

Peninsula 2020 Initiative:

A Consensual Vision of the Future of the Placencia Peninsula

December 2011

INTRODUCTION

The Peninsula 2020 initiative was conceived in early 2011, having emerged from the controversy surrounding a private foreign developer's attempt in 2010 to establish Placencia Village as a port for cruise ships.

While a coalition of citizens and community groups successfully resisted the cruise ship effort, those at the forefront of the opposition realized that the cruise proposal was likely just the first of many such externally generated efforts at "development." With its attractive beaches, proximity to marine and land attractions, excellent infrastructure and genuinely friendly residents, it would only be a matter of time before the Peninsula would become a magnet for more - perhaps larger and potentially damaging - tourism related proposals.

Rather than confronting each new project, activists realized that a proactive, not a reactive, approach was needed. Instead of having to repeatedly battle the forces of large scale unplanned growth why not canvas the residents to find out not just what they were against, but instead, what they actually wanted for the future development of their Peninsula.

Peninsula 2020 was conceived as a way to accomplish this goal. The World Wildlife Fund provided financial assistance, with the Placencia Chapter of the Belize Tourism Industry Association (Placencia BTIA) acting as the contracting party. The Peninsula 2020 Steering Committee guided the work of the project, validated results and included representatives from a cross section of Peninsula based organizations and representatives of various geographic areas, including the Placencia and Seine Bight Village Councils, the Southern Environmental Association, the Placencia BTIA, the Placencia Fishermen's Cooperative, the Placencia Tour Guide Association, the Placencia Tour Operators Association and the Peninsula Citizens for Sustainable Development

Following a rigorous selection process, the Steering Committee chose consultants Mark Usher and John Flowers to conduct the research and produce this document, which articulates a *consensual vision for the Peninsula's development over the next decade*. This Vision Statement, then, sets out a roadmap, or guide, that is the product of the Peninsula's own preferences, and will be provided to all those - government, private developers, NGO's, local and international financial institutions - who might seek to influence the future development of the Placencia Peninsula.

While this document is not necessarily legally binding, a number of its recommendations do call for new or newly enforced laws. However, its primary purpose is to stand as a signpost, the equivalent of a billboard at the Riversdale junction saying: "Welcome to Placencia. Join us in the Peninsula's development. Here is our vision. Read it and ignore it at your peril."

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The consultants employed a bottom-up approach that relied on input from all segments and levels of Peninsula society. The study recognizes the existence of three distinct geographic communities: Placencia Village, Seine Bight Village and the Maya Beach/Plantation communities.

Placencia Village, at the Peninsula's southern tip, was traditionally a Creole fishing community that has today become more focused on tourism. Seine Bight is predominantly Garifuna and remains the most economically distressed part of the Peninsula. Although its political boundaries technically extend north to Riversdale and include some of the area's largest hotels and residential developments in Maya Beach and Plantation, these "suburban Seine Bight" residents have traditionally had little social or political engagement with Seine Bight Village. While geographically distinct from each other, Maya Beach and Plantation are inhabited primarily by expatriate full and part time residents from the U.S.A., Canada and, to a lesser extent, Europe. As a whole, Maya Beach/Plantation residents are much better off economically than residents of the rest of the Peninsula.

While the geographic areas of the Peninsula are distinct and have different ethnic backgrounds, it should be noted that -- like the whole of Belize -- social and ethnic barriers are breaking down. So, while Placencia is characterized as a Creole village, a growing number of its residents are Belizean and immigrant Mestizos, as well as North Americans, Europeans, and Chinese. Seine Bight is also seeing a demographic shift, as increasing numbers of Mestizo construction workers gravitate toward its lower rents and closer proximity to job sites. Even Maya Beach is experiencing an influx of local entrepreneurs opening shops and other ventures to service the burgeoning expat population.

The six month Peninsula 2020 process of creating a representative vision for the Peninsula used a variety of techniques: interviews with key leaders, focus groups, community public meetings and a survey involving a random sample of Peninsula residents based on the 2010 census. In arriving at its conclusions and broad recommendations, the consultants also worked closely with the steering committee and ad hoc planning committees drawn from all three geographic areas.

As a result of this inclusive process, the steering committee is convinced that the vision articulated in this document is based on solid social science and accurately reflects the broad sentiments of the Peninsula's residents.

THE VISION

The vision for the Peninsula's future is broken down into three broad areas: social, economic and environmental.

The desire of Peninsula residents for more local control over the decisions impacting their lives and future well being is the single overriding conclusion of the Peninsula 2020 process and cuts across social, economic and environmental concerns, as well as geographic, ethnic, and economic lines. While that sentiment should not be surprising anywhere in Belize (where the powers of village level government tend to be weak), the fact that it was so firmly articulated by so many residents of the Peninsula should not be overlooked by those, on or off the Peninsula, who would seek to influence events here.

The second general conclusion of the Peninsula 2020 process is that, contrary to what might be expected, the visions and goals expressed for the Peninsula in this document did not vary greatly among the three distinct geographic areas on the Peninsula. Black or white, rich or poor, Creole, Garifuna or Mestizo, almost all residents share a set of common aspirations.

Finally, the majority of participants in Peninsula 2020, particularly those in leadership roles, acknowledge that interacting on a Peninsula-wide basis, instead of by geographic location, has given them a new perspective on looking at the future.

ECONOMIC

While the Placencia Peninsula in general enjoys a higher standard of living than most other areas of the country, residents voiced a number of concerns – some shared with other Belizeans, others particularly local – relating to the Peninsula’s economic future.

Jobs

Just as the Peninsula’s population has increased dramatically over the last decade, so has the number of jobs, largely in the construction and tourism sectors. The problem for Peninsula residents is that most of the jobs have gone to migrants from outside the area – Belizean or otherwise. While residents understand that more workers than the Peninsula can supply are needed to accommodate the area’s growth, many residents believe that some employers prefer not to hire locally because they find non-resident employees to be harder working, easier to control, and less likely to insist on adherence to labor laws. This is particularly true for Seine Bight residents, for whom the issue of racial/ethnic discrimination is an additional factor.

Recommendations:

- Local job training efforts must be improved both in the public and private sectors, including better access to educational institutions around the country and region, apprenticeship programs and increased continuing education by employers.
- A centrally located National Tourism Training Institute should be established where local residents can raise their skill levels, particularly in management, to more effectively compete for the industry’s better paying jobs.

Access to Capital

Business owners and potential business owners consistently pointed to the inability of local businesses to compete against foreign competitors because of the high cost of, and lack of access to, capital. Many local residents are dissatisfied with the behavior of the three local bank branches, and, with some small business owners paying rates on loans as high as 24%, this attitude appears justified. Lack of banking transparency, combined with a general lack of financial sophistication and a local fisherman derived tradition of “hard work and harder play,” has led to a number of foreclosures, forced sales, and virtual debt slavery for many business owners. This problem has been intensified by the global recession and resulting decreased tourism activity since 2007.

Recommendations:

- The Government of Belize must enact Truth in Lending laws to increase banking transparency.
- Government must continue its efforts to lower bank interest rates and pursue an initiative to establish a national bank.

- Residents must be made aware of the advantages of joining a credit union. The nation's largest credit union has a branch in Independence that is easily accessible and provides services through the Placencia branch of the Belize Bank.
- Efforts must be made locally to offer basic education in financial literacy for both households and businesses.

Foreign Versus Local

Apart from the difference in financing opportunities, other important issues regarding the relationship between foreign and local residents of the Peninsula surfaced during the Peninsula 2020 process. Although it is beyond the scope of this initiative, it must be noted that the foreign/local split is not a simple cleavage. In all three geographic communities there is a pecking order generally based on one's longevity in the area, race, community service, blood relations, and intermarriage. So a white foreigner who came to Placencia decades ago, raised children here, owns a grocery and has a long record of village service is considered solidly "local", while a man of similar age, born in Placencia to an old Creole family, but raised abroad and only recently returned (with an American accent) may be considered for most purposes a foreigner.

That having been said, the local/foreign split largely involves the belief that foreigners are receiving too many advantages in the economic field: work permits too easily granted, immigration laws flouted, business fields supposedly "reserved" for locals being "invaded" by foreigners and retirees from abroad receiving duty free exemptions for cars, boats, and household goods (under Government's Qualified Retirement Program "QRP") and illegally using those items to open businesses. While it is difficult to confirm these allegations, it is clear that the rapid growth of foreign owned businesses when compared to local is real and that this trend, although not new, should be more closely examined with an eye to creating a level playing field.

Recommendations:

- Programs should be created by Government and relevant NGOs to encourage the growth of locally owned businesses.
- The respective village councils should have a greater say in the granting of work permits to foreigners. These bodies are in closer touch with the local employment situation on the ground as opposed to immigration and labor officers who sit in Belmopan.
- The Immigration Department should more closely enforce its own regulations as there is the widespread impression that work permits are "for sale" from the right officials.
- The QRP program, administered by the Belize Tourism Board, needs to be more closely monitored to prevent abuses.

Transportation

With the newest and finest paved road in the country, Peninsula residents can no longer complain of the punishment they endured for so many years at the hands of mud, dust, and potholes. But a road is not the same as a transportation system. The single largest transport problem the area faces is the lack of regularly scheduled public transport from one end of the Peninsula to the other. This absence affects the movement of tourists from their hotels to shops, restaurants and nightlife, but, perhaps more importantly, the ability of residents to move up and down the Peninsula from home to places of employment. This lack of local labor mobility makes it more difficult and expensive for residents to find, and keep, employment.

Traffic and parking in Placencia Village is also a growing problem that will no doubt become worse due to a lack of available land and the Village's position at the tip of the Peninsula.

Recommendations:

- The government should license and provide fiscal incentives for a shuttle service for intra-Peninsula transport.
- The private sector should be encouraged to support such a service through direct investment or the generous purchase of advertising on the shuttle vehicles.
- A study should be carried out to explore ways to reduce the flow of vehicular traffic into Placencia Village or better ways to deal with the increased flow.

Fishing

Commercial and subsistence fishing has been an economic mainstay for the Peninsula perhaps as far back as the earliest occupation by the ancient Maya. Reaching a peak in the 1970s, particularly through the activities of the Placencia Fishermen's Cooperative, fishing has been largely supplanted by tourism as the area's major economic activity.

However, fishing is still important, both culturally and as a viable economic diversifier, not to mention as a food supplier to local resorts and restaurants. The fishing industry is also an alternate economic activity for residents, particularly for sport fishing and dive guides who bring with them considerable knowledge of the marine environment. Residents strongly support the retention of fishing in the Peninsula's economic mix.

Unfortunately, the fishing industry's viability is significantly threatened by the lack of enforcement of fisheries regulations.

Recommendations:

- The national government must provide stronger enforcement of fisheries regulations including foreign fishing in Belizean waters, closed seasons, and size limits.

- A total ban on gill netting should be enacted and enforced along the entire Peninsula coast and also in the Placencia Lagoon, as continued netting of creeks threatens snook and tarpon stocks.
- Financing costs for fisher folk should be lowered.
- Improved education for fisher folk in new technologies should be provided.
- The fishing and tourism industries must be more tightly integrated in terms of culture, tourist activities, and supply chain.

SOCIAL

Much of the social situation on the Peninsula mirrors that of the country as a whole. Concerns over health care, education, crime, and other issues are debated daily on a national scale and the Placencia Peninsula is no exception. There are some specifically local concerns, however, largely arising from the area's rapid growth and the feeling that social services are lagging behind that growth.

Too Many People, Too Little Land

There are many facets to the land situation on the Peninsula. The first is high prices, attributable to the rapid rise of tourism. With land prices second only to San Pedro, Ambergris Caye, very few Belizean residents of the Peninsula can afford to buy land in their neighborhood at current market prices. This is, of course, a double edged sword in that those residents who own property are quite literally sitting on a gold mine.

The second issue is that there is little public land left for the Belize Government to give out at subsidized prices and those parcels that have been given to locals have, in many cases, been quickly resold to foreigners at a significant profit.

The third issue is the loss of land to bank foreclosures, a subject covered previously in this report.

Recommendations:

- While it is difficult to fight market forces or interfere with rights of private ownership, mechanisms should be established to encourage retention of local ownership of Peninsula land. This could include technical advice on how to create unique income producing businesses on property as an alternative to outright sale.
- Government should identify remaining areas for potential subsidized residential development with lots made available on a non-political basis by representative lot committees. Restrictions should be placed on titles that prevent sale to non-Belizeans for a given time period.
- Where subsidized lots on the Peninsula are not available or remain unaffordable, residents should be given early preference on lots available in Santa Cruz or Independence Villages.

Preservation of Culture

Two cultural trends occurring globally come into play on the Placencia Peninsula: one, traditional cultures are disappearing rapidly, and two, cultural tourism is a fast growing segment of the tourism industry.

What this means for the Peninsula is that the growing demand for local cultural experiences by the tourism industry can help revive and enhance traditional cultural practices, particularly in Seine Bight and Placencia Villages, with their respective Garifuna and Creole cultural traditions. It is potentially a win-win situation in that cultural strengthening as well as increased economic benefits accrue when tourism and culture join forces.

Recommendations:

- Community cultural leaders should be assisted in tapping into national/regional/global initiatives designed to promote cultural preservation.
- Local and national marketing campaigns should promote cultural tourism and set aside funding for initiatives that enhance the quality of cultural presentations.
- The three communities on the Peninsula must work more closely together to promote cultural tourism as a Peninsula-wide product instead of belonging to solely one village or the other.

Health

Peninsula residents generally agree that current arrangements for medical care on the Peninsula are inadequate to serve the present needs of residents or visitors. The health center in Seine Bight is irregularly staffed by a single nurse and Placencia Village has a single doctor with nursing staff but in less than ideal surroundings. Most residents use the government polyclinic in Independence, Southern Regional Hospital in Dangriga, or private doctors off the Peninsula. The lack of nearby emergency medical care (particularly at night) is concerning to residents as well as those potential retirees from abroad (including the Belizean diaspora) who would seek to settle here.

Recommendations:

- Establish an emergency medical clinic on the site earmarked near the Placencia airstrip.
- Encourage the establishment of a private medical clinic on the Peninsula to provide care options for both residents and visitors.

Crime

Crime on the Peninsula, while periodically raising concerns, has not yet reached the crisis proportions experienced elsewhere in the country. However, residents, particularly those in the tourism industry, acknowledge that the threat of increased criminal activity is ever present and many further believe that the current level of policing on the Peninsula is and will continue to be inadequate. This is particularly true outside of Placencia Village, where a single corporal in Seine Bight, with no vehicle, is responsible for law enforcement on the entire northern two-thirds of the Peninsula. Recognizing that increased crime hurts residents directly and has the potential to destroy tourism, the Placencia BTIA formally submitted a set of recommendations to the Commissioner of Police, which have yet to be addressed by the Belize government.

Recommendations:

- Upgrade the position of the Placencia station's commander from Sergeant to Inspector.
- Upgrade the Seine Bight station position from Corporal to Sergeant and increase staffing.
- Institute a permanent mobile checkpoint on the Placencia Road as a way of deterring and foiling crime caused by criminals who reside outside the Peninsula.
- Initiate a crime reporting system in which the BTIA and Village Councils receive reports of crimes on a daily basis so they may follow up on all cases and be aware of the level of criminal activity on the Peninsula.
- Encourage more community policing and neighborhood crime watches as well as improve liaison between police and private security operations.

ENVIRONMENT

The major reason for the Placencia Peninsula's desirability as a place to live and visit is its physical environment: beautiful beaches, enchanting lagoon, offshore islands and coral reefs, all coupled with a laid back rural lifestyle. It is no surprise, then, that most residents, while hardly classic "tree huggers," have a close relationship with their surroundings and desire to preserve those environs.

Progress Brings Problems

However, in recent years that innate desire has run headlong into the realities of rapid economic growth and the tough choices that go with it. The development of new resorts, residential areas and commercial ventures has significantly destroyed protective mangrove forests, while the dredging of sand from the Placencia Lagoon has caused sedimentation and loss of marine habitats and plants vital to sustain the health of the Lagoon and the area's fishery. The general sentiment of the residents is, not surprisingly, the need for a balance between growth and environmental conservation. The general concern is that national environmental policy is not always clear, existing regulations are unevenly enforced, no official enforcement mechanism is present on the Peninsula, and local village councils have very little power over policy or enforcement.

Recommendations:

- More stringent enforcement of existing environmental regulations.
- More oversight powers and institutional strengthening for Village Councils.
- A permanent presence on the Peninsula by the Department of Environment, the Department of Geology and the Forest Department. (This presence could be one person who has legal authority to represent all three departments in enforcement matters.)
- Support for the Coastal Zone Management Authority's efforts to comprehensively control development on the many cayes off the peninsula's coast.
- Enactment of a moratorium on the granting of leases or conversion of leases to titles on crown land (or water) in and around the Placencia Lagoon in advance of placing the Lagoon under officially protected status.
- The creation and dissemination of "best practices" manuals for responsible development of coastal areas and cayes.

Living With Neighbors

Along with the state of the natural environment, Peninsula residents are also concerned about the conditions under which they live amongst their neighbors. Things like population density, height and setback limits, public spaces, and zoning are becoming increasingly important as population increases and land grows scarce. Where a "pleasant disorder" once dominated the Peninsula's pattern of habitation, population and economic pressures now demand a more regulated society, both locally and nationwide. Again, the issue of local control comes up with residents expressing a desire to have a greater say in decisions that affect how they live.

Recommendations:

- A professional urban planner be engaged to advise on physical planning issues.
- Establishment of a height limit of three stories (expressed as a specific distance above mean high tide level) across the Peninsula with gradient height regulations in Placencia Village.
- Enforcement of setback regulations and building footprint restrictions.
- A full time presence on the Peninsula of the Central Building Authority to better monitor building code compliance.

TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE TOURISM BASED FUTURE

The best description of the kind of development most desired for the Peninsula is summarized in the words “low impact”. This means that while the bar should be raised when it comes to the quality of the Peninsula as a destination, bigger is not necessarily better. With “authenticity” as an increasingly rare and valuable quality in global tourism, the Placencia Peninsula would do well to preserve its well earned reputation as a truly authentic destination where overnight visitors may participate in the life of the community rather than stand apart from it.

The overwhelming sentiment supported by the Peninsula 2020 process is that the Placencia Peninsula should not become a mass tourism destination. In broad practical terms this means the following:

- New resorts should fall into the “boutique” category. Small locally owned inns or bed and breakfasts should be encouraged in the villages. “Mega” resorts should be prohibited outright.
- The development of “all inclusive” resorts (those which include all food, drink and entertainment) should be discouraged as they isolate tourists from the surrounding community.
- Resort rather than condominiums or strictly residential enclaves should be encouraged because resorts promote greater employment and opportunities for advancement as well as wider distribution of tourist expenditure.
- Placencia should not become a cruise port save for small ships. The definition of small is difficult to agree on but one suggestion is to limit visits to only those ships (not tenders) that could actually berth at the new municipal pier. Economic activity from any such ships would be handled by the Village Council or bodies it designates such as the Placencia Tour Guide Association, with an aim to spread benefits as widely as possible.

A FINAL WORD ON GOVERNANCE

The carrying out of the Peninsula 2020 initiative demonstrates a reservoir of optimism among Peninsula residents and confidence that the level of leadership – both elected and informal – is more than adequate to make the area an even better place to live in the future.

There are, however, some specific challenges. The first is to establish the actual boundaries of Placencia and Seine Bight Villages. This has been tried in the past without success. Both Village Councils, in addition to the Belize Government, must put this issue to bed as development pressures will only make the stakes higher –and the issue less solvable – in the future.

While the Placencia Village Council and Placencia Water Board appear to be functioning well and Maya Beach/Plantation residents are showing the ability to organize around relevant issues, governance in both the Seine Bight Village Council and Seine Bight Water Board is not yet at the level to best deal with anticipated growth and change on the Peninsula. Greater interaction and cooperation with other Peninsula institutions may be of some help to improve the situation.

The ability of all governing bodies to cooperate may be put to the test in the near future as a Belize Government project to install a much needed Peninsula-wide sewer system comes to fruition. It appears that Belmopan would like to combine the present village water systems (plus two private systems) with the sewer operation and place all in the hands of the government owned Belize Water Services Ltd. Such a development, in its simplest form, would cut off a major source of local revenue for Placencia and Seine Bight Villages and constitute a significant loss of local control. How the Peninsula's leadership meets this challenge will be a very strong indicator of how it deals with the future in general.

There is also the issue of the National Assembly's failure to approve the Placencia Village by-laws. Such approval would significantly enhance the Village Council's powers to control development but at this writing it appears that even after a decade of local effort there is little enthusiasm for the idea in Belmopan.

Finally, the Peninsula 2020 process demonstrates that most of the challenges facing the Peninsula, whether economic, social, or environmental, transcend village and neighborhood governance and can best be met on a Peninsula wide basis.

Unfortunately, no Peninsula wide governing mechanism currently exists. While public opinion is almost evenly divided on whether township status for the Peninsula is a worthy goal, there is general consensus on the need for more cooperation and coordination among the two Village Councils and community groups. Ideas have been put forward for a body acting as a Peninsula Planning Commission to advise the Village Councils, a Peninsula Advisory Council along the lines of the 2020 Steering Committee, or even just a monthly social session among the area's elected officials and community leaders. While there is no formal recommendation on governance that emerges from the Peninsula 2020 process, it is clear that without a Peninsula-wide approach to the future the task facing residents will be considerably more difficult.