

FLORIDA TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION



April 10, 2025

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Sent via email

RE: Call to protect the Vilano Beach Main Street and the Magic Beach Motel

Dear Commissioners,

Thank you for the important work you do to protect the historic places in your care, which is vital in St. Johns County where there is such a wealth of history to protect, and where it is so easy to translate protection of these resources into economic vitality for your community.

It is our understanding that an application for the demolition of one of those resources, the Magic Beach Motel, has been submitted to the city, along with a cultural resource management plan, and a mitigation report. Opened in 1951 as the Blue Ocean Motel, the longstanding motel is a key component in the Vilano Beach Town Center. Since 1999, the County has established specific goals and objectives for the Vilano Beach Town Center in the Comprehensive Plan, and Vilano Beach was designated as a Main Street community in 2003.

As the statewide nonprofit dedicated to protecting our state's history and heritage we respectfully seek the following:

- We ask that the Magic Beach Motel be granted Local Landmark status.
- We ask to slow down the demolition process so the Cultural Resources Review Board has adequate time to review documentation and request additional information. We hope that this review will prove the demolition of this historic building is not in the best interest of the community
- We ask the CRRB and Board of County Commissioners to uphold the goals and objectives of the Land Development Code by not approving the demolition of the Magic Beach Motel





- That new development in the Main Street area incorporate the economically successful and rehabilitated, award-winning Magic Beach Motel
- We ask for a historic structure assessment by a historic preservation-trained professional to determine the structural integrity of the building so CRRB and the Board of County Commissioners are able to make informed decision on the future of this significant historic building

Over the past decade, St. Johns County Cultural Resources staff has recommended the Magic Beach Motel be qualified as a local landmark and recommended it is a Significant Cultural Resource under the Land Development Code. The CRRB confirmed its status as a Significant Cultural Resource in 2021. Your staff and entities throughout Florida recognize the historic and architectural significance of this property. The County's public documents related to Vilano Beach and Vilano Beach Main Street identify the Magic Beach Motel as a primary character-defining element of the area. Taking the next step and formally recognizing this significant building as a Local Landmark should be the next step.

The Florida Main Street program has a goal of revitalizing historic downtowns and encouraging economic development within the context of historic preservation. Main Street programs thrive only in areas where there is a balance of economic and historic preservation activity because historic resources can drive economic development. Allowing demolition of the Magic Beach Motel, one of the widely recognized icons of the area, will signal a lack of concern for historic authenticity or regard for the county's goals within the Vilano Beach Town Center zoning district as well as the misuse of more than \$10 million in local, state and federal public funds that have been used to promote and preserve the historic community.

Furthermore, the Florida Department of State previously recognized the Magic Beach Motel with the Outstanding Florida Main Street Rehabilitation award. The property is actively and economically used, contributes to the vitality of the mix of uses in the Vilano Beach area, and is a recognized landmark as citizens, taxpayers, and visitors are familiar with the building.

As stated in the County's Land Development Code for the Vilano Beach Town Center Overlay, "These regulations are intended to support the creation of a downtown area that has buildings designed to reflect the unique local flavor and character of this small beach town generally reflected in the existing historic and public buildings."

Under the County's Land Development Code, Section 3.01.01.B, the County has noted the intent for the regulations to:





- Protect against unwarranted destruction of Cultural Resources in the County
- Encourage Uses of Cultural Resources that lead to their continuance
- Discourage destruction of Cultural Resources that qualify as Significant Cultural Resources
- Encourage the continued use and adaptive re-use of Significant Cultural Resources

While the Magic Beach Motel has changed over time, much of the significant original materials have been restored. These changes to the property do not detract from its importance. The Magic Beach Motel illustrates a time and place through authentic architectural and interior design reflective of the national trend in highway motels and locally for the use of a mid-century modern design reminiscent of the art deco period. The additional story to the detached structure does not detract from the one-story Magic Beach Motel and even after a devastating fire, careful attention was paid to restore the motel's authenticity. Demolition of this important building would be contrary to the land development code.

The State of Florida's Florida Master Site File, the statewide repository for archaeological and historic resource documentation, includes a written record from two evaluations of the Magic Beach Motel's historic character and significance, one in 2001 and one in 2010. In the latter survey, the architectural historian noted the alterations included replacement of the original doors and windows. That same reviewer stated the Magic Beach Motel retained important characteristics, known in the historic preservation field as integrity of setting, location, association and feeling.

The St. Johns County Board of County Commissioners established landmark criteria unique to its jurisdiction. Of the nine criteria, the Florida Trust contends that the Magic Beach Motel qualifies for at least four of the nine criteria.

- Exemplifies a historic, cultural, political, economic, or social trend of St. Johns County, the State of Florida, or the nation
- Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, period, or method of construction
- Has value as a Building that is recognized for the quality of its architecture and that retains sufficient features showing its architectural significance
- Is a geographically definable area or neighborhood united by culture, architectural styles, or physical development, which has historic or cultural significance in the community





The CRRB used these same criteria to designate it as a Significant Cultural Resource. We support the evaluations and determinations undertaken by St. Johns County staff and the CRRB that have come to this conclusion.

A study performed by a nationally distinguished economic firm found that St. Augustine's heritage assets contribute \$2.9 billion toward the economy. Further, the study noted there is a correlation between the loss of historic resources and a reduction in tourism dollars.

Vilano Beach is an attractive and unique place to visit and to live, and the principles the County set forth in the Vilano Beach Town Center guidelines recognize this and provide measures to protect existing historic resources and inspire new development. The guidelines also provide incentives like local and national tax credits that can be leveraged to help rehabilitate and preserve these character-defining resources. The county has recognizes that new development at a larger scale would pressure the demolition of the one-story character of historic Vilano in order to preserve those historic resources.

The Florida Trust supports sensitive new development that integrates historic resources and sound planning and infrastructure for a cohesive whole. Vilano Beach is economically healthier thanks to the efforts of St. Johns County to use the area's historic authenticity to drive new development and provide incentives for the rehabilitation of its older properties that are the original character givers of the area.

On behalf of the Florida Trust's Board of Directors and our membership, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and comment regarding the historical significance of the Magic Beach Motel as an individual property that anchors the historic main street area. Thank you for your time, consideration and all you do to protect Florida's history and heritage. If you have any questions, please contact me at (850) 224-8128.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Melissa Wyllie'.

Melissa Wyllie
CEO & President
Florida Trust for Historic Preservation

