

St. Lucie County has evolved because of the Ft. Pierce Inlet and the Port of Ft. Pierce.

The creation of the fort that gave the town its name came because the inlet allowed the provisioning of the fort as the United States took possession of the Florida peninsula. Accounts of the area from the 1880's tell of the inlet being a natural one somewhat north of the existing dredged inlet that brings Gulf Stream waters into our estuary. The inlet as it is now was dredged and opened in 1921.

The inlet fostered an incredible diversity of life in the Indian River Lagoon. Tropical fish swept north from the Caribbean found shelter here during warm summers and temperate fish from northern waters mingled with them to create the most diverse estuary in North America, possibly the world.

Occasional efforts to develop the Port of Ft. Pierce gave concern to residents who appreciated the fragility of the ecosystem in the lagoon. The inlet depth was deepened to accommodate larger ships and the port served the citrus industry, commerce to and from the Bahamas and the importation of aragonite. Commercial interests pushed for deeper access and more shipping. Multi-storied silo's stand where entrepreneurs meant to import cement. It did not prove to be a profitable venture but the silos dominate the skyline of the north side of Ft. Pierce to this day.

Conservation Alliance of St. Lucie County joined with the St. Lucie Waterfront Council and Audubon of St. Lucie County to push for sustainable uses for the port property. Lawsuits challenged dredging and the loss of endangered seagrass. A constant presence at Planning and Zoning meetings and County Commission meetings kept pressure on to enact zoning and land use constraints that guided the port toward uses that would not degrade the Indian River Lagoon. One of the Conservation Alliance founders, Betty Lou Wells, created a group called the Comprehensive Plan Study Group, to which she recruited representatives from business, real estate, permitting agencies, homeowner groups, and conservation groups to help craft the regulations that would guide the county into the coming decades. One of the many successes was a limit to the dredging of the Ft. Pierce Inlet to a depth of 28 feet.

Of the uses of the port property that could bring prosperity to the community while not degrading the environment was the development of a modern mega-yacht facility to serve large pleasure yachts and provide jobs for residents in fabrication, welding finishing diesel service, hydraulics and the procurement of the many items that need constant maintenance and replacement on such vessels. Director now manages such a facility and adheres to codes enacted to protect the environment from contamination.

The most grave threat facing the port area today is the emerging popularity of the inlet and waters surrounding it for transient boats traveling the Intracoastal Waterway and coastal waters on their way north or south. Ft. Pierce Inlet is reputed to be one of the safest inlets in which to seek protection from weather and to find a pleasant break from long passages. Cruising boaters are generally concerned about protecting the environment but the lack of convenient pump out service for the hundreds of boats that anchor leads to the dumping of sewage overboard.

Other counties in Florida avail themselves of generous grants from the Department of Environmental Protection and other sources to operate pump-out boats that collect "black water" from holding tanks and safely transfer it to municipal sewage systems. Such a boat operates in Martin County and others but the volume of boats anchored in the waters near Ft. Pierce is much higher.