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Headline: New strategies needed for struggling beachside

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Text: In a series of articles this week, The News-Journal is examining the decline of the Daytona Beach beachside area and searching for ideas that can revive the city's heart and core.

We believe the strip of land that fronts the Atlantic Ocean between International Speedway Boulevard and Seabreeze Boulevard defines the city's past and present, and holds the key to its future. If this central beachside area continues to decay, the World's Most Famous Beach will become a mockery of itself, driving away residents and tourists.

The future of the beachside depends in large part on the vision and persistence of city leaders and Volusia County officials. For the past

30 years, city and county leaders have been grappling with the area's problems, with only limited success. New approaches are needed. Relying on past strategies inevitably will lead to another dead end.

Daytona Beach and Volusia County literally can't afford an extended exercise in futility. Tens of millions of dollars already have been invested in an effort that seems mainly to have

controlled the rot and infused new life into just a few places along the **beachside**.

Thirty years ago, Daytona Beach declared its core tourism zone blighted. City leaders hoped to bring in more federal aid and create new options for redevelopment. Yet the blight remains, especially in residential sections, and the threat of crime discourages investors and tourists.

Some business locations look rundown and seedy — not what most people would associate with a famous tourist town.

Very few new hotels have appeared on the **beachside** in the past 20 years. Dining options are limited, except in the area around the Hilton Daytona Beach Oceanfront Resort and the Ocean Walk Shoppes.

Here and there, Daytona Beach looks like some beach cities looked in the 1960s. Today's middle-class tourist expects to find more at the beach than small hotels, arcades and beach-towel shops. The tourists of the new century want entertainment, high-quality dining and quaint shops. Daytona Beach has some good things to offer, but it can't deliver what many of these tourists are looking for.

Tourists also like areas with healthy neighborhoods and residents who walk the streets at night. A resort location with a "lived-in" look has an advantage over one that is designed solely for tourism.

The neighborhoods of the **beachside** are in rough shape. Many houses there sell for under \$50,000, a contrast with **beachside** neighborhoods in neighboring Ormond Beach where the median home price is \$117,000.

Can the **beachside** be revived if families don't want to live there, or if residents have to battle indifference, petty crime and physical decay in their neighborhoods?

A beach city with deteriorating neighborhoods likely cannot attract and hold the families that form the backbone of the tourism industry.

Change must finally come, or the **beachside** could become "a slum by the sea," a term once used to describe Atlantic City.

City and county officials understand the need for change; they have been aggressively pursuing revitalization and redevelopment since the 1980s.

Their basic approach can be characterized as swinging for the fences. Go for the big projects. Hope for a sudden turnaround.

Some progress has been made, thanks to the leaders' commitment to the projects that produced the Hilton resort, Ocean Walk and the expanded Ocean Center. But these ventures haven't been smashing successes — the Ocean Walk development is in foreclosure, the Hilton is facing some financial difficulty and the Ocean Center's operations are subsidized by taxpayers.

The home-run advocates see hope in the coming of the big Shriners International Convention in 2017, the reopening of the pier and the opening of Joe's Crab Shack. There is also the prospect of two new condo-hotel towers, which a Canadian company has plans to build just south of Sun Splash Park.

These developments bolster hopes for the beachside's future. But they need to be accompanied by a number of smaller, less-exciting changes that will ensure progress takes root and spreads throughout the core zone.

To reach its full potential, the **beachside** needs nice neighborhoods and everything that comes with them: a strong sense of place; thriving businesses including restaurants and shops; and residents who make the streets come alive

year-round.

More about this and other **beachside** issues in the stories and **editorials** that appear today, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

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Text: A second large convention hotel is the great white whale for local leaders who've sought for years to turn around the struggling **beachside**.

It's seen as the next monster project, the one that finally will be the tipping point for the area around the Ocean Center, the county's impressive convention facility. Economic-development specialists and city and county officials are aggressively pursuing a complement for the 744-room Hilton Daytona Beach Oceanfront Resort. Some of these officials believe their goal is within sight, if not quite within reach.

Unfortunately, a sober analysis won't support the optimism of the **beachside** planners. A second big convention hotel remains elusive, and there aren't many solid reasons to believe the outlook will improve any time soon.

Last year, area business leaders funded a \$50,000 study of the market for a second convention hotel in Daytona Beach. The study found that a 500-room hotel could succeed on the **beachside**. But to make it happen, local officials would have to invest a large sum of public money and take on a significant amount of financial risk.

The numbers were discouraging: A \$130 million hotel project would require the taxpayers to build and own the hotel, the report from Fishkind & Associates in Orlando said. Private investors almost certainly wouldn't take on the risk of such a large venture in return for a fairly modest projected return.

Fishkind explored an alternative scenario that included some taxpayer-financed amenities such as a parking garage. That probably wouldn't be enough to entice the private sector, the report said.

So, elected officials would have to assume the risk of committing the taxpayers' money to an expensive project that could well fail. As The News-Journal reports today, the convention business nationwide isn't exactly booming. Over the past decade, publicly financed convention hotels in cities such as Myrtle Beach, S.C., and Baltimore have gotten into financial trouble.

It's no surprise that county officials didn't rush to embrace the study's recommendations. The last thing they and their constituents need is another large, publicly financed project that fails to meet expectations.

The county-owned Ocean Center is the biggest current example of a public project that has fallen short of expectations. Several years ago, the county poured \$82 million into an expansion of the center, but it still hasn't attracted enough convention business to stand on its own without help from the taxpayers.

County leaders believe a second convention hotel would reel in more business for the Ocean Center and make the \$82 million expansion pay off handsomely for the community.

But independent analysts say there isn't a lot of room for growth in the convention business. The economy is still weak, and more and more business groups are seeking high-tech alternatives to conventions.

The county shouldn't give up on the Ocean Center. It has a good location a short walk from the World's Most Famous Beach. And the decision by the Shriners to hold their convention there in 2017 should provide a nice promotional boost.

Throwing big money after a second convention hotel, however, looks like a losing proposition. Local leaders need to work on making the **beachside** more attractive to private investors before they decide to bet public money on one big project.

When shops, restaurants and entertainment venues begin to multiply on the **beachside**, conventioners will have more reasons to come to Daytona Beach. And when people buy homes on the **beachside**, fix them up and help to build attractive, thriving

neighborhoods, the area will hold more appeal for visitors and business investors.

Instead of pursuing the great white whale, local leaders need to focus on the small elements that come together to make tourist cities successful.

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Text: A comment published in The News-Journal's ongoing series of articles on the state of the beachside captures both the challenge and the opportunity presented by this blighted area.

Paul Politis, a well known local businessman, remarked: "We've created an atmosphere that's the least-desirable location in Volusia County — and it's two blocks from the beach."

The beachside area is the core of Daytona Beach — it's the source of the city's identity and history as a tourism mecca, but today it's widely viewed as an undesirable location for residents and businesses.

Yet it lies by the rolling waves of the Atlantic Ocean and hard-sand beaches that still host millions of visitors each year. Thirty years of decline in the value of the city's human assets haven't robbed Daytona Beach of its natural appeal.

And as Politis' comment implies, local leaders whose big plans went awry and residents who were guilty of the sins of indifference and neglect created the less-than-inviting

"atmosphere." It didn't just happen through some inexorable historical process.

So the downhill slide can be reversed — just look at the nearby beach and think of how many people want to live near the ocean. Think further about how water — in the form of rivers, lakes and bays — serves as a magnet in so many thriving cities, pulling in visitors, investors and new residents.

The **beachside** has the powerful pull of the Atlantic, and it has the additional advantage of cheap property. A house near the beach that would sell for \$300,000 or more in other Florida coastal cities may go for under \$100,000 in Daytona Beach. And even commercial property within a block or two of the beach is a relative bargain.

Daytona Beach has some real pluses, but it needs to attract a "pioneer" class of residents who will lead the transformation of deteriorating, crime-prone **beachside** neighborhoods.

To attract those pioneers, the city must first get down to the nitty-gritty of urban revitalization: code enforcement, a "feet on the street" strategy of policing and an overall sprucing up of neighborhood amenities such as sidewalks.

The city already is stepping up code enforcement and increasing the police presence in areas where petty crime has taken root. City officials are planning to put pressure on the owners of rental properties of four or more units, in an effort to ensure those houses are well-maintained. A prolonged offensive against street crime and code violations should remove signs of physical decay and increase residents' sense of security. These are the basic building blocks of neighborhood renewal.

With the foundation in place, city leaders should find it easier to encourage investment in housing and retail ventures. The **beachside** could align itself with the trend of "walkable downtowns" and offer lofts, townhouses and smaller living spaces for the growing ranks of single adults and aging baby boomers who like living in urban environments and enjoying all the benefits of city life.

City leaders should look for ways to help small-scale developers achieve success on the **beachside**. The long-term success of some of the city's big projects, such as the \$82 million expansion of the Ocean Center, probably will depend in part on whether the core area of the city's so-called entertainment zone looks like a lively place where conventioners and their spouses can feel comfortable dining, shopping and walking the streets at night.

The activities of entrepreneurs and pioneer residents can send a strong positive signal to visitors, including business officials who make decisions on locations for their companies' offices and factories. Volusia County needs more high-wage employers and job creators;

that's part of the revitalization equation too.

While tougher code enforcement can help neighborhoods, looser regulation would be beneficial for **beachside** developers.

City officials are re-examining zoning requirements that were designed primarily for suburban areas. Zoning is uniform in the city, but one size doesn't fit all situations — especially in depressed areas on the **beachside**. The city should get rid of artificial barriers to **beachside** development and put out the welcome mat for responsible developers. Rules are necessary, but no one wants rules that preserve abandoned buildings and rundown properties.

The people of Daytona Beach can create a new and better atmosphere on the **beachside**. City and county leaders shouldn't wait for outsiders with deep pockets to bring the area back to full glory.

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Headline: The **beachside** needs small changes and a big push from locals

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Text: I think The News-Journal's series last week on the **beachside** contains several key lessons for local leaders and residents, with the most important one being: sweat the small stuff.

There also is this lesson for the top officials: Put down those expensive consultants' studies and just look. See for yourself what's going on with residents and businesses in the area in Daytona Beach between Seabreeze Boulevard and International Speedway Boulevard. Then think about practical, relatively low-cost steps you can take to improve the area.

And this: When an area is rundown and depressed, you can't just wait for some outside agency to come in and save it. Our own residents and local investors need to resolve to bring it back to life.

Then there is this very important lesson for residents, which comes mostly from my own observations: Don't be a cynic, a killjoy and an obstructionist. If you think Daytona Beach has no future and you don't want it to change anyway, keep it to yourself and don't try to influence others with your negative attitude. Don't get in the way of the dreamers and doers

who will carry a community into the future.

As for sweating the small stuff, this is not an easy lesson for many political leaders to learn. Politicians have a natural tendency to promise the moon. They want to leave behind monuments to their aspirations for the community.

Daytona Beach and Volusia County officials are generally well-grounded people, and they don't suffer from delusions of grandeur. But they have tended toward grandiosity in planning for the future of the **beachside**. Too often they've taken this approach: order an expensive study, marvel at the drawings of wonders to come and predict that a glorious new day is about to dawn.

Some of these studies actually

have helped produce some real improvements on the **beachside** and in downtown Daytona Beach. But then the momentum slows and citizens become cynical about all the studies and grand plans. And, of course, public financing poses a constant challenge and leaves many proposed projects hanging — often for years.

The **beachside** overhaul should begin on its beleaguered streets. Clean up crime, fix broken windows and remove graffiti. Get tough on code enforcement and put heavy pressure on slumlords. Fund neighborhood beautification projects. Find ways to encourage new investment in shabby neighborhoods and ailing retail districts.

Think about the meaning of revitalization. When an area begins to show real signs of life, the foundation for more sweeping changes has been laid.

Think about this too: Would you want to visit a place that looks unlivable — that is, not like a place where you would want to live? Today's tourism is driven in good part by a resort's ambience, the impression it gives and the way it feels on the street.

The **beachside** doesn't have much ambience. And it needs ambience — it doesn't need to be South Beach or Delray Beach or some other trendy spot — but it needs to have an inviting atmosphere that makes people feel comfortable.

Tourists will come to a place with a clear, appealing identity.

While sweating the small stuff, Daytona Beach can't afford to abandon the big stuff, like the Ocean Center. Taxpayers have invested \$82 million in expanding the convention facility, and the county must take aggressive action to ensure the public gets its money's worth. That means providing more effective marketing and promotion, and recruiting new hotels to increase the availability of high-quality rooms.

It should not mean, however, putting a giant wad of taxpayer money on the table and betting it all on another dicey, large convention hotel like the Hilton. That money can be put to safer and better use cleaning up neighborhoods, helping small entrepreneurs and improving the **beachside's** infrastructure.

Again, most of the energy should come from the city and its residents. An outside investor will look only at the bottom line; someone who lives here and invests time or money is more likely to have an eye on the **beachside's** future.

Now, about public attitudes. At times I think that Daytona Beach and Volusia County have an " 'agin' it" lobby. It's made up of shifting groups of people who shout "I'm against it" — or "I'm agin' it, " as country folks say.

Virtually every attempt to change something seems to draw this response, and at times the negativity exerts strong influence on elected officials. The naysayers sometimes display a bad attitude, claiming that leaders are foolish to think Daytona Beach or some other city in the area can make real progress.

I'm the first to say change isn't always good. And some calls for change aren't grounded in reality. But we always need some change, and we should always be looking ahead, planning to make progress.

The **beachside** won't change — in fact, it will continue to decline — unless local leaders and residents put their backs into an effort to push it toward a better future. Those who just say "no" are standing in the way of the future.

For the **beachside** to change for the better, leaders need to start with the small things. See what happens. Then get ready to take bigger steps.

Mac Thrower is the opinion page editor of The News-Journal. Email him at

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Text: Daytona Beach made a statement last week about the importance of cleaning up the **beachside** as a prelude to reviving the city's core area.

City commissioners gave an initial OK to biennial inspections of rental homes with up to four units. The move is intended to put pressure on indifferent landlords and force them to keep their properties up to city code.

The **beachside** has suffered from the indifference of some property owners who allow houses and yards to deteriorate and turn into eyesores. It's about time the city cracked down hard on slumlords. City officials need to go all-out in an effort to cure urban blight and make the **beachside** more attractive and appealing to potential new residents.

When the City Commission gave preliminary approval to the rental-house inspections, there were complaints about threats to property rights and the privacy of renters. Property rights are a crucial concern, but no property owner — especially one who rents houses and makes a profit on them — has a right to let houses fall into disrepair, creating safety hazards for renters and ugly scars on the urban landscape.

The city should be aggressive in enforcing codes and policing crime-ridden neighborhoods. That's the first step toward bringing struggling areas back to vibrant life.

The city's Daytona Proud program has the potential to harness the energy of city employees, residents and business owners and direct it in a campaign to beautify and revitalize depressed areas. Last year, Mayor Glenn Ritchey said the campaign was "not just a cleanup activity." Daytona Proud aims to "change the way we think about our community."

A change in thinking is needed, because Daytona Beach residents sometimes tend toward negativity when discussing their city and its future. An infusion of community pride would go a long way toward turning around the **beachside** and other blighted neighborhoods.

It's hard to take pride in a place that looks like a slum. That's where code enforcement, property inspections and street-level policing can make a difference.

So can spending on sidewalk upgrades and landscaping improvements. These are small investments for the city, but they can help change negative impressions and encourage investors to take a chance on the **beachside**.

These small-scale efforts are overshadowed by local governments' big projects, such as the county's \$82 million expansion of the Ocean Center. But the Ocean Center has yet to make a big difference for the **beachside**, and it's clear a new approach is needed to achieve local leaders' dreams of a thriving tourism zone.

Daytona Proud and the proposed inspections of rental houses should help improve the atmosphere of the **beachside**. From there, city and county leaders need to look at affordable initiatives that could encourage private investment in the core area.

As detailed in The News-Journal's series, "Beauty and Blight," the city of Delray Beach revived its downtown with a variety of measures, including business loans and grants and other incentives for developers. Also, Delray Beach came up with a year-round calendar of special events to attract people downtown.

Daytona Beach officials should look at Delray Beach and other coastal cities that have turned around their urban cores. There is no one formula for achieving success, but a mix of measures tailored to Daytona Beach and its history and identity should eventually pay off for the city.

You start toward a goal by putting one foot in front of another — not trying to leap over decades' worth of obstacles in a single bound. Let's hope the Daytona Beach City Commission's recent vote on property inspections represents one of those small steps into the future.

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Push in the right direction for the lagging beachfront

OUR VIEW

Published: Sunday, March 31, 2013 at 5:30 a.m.

Suddenly, it seems, new or refurbished hotels and condos are popping up like spring flowers in key areas along the beachfront in Daytona Beach. Revival is now the theme for the beachside, which has suffered from the recession and a general decline of the commercial and residential areas along State Road A1A.

City and county leaders know that it will take more than a handful of projects to bring the beachfront back to full, roaring life. And past disappointments continue to haunt the present, even as developers unveil new plans for high-rise hotels and condos on A1A.

Still, there's no question that the short-term outlook for the Daytona Beach oceanfront looks more promising than it has since the collapse of the real estate bubble and the onset of the recession. More important, there are solid reasons for optimism about the chances for a long-term revitalization of the beachside. Several factors are combining to make Daytona Beach a more attractive place for real estate investment and tourism development.

As always, the primary factor is the state of the economy. The national economy is slowly gaining ground in the wake of the recession, and Florida is beginning to outpace the nation as a whole.

Real estate, ground zero for the Great Recession, is making a major comeback. Deep-pocketed investors are ready to invest in real estate again. And the bad news/good news for Daytona Beach is that prices in prime areas like the beachfront are still comparatively low, making this struggling market a bargain for opportunistic investors.

Finally — and this is an especially encouraging point for local leaders who have invested public money in the beachfront — the core of the entertainment zone, or E-zone, isn't moribund. The Ocean Walk Shoppes development has struggled, but it brought new restaurants and gave the area a more appealing look. The venerable Daytona Beach Pier has reopened with a popular restaurant, Joe's Crab Shack, drawing tourists and locals to the beach. The \$80 million renovation of the Ocean Center is still controversial, but this convention center near the beach holds obvious potential as the convention business picks up in the aftermath of the recession.

With the convergence of these factors, economic momentum is building along A1A from Seabreeze Boulevard south to Daytona Beach Shores.

Four national hotel chains are renovating and reopening hotels along the beachfront. A \$150 million hotel-and-condo development with two towers is slated to open at the eastern end of Oakridge Boulevard in 2015. Another big hotel-condo complex has been planned for a location south of Sun Splash Park.

Some are wondering if the big projects on the beachside will fall through, continuing an unfortunate pattern from the last decade. Certainty is usually in short supply in real estate development, but city officials have reason for confidence. Good things already are happening on the beachfront, and the improvements taking shape should invite more interest from investors.

But make no mistake, the future of the beachside is still in doubt. There are still shabby-looking hotels and businesses in central locations. The area needs more restaurants, more upscale shops and more conventions to help fill those new hotels rooms. And redevelopment won't be complete until the beachside neighborhoods regain their old appeal.

Nevertheless, as City Commissioner Pam Woods observed, the area is getting "a push in the right direction." After years of stagnation and decline, that push is raising new hopes for the future of the world's most famous beach.

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