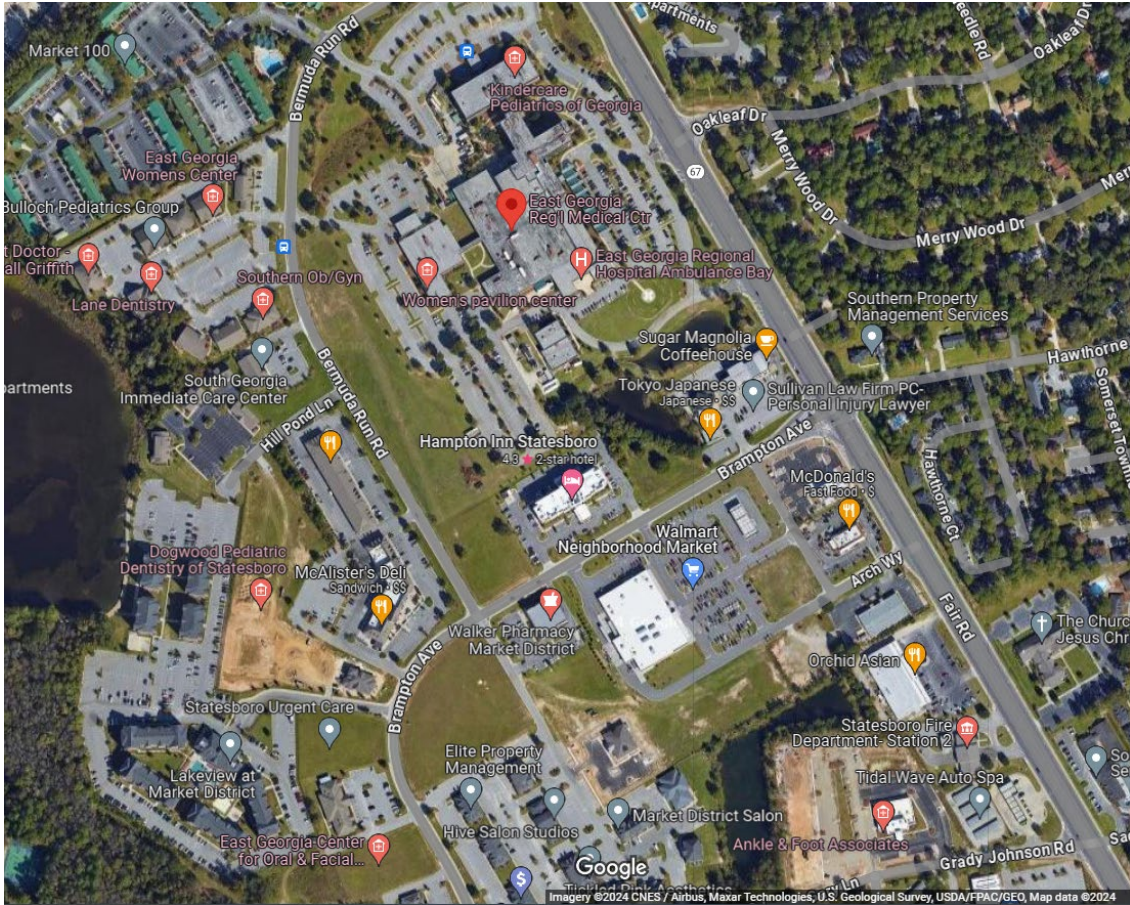


Figure 17: Hospital Site in 2024

Before the construction of the hospital, there was already demand for services including dining, a grocery store, and a pharmacy. However, much of the surrounding area was low-density residential, such that demand was insufficient for commercial development. The hospital acted as a catalyst for new commercial development, finally providing enough demand to entice commercial developers. As goods and services began to locate in the area, this in turn created a demand for more housing; today, there is much more housing in the surrounding area than there was before the construction of the hospital. This has created a positive cycle, in which commercial development attracts residential development, which in turn creates demand for more commercial development.

Case Study: Gulf Coast Medical Center – Fort Myers, FL

Construction was completed on the Gulf Coast Medical Center in March 2009. The Medical Center was constructed around the former Gulf Coast Hospital, which was founded in 1990. The Gulf Coast Medical Center added 436,000 square feet of new construction and 20,000 square feet of renovation to the original hospital. An additional tower was constructed in 2021, adding 54 beds. Currently, the Center sees around 210,000 patients annually and hosts 699 beds.³

³Lee Health Acute Care Hospitals Fast Facts. Accessed January 2024. <https://www.leehealth.org/about-us/get-to-know-lee-health/lee-health-fast-facts/lee-health-four-acute-care-hospitals-fast-facts>.

As seen in the photo below, the area immediately surrounding the original Gulf Coast Hospital was largely undeveloped in March 1994, despite much of the area further north and west of the center having already been developed.



Figure 18: Hospital Area in 1994

By 2004, some developments had been constructed in the area, including a few specialty doctor's offices and other healthcare facilities, a pharmacy, and several fast-food and sit-down restaurants. During this same period, an apartment complex was also built. The construction and renovations to the Center in 2009 led to the creation of even more dining options and adjacent healthcare developments, including a senior-living facility.

Pictured below is a map of the area surrounding the hospital as of January 2024, in which nearly all the area has been developed, primarily with complementary goods and service providers.

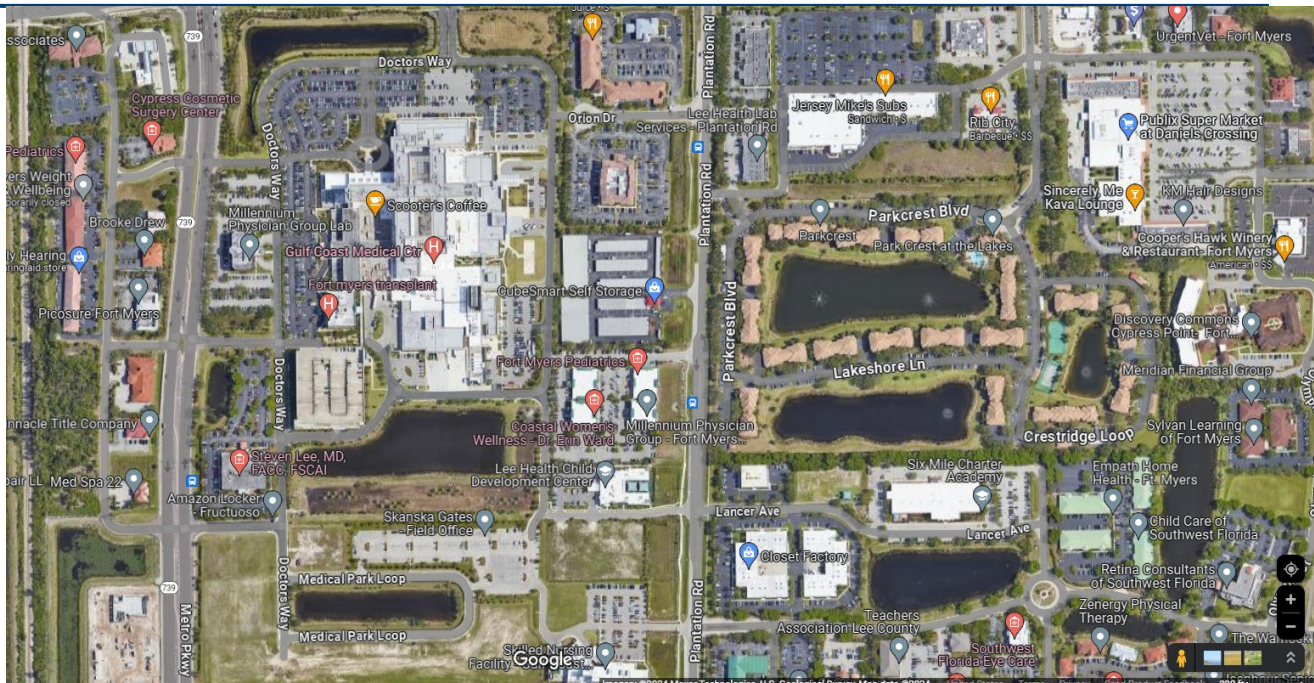


Figure 19: Hospital Area in 2024

Both case study examples demonstrate immense growth fueled by the construction of a hospital in an underdeveloped part of a city. In the shorter term, casual dining options can be expected to locate near the hospital, to serve staff, patients, and visitors. In the longer term, complementary services and amenities, such as hotels, pharmacies, and other medical practices, will begin to locate in the area. With expanded dining options and amenities nearby, additional vacant land is attractive for infill residential development, which in turn creates more demand for future commercial and office development.

In both cases, the surrounding area had some residential development, and therefore some demand for commercial development. However, the construction (or expansion) of a hospital was the impetus needed for goods and services to finally locate in the area.

Fiscal Impacts

It is reasonable to assume that tax revenues for the City of North Port from this area will increase substantially with the development of the Gateway Activity Center. The potential to use additional tax revenues to finance the necessary infrastructure in the Activity Center through a mechanism like Tax Increment Financing will be explored in the Master Plan.

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

This assessment has identified a variety of opportunities for development of the Gateway Activity Center that can create benefits for North Port. It has also identified a number of challenges that will need to be planned for in order to deliver those benefits.

The following challenges, or issues, have been identified:

- Most of the land within and surrounding the activity center is in a flood hazard zone, and was recently severely impacted by flooding in Hurricane Ian.
- Existing single-family homes exist in areas where mixed-use or Activity Center development is desired, and will need to be considered in any redevelopment plans.
- Land surrounding the activity center has been pre-platted for residential and parcels are owned by many different owners, many of whom are not local, making assembly of parcels for large projects difficult.
- With the exception of the hospital, there is uncertainty surrounding the interest and feasibility of current development prospects, and concern about the availability of workforce housing.
- The area of undeveloped land surrounding the interchange is not large enough for the desired or anticipated level of activity.
- The topography of the land, with its wetlands and waterways, as well as the current stormwater management system, creates a challenging landscape for building.
- Water and sewer utilities are currently being installed in the parcels south of I-75, but there are no plans to extend utilities to the parcels north of I-75.
- The transportation network between the four quadrants of the interchange, as well as between the surrounding neighborhoods, is lacking in connectivity.

The following opportunities have been identified:

- The Activity Center's location at the interchange and the imminent development of the hospital provide an opportunity to serve local goods and services needs through hospital- and highway-oriented development.
- The utilities expansion taking place in the southern quadrants will set up those parcels for rapid development.
- Locations are available on site and in the surrounding neighborhoods to create shared-use stormwater management infrastructure, such as ponds, that can double as neighborhood amenities.
- The FDOT safety work at the I-75 interchange, which includes signalization of the highway ramps, creates an opportunity to connect trails across Sumter Boulevard.
- The signalization project also creates an opportunity for a gateway treatment across Sumter Boulevard, which would slow traffic, improve safety, and create a sense of place for North Port and the Activity Center.
- The topography of the study area creates an opportunity to create a network of trails along waterways that can connect neighborhoods, parks, existing trails, and the Activity Center. This trail network can be implemented as part of new development and would allow for better public access to parks and other recreation opportunities on public land.

- A system of signage and wayfinding can supplement the trail network to improve connectivity and create a distinctive brand for the Gateway district.
- The expected level of development in the Activity Center would allow it to be set up as a Tax Increment Financing district (or similar tax benefit structure) to finance infrastructure improvements.
- The Activity Center or the future mixed-use area to the south would support affordable housing for seniors or workers with proximity to the hospital.
- The hospital also creates a strong opportunity to develop a hotel and other visitation uses, supported by the interstate and the existing market in North Port.
- The Activity Center land could support light industrial and employment-intensive uses to create jobs.
- Land that is conserved in the study area can be established as a natural environment that helps to manage stormwater and provides natural habitat for wildlife.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The strategic framework for developing land use scenarios for the Gateway Activity Center is informed by the North Port Comprehensive Plan, the North Port Strategic Vision Plan, and the findings of this assessment.

The Comprehensive Plan establishes this Activity Center to provide for highway uses serving interstate travelers, and for economic development. It requires a hotel/motel or other appropriate high revenue generating land uses to offset the impacts of the tax-exempt hospital. It stipulates that adjacent neighborhoods are adequately buffered from negative impacts, such as traffic and noise. Finally, it requires connectivity to adjacent neighborhoods and Myakkahatchee Creek Park/Greenway, as part of the City's promotion of Working Waterfronts and water-based recreational opportunities.

The Activity Center should be developed in a way that supports North Port's priorities as identified in the Strategic Vision Plan, particularly those in the Economic Development and Quality of Life pillars. Relevant priorities include:

- Promote the natural character and enhance the identity of our neighborhoods to build community cohesiveness and a better "sense of place" for North Port.
- Promote a range of housing options and affordability for current and future residents.
- Increase the percentage of non-residential tax base year over year.
- Pursue the development of a diversified economy that supports a wide range of businesses and sectors representative of targeted employers.
- Develop multi-modal connectivity to historical, cultural, and recreational locations, including neighborhoods, and environmental greenway & blueway points of interests.

The Gateway Activity Center will continue to be defined by its proximity to the interstate, as well as by the construction of the future hospital. However, in planning this area, it is necessary to ensure that the Activity Center functions to both serve and welcome interstate travelers, as well as to provide much needed amenities to the residents of North Port.

The Gateway Master Plan will consider three land use scenarios for the Activity Center, along with five recommendations for stormwater management. The development of scenarios and recommendations will be guided by the existing plans and strategic vision for North Port.

The desired outcomes of the land use models are summarized in four guiding principles:

1. Develop a land use strategy focusing on mixed-use development that spurs economic development to attract visitors and provide employment, services, and amenities for North Port residents.
2. Create a cohesive gateway district vision that establishes a sense of place for North Port residents and welcomes visitors.
3. Improve multi-modal transportation connectivity and access within and through the Activity Center.
4. Reduce flooding risk and mitigate the cumulative stormwater impacts from existing conditions and anticipated development projects.

All land use scenarios will address in varying degrees the issues and opportunities identified in the previous section. Any scenarios developed will likely have the following characteristics:

- Highway-oriented development will be encouraged, to provide a mix of uses that primarily serve interstate travelers. These uses include a hotel or motel, electric vehicle charging stations, retail, and restaurants. These uses will serve interstate travelers; provide new and diversified goods, services, and amenities to North Port residents; increase in-town spending; and provide new employment opportunities.
- Scenarios will encourage mixed-use development with a variety of commercial development types, as well as some residential development (which may be located outside the Activity Center itself), helping to establish a commercial center accessible to the surrounding neighborhoods. By increasing the range and amount of the City's housing stock, new mixed-use development ensures there will be an adequate level of workforce and affordable housing for new and existing residents.
- Scenarios will provide a framework for the installation of water and sewer lines at a level that is adequate to support the level of targeted development.
- Scenarios will include multi-modal connections between the Activity Center, the adjacent neighborhoods, and the existing greenway and blueway system, expanding multi-modal connectivity and access.
- Scenarios will consider and attempt to minimize the potential for adverse environmental impacts, particularly as related to water treatment and distribution, flooding, and protection of the City's potable water supply. "Green" building standards will also be encouraged for all new development.
- Scenarios will balance the demand for increased development density with the need to buffer the surrounding neighborhoods from the Activity Center.

Based on the location, characteristics, and goals of the Gateway Activity Center, the Gateway Master Plan will consider three plausible development scenarios:

1. **Hospital-oriented Development**, in which commercial growth follows the development of the hospital at 4900 Sumter Boulevard. The surrounding area is developed primarily with uses that are complementary to the hospital, that serve hospital workers and visitors.
2. **Commercial (Employment) Focused Development**, in which in addition to new development that is complementary to the new hospital, additional commercial, including possible destination recreational uses, office, and light industrial development is constructed. This strategy involves the use of targeted development investments and business incentivization strategies.
3. **Recreation Focused Development**, in which there is a large focus on recreational and conservation purposes. This includes an expansion and connection of the trail system and lower levels of development than the other scenarios.

The Master Plan will develop and evaluate these three scenarios. The final recommendation will be a preferred scenario, which may resemble one of the three listed above but may also incorporate the best elements of all three scenarios. The preferred scenario will include implementation action steps the City of North Port can take to engender desirable development for the area.