



Tarpon River Neighborhood: Building Community One Bridge at a Time

Submitted by Steve Buckingham, President, Tarpon River Civic Association



When you think about city neighborhoods in Fort Lauderdale, you think about streets, parks, housing types, nearby shopping and restaurants. Of course, it is the people who live there that make it a neighborhood and ultimately provide its character, warmth and vitality.

Tarpon River, like many city neighborhoods, has a rich history and a long tradition of growth, development and renewal. Similar to several other city neighborhoods, it is surrounded by water, or, more specifically, two natural rivers: New River and Tarpon River. Here, water not only surrounds us, it also brings us together for exploration and enjoyment with family and friends. Over the last several years, the Tarpon River neighborhood has worked to connect people and build community with public art. Public art inspires civic pride and helps to enhance and define a neighborhood's identity. When you have a community surrounded by water, one of the best canvases for public art is the faithful bridge. Contained within or on the periphery of the Tarpon River neighborhood are seven bridges. Its residents



cross or engage water every single day whether they realize it or not and they do so by car, boat, bike, or on foot.

Over the last 5 years, two significant public art projects were completed at the behest of the residents of the neighborhood and with the leadership of the Tarpon River Civic Association. The first project involved the SW 4th/7th

Avenue Bridge, also known as the Marshall Bridge, named for Fort Lauderdale's first mayor, William Marshall. Several decades old, the Marshall Bridge crosses New River and connects Tarpon River to the Sailboat Bend neighborhood. It is a principal gateway from downtown into the heart of Tarpon River. The bridge, which had fading paint, was always considered a blank canvas for something more aesthetically pleasing, creative and community spirited. The Tarpon River Civic Association established a trust account in the late 1980s to collect donated funds to advance the cause of bridge beautification.

Fast forward to 2006, a long series of meetings with various stakeholders were held to advance the idea of repainting and, more importantly, "re-branding" the bridge with both paint *and* art as way to build community and neighborhood pride. Past Tarpon River presidents Gloria Reese and Dave Rose led the effort. The idea of public art is always an organic process and many ideas were gained from others in the community. County and City Commissioners and their staff helped. Riverwalk Trust assisted. Nearby neighborhoods joined forces. The bridge color, "Bracing Blue" was selected by the neighborhood and an Artist Selection Committee was formed to explore something special for the pillars of the bridge. After careful consideration, local award-winning artist Kevin Kichar was



chosen to produce mosaic tile murals to place upon 4 sides of the bridge. The artist's vision evolved to call for mosaics that would represent Tarpon River, Sailboat Bend, Fort Lauderdale's Native American heritage, and the nearby arts & entertainment district. Pulling it all together financially required the dollars from the already established trust account, a Neighborhood Capital Improvement Program (NCIP) grant, and contributions from the Downtown Development Authority and AutoNation.

Five years later, in 2011, the mosaics were installed during Fort Lauderdale's Centennial, and in time to provide an artistic background for the Winterfest Boat Parade. The accompanying photographs to this article demonstrate the size and scale of the project. The four mosaics (7 feet wide by 10 feet high) each contain over 2500 pieces of handmade tile. Now, whether walking on the Riverwalk, biking along the street or cruising down New River, *a bridge is no longer just a bridge*, but a work of art and a visual display that unifies a neighborhood with its city, history, waterways, and people. According to Gloria Reese, "gaining political support and writing the NCIP grant application were key; we went big and it turned out awesome. Without the city's NCIP program, we would not have been able to complete this great neighborhood investment."



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Drawing on the success of this public art/bridge project, a succeeding Tarpon River president, Brucie Cummings, led a recent neighborhood effort to apply public art to another neighborhood bridge on SW 7th Street, known as the Cochran Bridge, named posthumously for neighborhood resident and Broward County Sheriff Ron Cochran.



This small but distinguished bridge, which crosses the actual Tarpon River, had also not been painted in years. After considering several painting ideas, the Tarpon River Civic Association decided to consult and engage another local artist, Bill Savarese, a well-regarded large-scale muralist who has completed several notable public and private projects around South Florida, including the famous Jaco Pastorius mural in Oakland Park, FL. Once again, this public art project was coordinated and led by the Tarpon River Civic Association and sought to build neighborhood pride. In the end, Mr. Savarese brought creativity, color and the symbolic tarpon to life on the sides of an otherwise uninspired bridge in the heart of the neighborhood.

Indeed, Tarpon River is a neighborhood connected by bridges and one that continues to build bridges connecting its residents to art. As the photos reveal, Tarpon River neighborhood leads the way in providing its residents not only with a place to call home, but also with artistic public spaces to connect, share and inspire....***building community one bridge at a time.***

We hope you come to visit on your bike or in your kayak and be sure to slow down to enjoy the view!

More information about the Tarpon River neighborhood can be found on our website: www.tarponriver.org