

# Winter Haven 2025 Comprehensive Plan

## Introduction

Settlement of the area to become Winter Haven began in the early 1860s, with several families homesteading in the area east of Lake Howard near the present day downtown. In the following decades, additional settlers came to the area, then known as Harris Corners, as the railroad was completed in the early 1880s. Following several years of growth, the City of Winter Haven was formally incorporated in June, 1911. Winter Haven's early years were centered on the growing of citrus and associated packing houses adjacent to the railroad. By the 1920s, the Florida Land Boom was underway bringing an influx of newcomers to the area with the City's population reaching over 7,000 residents. The 1930s would bring the first Publix supermarket and Cypress Gardens to the community; the beginning of tourism as an economic foundation for the community. Following World War II, a second period of rapid growth came to the City as returning servicemen, who had trained in Central Florida, returned to the area to start families. However, by the late 1980s, with a majority of the community's growth occurring southeast of the City in the Garden Grove area, the older, original core of the City began to decline. In 2000, to combat the urban core's decline, the City created the Downtown and Florence Villa Community Redevelopment Districts to promote revitalization of the City's older commercial and residential areas. Creation of the two CRAs led to a renaissance of Winter Haven's downtown during the last decade.

As the City enters its second century, the community envisions continued revitalization of older neighborhoods and commercial areas, while guiding the development of new, sustainable residential, commercial, and industrial projects within the City's urbanizing area. During the next 15 years, up to 9,600 new residents are expected to call Winter Haven their home. Along with accommodating new residents, the community's leaders desire to grow the existing medical, tourism, and service industries while promoting the development of new high technology, manufacturing, distribution, and logistics businesses in the City.

It is envisioned that this Comprehensive Plan will serve as the general guide for the City as a whole over the next 15 years. Specific implementation of the concepts contained in this plan should be through the City's Code of Ordinances, Unified Land Development Code, policies of, and actions of the City Commission.

## **Background**

Winter Haven is located in central Polk County along one of the sand ridges that generally runs north/south along the Florida peninsula. Within or touching the City is a 24-lake, chain of lakes connected by canal systems dating to the early twentieth century. The original purpose of connecting the lakes was to ship citrus from groves to packing plants located along railroad lines. Today the chain of lakes serves as a recreational amenity for residents and visitors. In addition to the connected lakes, there are 29 isolated lakes in and around the City.

Primary access to the City is via US Highways 17, 27, and 92, as well as State Roads 60, 540, 542, 544, and 655. The City is located approximately 12 miles south of Interstate 4 and five miles east of the Polk Parkway (SR 570). Additionally, the City owns and operates a general aviation airport with one 5,000-foot runway and another 4,000-foot runway.

Winter Haven is one of the urbanized areas of the Lakeland/Winter Haven Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). With a population of 602,000, the Lakeland/Winter Haven MSA ranks as the seventh largest in Florida. According to the 2010 US Census, the City has a population of 33,874 full time residents inside the City limits. Within the City's Utility Service Area, there is an estimated population of 72,000 residents. In addition to the City's full time residents, an estimated seasonal population increase of 3,600 occurs during the winter months, as part-time residents return from out of state. An additional daily increase in population occurs as workers and visitors enter the City to visit employment centers, medical facilities, retail centers, and the soon to open LEGOLAND theme park. Winter Haven serves as the center of a regional market that extends throughout eastern Polk County and as far south as Hardee and Highlands Counties.

Employment in Winter Haven includes a wide range of professional, service, back-office, government, and manufacturing jobs. With the City's location midway between the Tampa and Orlando areas, it is believed that a portion of the City's residents leave the area for employment. Winter Haven is also home to a significant number of retirees, many of whom have moved to the City from outside of the area.