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Advocates for the Historic Eastside neighborhood are determined to revitalize it — on their own terms



Members of the Historic Eastside Community break ground at the future Historic Debs Store.

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Jun 16, 2022

In the heat of a May morning, a team of experts scours a parcel of land along the St. Johns River as they complete due diligence work for a massive new commercial development worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

That same morning, residents of a nearby neighborhood file out of the hot sun and into a church fellowship hall to hear about a plan to improve their community, which hasn't had new commercial property built in many years.

These events may seem a world away from each other, but they're not.

In fact, just more than two miles separate the two projects: one, the site of a future Four Seasons hotel on the St. Johns River downtown undergoing due diligence; the other, Little Rock Baptist Church on Van Buren Street in the Historic Eastside, where community members gathered to commemorate the start of a project to fix up homes.

The Four Seasons, of course, is expected to be transformational for Jacksonville. The hotel is just one component of a \$370 million project that also includes a new office building for the Jacksonville Jaguars and at least 25 luxury condominium units overlooking the river.

But for the nearby Historic Eastside neighborhood, the Four Seasons project represents a dark cloud on the horizon.

Eastside residents are worried that the high-end luxury hotel may help kick off a wave of interest from investors who would buy up Eastside real estate and create a gentrification effect that would force them out of their homes. It's a real fear backed up by numerous similar examples across the U.S.

That's why organizations including Historic Eastside Community Development Corp., LIFT Jax, and LISC Jacksonville and others have multiple initiatives underway to improve the Eastside area, so that residents get a nicer neighborhood without being displaced.

FEARS & OPPORTUNITIES

You can hear the emotion in Suzanne Pickett's voice when she talks about the issue. Pickett is the president of the Historic Eastside Community Development Corp., which together with several partners is beginning work in June to completely rehab every home on Van Buren Street between 4th Street and 5th Street. In addition to between \$15,000 and \$20,000 being put into each home, two churches on Van Buren will also get facelifts.

"Some of these residents have been in Eastside their entire lives," Pickett said. "They just didn't have the resources to continue to repair their homes."

The rehab project, known as "Restore and Repair," will fix up 15 homes for residents as part of an overall strategy known as "withintrification" which tries to improve poor communities without pricing out longtime residents.

Pickett said a combination of lots of factors led to disinvestment in the Eastside over the last five decades: the lingering impact of redlining and lack of access to loans among them.

At the same time, millions of dollars in investment are planned near the neighborhood.

As well as the work at the Shipyards – which includes the Jaguars' multimillion-project, the \$100 million MOSH Genesis plans and a new public park – the long-awaited Emerald Trail is already underway to link at least 15 Jacksonville neighborhoods. More than three miles of the almost 30-mile trail will come through Eastside. That portion will link Springfield to the West with the Sports and Entertainment District to the South of Eastside.

The Eastside leaders say the activity surrounding the neighborhood is positive, but not if it comes at the expense of the historic neighborhood residents.

"There is a fear of gentrification and displacement," Pickett said. "We know the area is going to change, but we want the residents to be able to stay in place and prosper. We don't want them to have to leave, to watch from outside, all the great things happening in their neighborhood."

INVESTMENT

Pickett said the spark for Restore and Repair was lit last year, when HECDG and United Way began fixing up front porches along Van Buren Street.

"Mrs. Delores Barr Weaver saw the front porch project in the media and decided to help, that is what spurred this," Pickett said, referring to Restore and Repair.

The local philanthropist made a commitment through the Community Foundation to support the Van Buren home restorations.

But Pickett says it doesn't stop there.

"The goal is to do the entire Eastside," Pickett said. "We want to make sure that the residents here are able to stay in place and prosper, that you won't be priced out of the places you grew up because of what's happening around you."

She said the ultimate goal is to go block-by-block, street-by-street restoring and fixing up properties so residents can finally have the community they want and deserve.

Boiled down, the plan is for existing residents to make the community great before others take the opportunity away from them.

WORKING AT SCALE

The revitalization, not gentrification, of Eastside is a long time coming, according to residents. The pride and excitement is palpable in the church fellowship hall as they hear about the HECDG's plans. Many gathered here have lived in the neighborhood for decades, and come from families that have been here for generations dating back to the early 1900s.

Travis Williams is a fourth generation from "Out East," as locals refer to it.

Williams, vice president of operations and impact at LIFT Jax, is heavily involved with the efforts to improve Eastside. The organization is specifically focused on ending generational poverty.

"The magic sauce that LIFT brings is moving stuff to at-scale," Williams said. "So how do you take a few (Restore and Repair) rehabs a year and turn it into tens of rehabs a year?"

Or even a couple hundred over a few years period of time? That's where LIFT comes into play."

Williams said Eastside is being transformed as a "Purpose Built Community," a concept from Warren Buffet and Tom Cousins to revive poor neighborhoods. The model rests on four pillars: cradle-to-career education, mixed-income housing, community wellness, and financial vitality.

This means the ongoing efforts to improve Eastside aren't just a shot in the dark, they're based on a proven model that includes communities in Atlanta, Orlando, and many other places.

Major partners, including Florida Blue, Wells Fargo, VyStar and the Jacksonville Jaguars, have already played a role in helping what's happening in Eastside.

Williams and Pickett both point to the rebirth of the old Debs Store in Eastside as another big catalyst, which was helped by a big investment provided by Florida Blue and support from Jaguars.

The store, which served the neighborhood for many decades before being shuttered, is reopening as a community grocery store. Up until now, Eastside has been considered a "food desert" or part of "food apartheid."

Debs Store will reopen, along with a Goodwill and a VyStar branch, and community space on the second floor above the grocery store.

It's just one example of Eastside residents finally getting what they've long desired.

"We want to make sure we do work WITH the community and not TO the community," said Williams. "We realize we're not working with a blank canvas. Gentrification sees communities as a blank canvas, that communities need rescuing. Eastside doesn't need rescuing, it already has leaders there who are strong assets. (LIFT) brings intellectual property and ideas from communities around the country and tweak those success to fit Eastside Jacksonville"

Pickett said too often, people come into neighborhoods with their own ideas of what it should look like, and they don't engage the community. That's the biggest difference

with this Eastside revitalization work-engaging the community.

To be clear, work to revitalize the neighborhood will not be easy or quick.

"Think about a ticker symbol for a really good stock," Williams said. "If you look at it over a period of time, you'll see some ups and downs. But hopefully what you're seeing is a trajectory that's up and to the right. That's how we see this work."

Williams said the Jacksonville Jaguars organization has been a big partner in what is happening in Eastside.

"Our philosophy with our community impact work is that we can do great things in all these other zip codes and surrounding counties, but if we're not a good neighbor to our neighbors then it invalidates everything," said Jaguars chief community impact officer Whitney Meyer.

Meyer points a program called Construction Ready as an example of how the Jaguars are making sure to include Eastside residents and provide opportunities like new jobs.

Construction Ready is a 20-day workforce development program, free to participants, that offers eight professional certifications. On day 21, participants match with an employer and can start work that day. Meyer said a few Eastside residents have been through the program and work on the Jaguars Sports Performance Center now under construction next to TIAA Bank Field.

Meyer said the Jaguars' work in Eastside has also included meeting on-the-ground needs like delivering meals and blankets for elderly residents during the winter.

"This is a continued commitment," Meyer said. "We just want to be a good neighbor."

DISPELLING MYTHS

Apart from helping improve one of the poorest areas of Jacksonville, the revitalization of Eastside is important in a broader context. Almost every single Black leader associated with Jacksonville had some connection to Eastside. James Welden Johnson and A. Philip Randolph both called Eastside home, as did athlete Bob Hayes and humanitarian Earth M.M. White.

It's also personal for both Pickett and Williams, who have family ties to where the Restore and Repair work is beginning: Van Buren Street.

"I'm excited about Van Buren Street," Williams said. "I spent my formative years and some of the best memories in my grandparents' home on Van Buren. I was brought home from the hospital to that home on Van Buren street."

For Pickett, she had left Eastside after growing up there. But she returned to fix up a family property that borders Flossie Brunson Eastside Park, and found the park almost identical to when she was a child.

"Nothing had changed, so I got involved and I made a commitment to stay and make the community better," Pickett said.

The cultural and personal history underpins the efforts to revitalize the neighborhood, with the goal to do more than just fix up some old homes. In addition to the physical work to be done, Pickett said, there's also an intellectual and societal burden to undertake for Eastside.

"We are dispelling myths about poverty, so many myths about people in the Eastside," Pickett said.

She said when you drive around Eastside, you'll see children going to school, families going to work, people working in their yards, and other daily life.

"We want people to see this neighborhood is no different from any other community," Pickett said. "We're often asked 'what does the neighborhood want?' We want the same thing that you want in your neighborhood. Good quality roads, housing, opportunity, to be able to take care of our families and our families to be safe. We want the same things."

Pickett said the HECDL is working with Eastside residents to help them prepare for the impacts of things like the Emerald Trail, including increased taxes from higher property values and a sudden influx of people passing through the neighborhood. One of the HECDL's programs helps residents pay those higher taxes, and also helps teach financial literacy.

The HECDC's Restore and Repair program will not place liens on resident homes, and is also not a loan residents must pay back. In fact, Pickett said HECDC is helping several residents make sure the ownership of their property is clear, since they have been passed down through generations.

Williams said gentrification is a problem, but it is more important to focus on the solution than the problem.

He said the solution is to make sure residents have quality homes so they won't be poached by investors who undercut the value.

And it starts on Van Buren Street.

"They say 'a rising tide lifts all boats,'" said Williams. "That analogy makes a lot of sense, but if you're on the shore, a rising tide doesn't help you. You've got to make sure folks are actually in boats."

The Trail

Picture this: You're biking or walking along an urban trail system, admiring artwork like murals and sculptures. Every now and then you pass by some attractive homes or apartment buildings with the people who live there working in their garden or pushing their child on a swing.

Before long, you come to a little cafe in a renovated warehouse, with indoor and outdoor seating, so you pop in and grab a quick snack and something to drink.

All around you, the trail and its surroundings are teeming with activity and all kinds of people just enjoying themselves outside.

But there's actually a downside to this almost utopian vision. Along with the surge of activity expected to be spurred by the trail are fears that in neighborhoods like the Historic Eastside, rising property values could end up squeezing out residents who already have trouble making ends meet.

The 3.65-mile portion of the Emerald Trail that will include Eastside is still several years away, but it's not too early to begin preparing.

The Emerald Trail Master Plan shows the Eastside Connector is scheduled to be in the acquisition and design phases in 2026 and under construction in 2027.

The Eastside Connector will connect to Edwards Park, Matthew W. Gilbert Middle School, Richard Brown Elementary School, Robert F. Kennedy Park, A. Philip Randolph Heritage Park, and Flossie Brunson Eastside Park.

The total cost of the Eastside Connector is estimated at more than \$36 million, according to the master plan, and that cost doesn't include costs of land acquisition.

The fear is that the Emerald Trail will cause more investors to come and the people who live in Eastside won't be able to afford to live there any more.

“That’s not going to happen here,” Pickett said.