

Race Issue Study Circle meeting at the St. Johns River Center in Palatka.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF PALATKA

## CITIZENSHIP AWARD

# Better Together

City of Palatka unites the community with Race Issue Study Circles

by Mandi Tucker  
City of Palatka



**PALATKA**  
Putnam County  
Pop. 10,723

**T**he **City of Palatka's** Race Issue Study Circles (RISC) embodies the city's unofficial motto, "**We Are Better Together.**"

Palatka recently was given the **Florida Citizenship Award** by the **Florida League of Cities** for the RISC. The Florida Citizenship Award focuses on city projects or programs that increase civic awareness and education and promote active participation in city government among residents.

RISC, created in 2006, was a recipient of a 2018 City Catalyst Grant from the **Florida League of Mayors** through a rebirth of the program in 2017. While the initiative was timely then, it has grown even more so in 2020.

## HISTORY EXTENDS BEYOND CIVIL WAR

Between 1860 and 1865, Palatka was occupied at different times by Union and Confederate forces. Both used the Bronson Mulholland House as their headquarters. After the war ended, the Bronson Mulholland House became a school for freed slaves. The city now owns the historic house, which is available for events and group tours.

Central Academy opened in 1888 and became the first accredited Black high school in Florida. In 1899, **Mary McLeod Bethune** founded the Palatka Mission School and operated it until 1904, before founding the school that would become

Bethune-Cookman University.

In 1915, when Palatka banned public hangings, the city became a safe haven for African Americans. In 1917, Mary Lawson Hospital opened, becoming the first Black hospital to be fully integrated in Florida. However, in 1918, the Ku Klux Klan formed in Palatka.

## A TIMELY REBIRTH OF RISC

The movement to form RISC was started in 2006 by residents **Ralph Dallas, Gaye Esperson** and **Kevin Sharbaugh**. RISC is a not-for-profit that is organized and run by volunteers.

Palatka **Mayor Terrill Hill's** desire to proactively address the issue of race relations in his city created an opportunity for the renewed RISC program. While Palatka's racial demographics are fairly even with a 43% Black and 47.4% White population (U.S. Census, July 2019 population estimates), the same diversity is not present within the rest of Putnam County.

Hill saw a racial divide escalating on a national scale. His concern grew following the 2017 incident culminating in violence and murder in **Charlottesville, Va.**, during protests over Civil War monuments. Palatka still has a statute of a confederate soldier on the county courthouse lawn. In 2017, RISC was reignited.

A town hall meeting with the theme "Addressing Historic Harms in Order to Preserve the Future" was held to bring racial

issues into the light. On August 28, 2017, with over 200 citizens present, the meeting addressed race relations and aired varying views of history, racism and community. This meeting affirmed that sharing collective experiences could give rise to empathy, understanding and community togetherness.

After several hours of sharing experiences spanning decades, over 70 citizens volunteered to participate in RISC, which has grown to include circle locations in **Crescent City, Interlachen** and Palatka. This program facilitates a safe space to speak about subjects considered taboo in public and enable people to ask questions they might not previously have had the courage to ask.

### CHANGING LIVES, UNITING COMMUNITY

The objectives of the RISC are:

- ▶ To change participants' lives as they gain valuable insight.
- ▶ To develop friendships and an understanding from people whom they may not have otherwise had an opportunity to engage with.
- ▶ To contribute to an open and honest dialogue about racial issues.

RISC is a conduit for community organizations to gain greater understanding about the benefits of race relations, empathy, understanding and diversity.

Two trained facilitators lead groups of 8-10 citizens per study circle. They create an environment that fosters respect for everyone and allows everyone to speak from the heart.

Each RISC circle has five weekly group sessions. The circles begin approximately three times a year. The circles are a harmonious discussion without challenging people's experiences or feelings and aim to address differences and similarities on a cultural, racial and social level. There are no right or wrong ideas, experiences or opinions. This approach allows people from different backgrounds to get to know each other, ask difficult questions and become friends.

Additional social activities are organized and held so participants can meet and mingle. This helps to reinforce the sense of a united community by enabling the members of all present and past circles to get to know one another. Most importantly, RISC creates a common ground for Palatka citizens.

Racial issues are in the headlines daily with the protests for Black Lives Matter happening in almost every state. With these issues on the minds of residents, RISC is instrumental in maintaining an open dialogue on concerns facing not only Palatka but also the nation.

As the state reopens following the COVID-19 pandemic, RISC will continue to bridge gaps and foster understanding between all Palatka citizens. Virtual circles began meeting on Zoom in August 2020.

As a grassroots campaign to stamp out misunderstandings and misconceptions of the race issues that face our communities and our nation, RISC is a progressive and positive program for any community. If you are interested in learning more about RISC, contact [riscputnam@gmail.com](mailto:riscputnam@gmail.com).

Mandi Tucker is project manager/grants administrator for the City of Palatka. **QC**

## Palatka Wins a Florida Municipal Achievement Award – Citizenship – for Race Issue Study Circles

*"Through the sharing of our personal stories, the Race Issues Study Circles have opened my eyes and heart to how our society is structured in a way that favors certain individuals and groups over others based upon the color of their skin. This awareness motivates me to use my position of privilege to be an ally for those people of color who experience this bias."*

– **Gaye Esperson, Co-Chair, Race Issues Study Circles of Putnam County**

*"The study circles provide a space for open and respectful conversations about personal experiences regarding race, racism and historical structural inequalities that continue to affect our communities. By listening to others and feeling heard by them, my perspective has been broadened and enriched. With this awareness, my compassion grows, and I am motivated to help make our community more just and equitable."*

– **Kevin Sharbaugh, Treasurer, Race Issues Study Circles of Putnam County**



PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF PALATKA



Bioreactor denitrification bed installation.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF BONITA SPRINGS

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AWARD

# Felts Avenue Bioreactor Project

Bonita Springs uses innovative technology to cut toxins in waterways

by Lora Taylor  
and  
Kiehl Ellison  
City of Bonita Springs



**BONITA SPRINGS**  
Lee County  
Pop. 54,437

**B**onita Springs is a friendly coastal town overlooking the beautiful waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Like many other coastal cities in the Southwest Florida region, water quality is an essential part of the economic stability of the area. Unfortunately, the past few years have seen an uptick in harmful algal blooms along the Southwest Florida coastline.

In 2012, the **Florida Department of Environmental Protection** implemented new regulations along the Imperial River to help combat the occurrence of harmful algal blooms in the area. These new regulations established a total maximum daily load for nitrogen of .74 milligrams per liter via the Everglades West Coast Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP). This tasked the City of Bonita Springs to reduce the amount of nitrogen along the Imperial River to more closely reflect pre-development levels. The BMAP established a target reduction amount of 60,000 lbs. by the year 2027, of which Bonita Springs' removal portion is 9,903 lbs.

Previous efforts from the city to improve water quality had already successfully removed about 3,301 lbs. of nitrogen from the waterways through various removal methods, but the city was interested in developing a more sustainable long-term solution for the remaining



6,000 lbs. of nitrogen. “With that in mind, the city decided to shift its focus to nitrogen removal methods that had the potential to fit three specific key criteria: ease of scalability, low aesthetic impact and cost-effectiveness,” said **City Manager Arleen Hunter**.

Of all the methods available, denitrifying bioreactors seemed to be the most aligned with the key features the city was looking for while also enabling the city to reach its goal of sustained nitrogen removal from its waterways.

Construction began on phase one of its Felts Avenue Bioreactor project in downtown Bonita Springs. There was little to no recorded data on the effectiveness of bioreactors in Florida available. Thus, the primary focus for phase one of this project was to capture nitrogen removal ratings data for the Florida DEP. **Assistant City Manager Matt Feeney** said, “Once reviewed and approved, these ratings would serve as a baseline removal efficiency rating for the bioreactor systems to facilitate the achievement of clean water statewide.”

The use of denitrifying bioreactors provided the city with an innovative way to reduce toxins naturally in waterways. Bioreactors use an anaerobic (oxygen-starved) environment to leverage naturally occurring denitrification bacteria to remove nitrogen in the water. They work by running water through pipes into basins filled with carbon-based filtering materials (i.e., wood chips) that are used to collect the nitrogen and expel a more natural quality of water into local waterways. The woodchips act as a carbon source for anaerobic bacteria to colonize.

The bacteria, in turn, strip nitrogen entrained in the stormwater runoff and convert it into nitrogen gas. This technology is proving to be highly effective at nitrogen removal, while at the same time being very cost-effective. Over the last 20 years, state and local governments across the United States have experimented with bioreactors as a cost-effective way to naturally denitrify bodies of water that contain excessive nitrogen pollution and restore the water quality.


The parcel of land selected for the bioreactor serves dual purposes, keeping in line with the city’s desire for low aesthetic impact while also making full use of the land set aside for the project. The project incorporated an at-grade event parking facility with 101 stalls directly above the bioreactor’s water treatment cells.

“Preliminary testing of the newly constructed bioreactors was conducted from September 12 through September 16, 2019, and yielded extraordinary results,” said **Mayor Peter Simmon**. “Phase 1 testing of the City of Bonita Springs bioreactor project has been able to effectively remove between 77% and 98% of nitrate, a key species of nitrogen closely associated with manmade fertilizer, from the water filtered through the system.”

By comparison, a similar bioreactor project conducted in Iowa in 2011 recorded a removal rate between 12% and 77% of nitrate. The increased effectiveness of the Bonita Springs bioreactor can be attributed to Florida’s warmer groundwater temperatures that facilitate an increased anaerobic bacterial activity that runs systems such as this. This is one of the most significant reductions of nitrate by a bioreactor system in the United States.

“By straying from the norm, the city’s progressive approach for solving its water quality problem may prove to be the new gold standard for future water quality projects throughout the state,” said Feeney. “The key criteria outlined in the development stages of the project helped guide the city in selecting a solution that fit the needs of the community, enabling the city to pioneer a unique and innovative solution.”

With the ease of scalability, effectiveness and efficiency in terms of land usage, this project has demonstrated it can be easily adapted to other coastal environments. It serves as a solid framework for coastal cities large and small to replicate and scale.

Lora Taylor is director of communications and Kiehl Ellison is project manager for the City of Bonita Springs. 

## Bonita Springs Wins a Florida Municipal Achievement Award



The **City of Bonita Springs** recently received the League’s **Environmental Stewardship Award**.

The award focuses on city programs that promote conservation, improve and protect environmental conditions, and/or provide environmental education and outreach programs within the city.

A 101-stall above-ground parking lot on top of Felts Avenue Bioreactor.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF BONITA SPRINGS



PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF SUNNY ISLES BEACH

**CITY SPIRIT AWARD**

# Pedestrian Safety Through Interconnectedness

Sunny Isles Beach focuses on the city's walkability

by Christopher J. Russo  
City of Sunny Isles Beach



**SUNNY ISLES BEACH**  
Miami-Dade County  
Pop. 23,253

In a time when it seems the world is becoming increasingly more divided, **Sunny Isles Beach** values interconnectedness as a guiding principle for governing. The connections lie between its residents and the government and between its diverse community members. Interconnectedness also extends to the heavily trafficked roads that demarcate the city.

A relatively young city, having just celebrated its 23rd anniversary, Sunny Isles Beach occupies approximately 1.78 square miles with a population of approximately 23,200 that is projected only to rise in the coming years.

The city's shared community values center around recognition and promotion of family life, and the city puts an emphasis on promoting citizen

interactivity. Since Sunny Isles Beach created its Cultural Master Plan, the City Commission has embraced that vision. Focused on creating an environment in which residential areas can thrive, the city's initiatives prompt "quality of life" and "quality of place" and prioritize community safety.

With quality of life and place at the forefront of the city's agenda, Sunny Isles Beach is an ideal place to live, work, learn and enjoy recreation. And walkability is a central community feature.

Residents can find everything they may need within walking distance. Yet, Collins Avenue (SR A1A), one of the busiest state roads in Florida, runs straight through the center of the city. During rush hour, the street teems with traffic as the city becomes a commuter route.



## FOCUS ON PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

With the increased volume of vehicles on the streets, pedestrian safety is a top concern. Reckless driving, driver distraction and jaywalking are also hazards that have unfortunately caused a loss of life in the city. To alleviate congestion along Collins Avenue and provide multimodal options to accommodate transportation needs, Sunny Isles Beach has implemented several successful initiatives in line with the city's Transportation Master Plan that increase pedestrian safety.

Recommendations for the master plan were communicated through a multi-level process: a series of town hall community workshops and input from the city's Fact-Finding Committee and City Commission. Now, the city has the following:

- ▶ Handicap accessible curbs that provide easier transitions at all intersections.
- ▶ New and updated crosswalks that ensure the safety of those crossing busy streets.
- ▶ A bicycle route along interior roads that enhances pedestrian and bicycle safety.

Along with upholding pedestrian safety, the goal of these projects and improvements is to relocate bicyclists and pedestrians safely off Collins Avenue to the local roads.

## IMPROVEMENT BASED ON PEDESTRIAN SAFETY STRATEGY

When the need for alternative pedestrian routes was identified, the city's multifaceted pedestrian safety strategy was created. Spanning several years, the strategy was funded through the city's capital improvement program budget and state appropriations.

In early 2015, the city began constructing pedestrian overpasses. Two pedestrian bridges have been built: one for pedestrians crossing over a busy state road, and the other connecting the north and south ends of the city over a canal using interior local roads.

Two more bridges are being designed. They will be constructed connecting the east and west sides of the city so that pedestrians can safely cross over the active street in multiple locations.


## CITY EYES MORE CHANGES

Sunny Isles Beach's future includes optimizing up-and-coming technology, architecture, art and safety measures to enhance quality of life and place. Through a continuous and participatory partnership among the community, city and state, Sunny Isles Beach is successfully collaborating to improve upon and evolve its pedestrian safety strategy.

There is nothing more important to a government than protecting its residents. The city administration takes great pride in keeping residents and visitors safe while living in or passing through

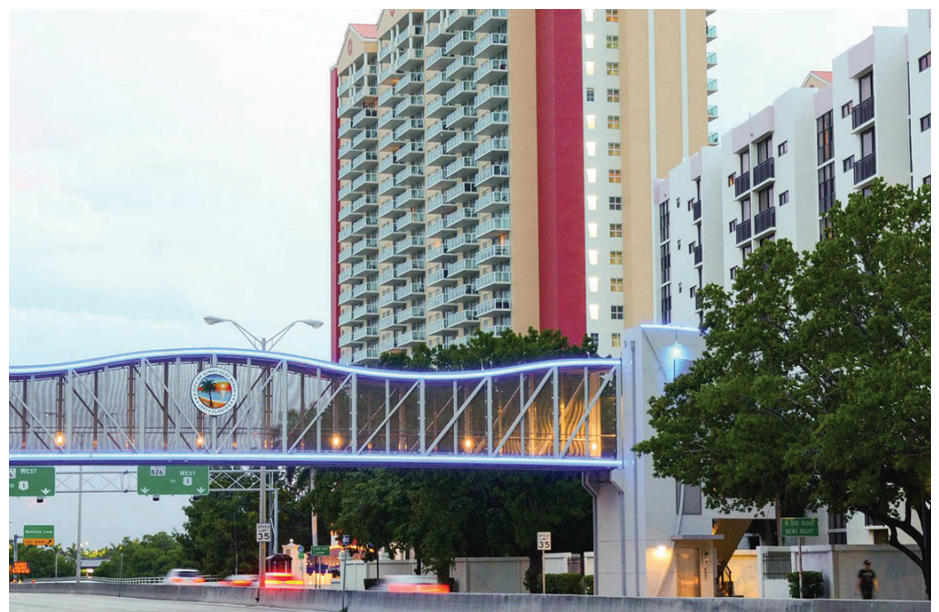
Sunny Isles Beach. The city's Police Department is consistently revisiting ways to promote and protect pedestrian safety. And members of the city staff work with the community to cultivate creative and effective resolutions when issues are presented.

Though Sunny Isles Beach's streets may frequently be crowded, the city has successfully been able to mitigate dangerous conditions and make the community safer for pedestrians and cyclists of all ages.

Christopher J. Russo is the city manager for the City of Sunny Isles Beach. 

## Sunny Isles Beach Wins a Florida Municipal Achievement Award

The **City of Sunny Isles Beach** recently received the League's **City Spirit Award**. The award is given to a city for a specific single citywide effort to successfully address a local need.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CITY OF SUNNY ISLES BEACH