



## Creating a Vibrant Neighborhood in the Urban Core

### Executive Summary

In six deliberative forums held on four evenings during the first quarter of 2019, participants overwhelmingly expressed interest in and support for the Cathedral District – Jax Inc. efforts to develop the urban core. Ginny Myrick’s presentations of the Torti-Gallas recommendations and the success in attracting a developer to convert the Community Connections building into a rental apartment complex were well-received and helped set the tone for the deliberative forums. The purpose for the forums was to engage people who live, work, worship and visit the District in dialogue about actions that could be pursued to advance development and build community support.

Forum outcomes revealed significant interest in relationship building among District stakeholders through community festivals, tours, collaborative church events, and possibly establishing a community association that would complement CDJ, Inc. efforts. People desire a walkable neighborhood with more green space, trees and lighting. Forum participants acknowledged the reality of parking lots taking up more than 50% of the land and could see the value in converting parking property for commercial and residential use; however, forum participants were not as confident in their ability to recommend solutions for the parking problem. On the other hand, people seemed more interested in supporting environmental and community-building initiatives.

A strong forum theme was reflected in people’s concern for people who live on Cathedral District streets, especially the Main Street Park. Participants struggled with a clear tension between safety for residents and visitors and a compassionate approach to caring for the needy. In fact, some said that until this issue is substantively addressed, efforts to improve the Cathedral District might be compromised.

Two of the open-ended questions on the post-forum questionnaire asked “Are you thinking differently about this issue now that you have participated in the forum?” and “In your forum, did you talk about aspects of the issue you had not considered before?” 83.7% and 81.3% answered “Yes” respectively. The responses clearly indicated that the deliberative process achieved its purposes to engage citizens and generate interest in developing the Cathedral District.

### Detailed Analysis

In the spring of 2018, Ginny Myrick and Rev. Gregg Kaufman discussed the possibility of holding deliberative forums to engage people who live, work, worship, and care about the Cathedral District. Deliberative dialogue can serve as a supplement to community planning. Unlike expert panels or town hall meetings where a featured speaker(s) share knowledge and provide time for Q&A, deliberative forums gather small groups of 12-18 people and over two hours, and with the assistance of a neutral moderator, people share their concerns, opinions, and possible strategic ideas to address common problems of issues facing the populace.

The Cathedral District worked with several consulting firms, the Urban Land Institute and Torti-Gallas + Partners, to study the district and identify development challenges. Torti-Gallas provided a detailed proposal with several development scenarios and recommendations, many of which CDJ, Inc. is pursuing. The acquisition of the Community Connections (former YWCA) building for the purpose of creating

apartment residences, consultations with a K-8 charter school organization, negotiating City of Jacksonville for tree planting, and working with the DIA, among other initiatives have been the primary foci. However, taking a step back to provide the board and people in the District with a broad perspective seemed prudent.

On May 14, 2018, representatives from several of the District churches and Parks at the Cathedral residences met to form a “naming and framing team” for the purpose of developing a deliberative dialogue forum resource. The group reviewed the process and agreed on a series of open-ended questions to survey peoples’ concerns about the Cathedral District. The group met again on June 27 to review and categorize a long list of concerns. Once three distinct categories were determined, the writing of the first draft of a dialogue resource began.

The first draft was produced and critiqued over the next several months and ultimately, after two additional drafts a final version was developed by the beginning of 2019. The issue guide – dialogue resource – was designed to have forum participants think about the future of the Cathedral District through three distinct challenges: 1) Focus on Alternative Parking Strategies, 2) Create a Walkable Environment, and 3) Rally Community Willpower. Within each challenge were a series of specific actions and corresponding tradeoffs to discuss. The deliberative dialogue goal is simply to listen for areas where there is significant agreement on how to move forward. Deliberation is called “choice work,” as people are asked to think about and recommend what their group determines as the best courses for action.

Six forums were held on four evening - January 15 and 26, 2019 at St. John’s Cathedral (18 participants), February 26, 2019 at the Parks at the Cathedral Clubhouse (11 participants), and on March 12, 2019 at First Presbyterian Church, to which all five churches, residents, and city leaders were invited and approximately 50 people attended and deliberated in three small groups. Consequently, approximately 75 people enjoyed the opportunity to hear Ginny Myrick use Torti-Gallas proposal material to update them on the District’s development progress followed by a ninety-minute forum where everyone had the opportunity to “weigh in” on the future of the Cathedral District.

Some common questions people who are new to the deliberative process ask are, “What is the value of this process? What is done with what we have to say? Will our efforts make a difference?” While it is understandable that citizens want to see results, the opportunity to listen to others and learn from different perspectives is often one of the first outcomes people see as helpful. 81.3% of Cathedral District forum participants answered “Yes” to the question, “In your forum, did you talk about aspects of the issue you had not considered before?” Forum moderators also share with participants that forum outcomes will be shared with decision makers. In this case, the Cathedral District Jax – Inc. and Billy Goat Hill boards of directors will hopefully benefit from forum outcomes.

What did we learn from engaging the public, ordinary citizens with an interest in an extraordinary challenge to develop Jacksonville’s historic urban core?

### **Community and Relationship Building**

The most notable outcome from the forums raised the hopeful concern for community and relationship building. Many forum participants recognized the dedication of people affiliated with the Cathedral District Jax - Inc. However, in each of the forums, the potential contributions and influence of people who live, work, and worship in the District was highlighted and resulted in rich conversation. People in the Parks at the Cathedral forum advocated for an annual Billy Goat Hill Festival with blocked-off streets, food, and entertainment. One person said, “I rarely meet anyone outside our residential complex.” Other groups suggested block parties or ice cream socials. People who attended the March 12 forums at First Presbyterian Church came from seven church organizations. Some said the forums might have been a

“first” for people from District churches gathering together. Many expressed an interest in more opportunities to build relationships. Some mentioned a tour of churches in the past. Others suggested that it would be helpful to work toward a faith-based “voice” to support urban development initiatives as well as social justice concerns.

Another aspect of the community-building theme conveyed concerns about communication. What would it take to develop some form of communication that could share a calendar of church and community events? Several people mentioned the *5 and Dime Theater* on 112 E. Adams Street, a performing arts theater of which few forum participants were aware. Another idea revolved around developing a community association similar to RAP, the Riverside Avondale Preservation. Such a group would endeavor to bring people together - vision keepers - to complement the CDJ-Inc. efforts to literally build and develop the urban core.

### **Caring for the poor.**

Deliberative dialogue often exposes creative tensions. In order to move forward, people might have to trade off something they hold valuable. While many participants desired more green space and small parks, the issue of people who inhabit Cathedral District streets came up again and again. Why create parks when “un-housed” people will gravitate to public spaces? (One group discussed how the term, homeless is often perceived as a negative description of people who inhabit the city streets and suggested un-housed as a more accurate term.) People spoke to the “perception of fear” while others acknowledged that violent crime in the urban core is minimal.

One group discussed how caring for the “un-housed” is a core issue that requires compassionate enforcement, mental health resources, alternative housing and gathering places. “Until we address the root cause of how to care for the “least of these my brothers and sisters,” creating a neighborhood where residents and visitors feel safe and secure could be compromised. One of the dialogue participants was a person who lives in the streets and who also worships at First Presbyterian. He said, “Not all people hanging out in the Main Street Park are homeless and not all homeless people are without work.”

This tension between a leafy green, safe walking neighborhood and an urban district that attracts people who are destitute has no easy answers. Some suggested that a coordinated approach to this issue among the churches and nonprofit organizations could be an opportunity for the churches to work together. Dean Kate Moorehead, St. John’s Cathedral has been quoted as saying that in the interest to care for the poor, faith communities have inadvertently participated in a form of “toxic charity” that has contributed to the District’s current conditions and lack of residents. Consequently, CDJ, Inc. might want to engage the churches in a collaborative effort to brainstorm ways to address this concern. Would it be possible to have “un-housed” people participate in forums to address this issue with the help of nonprofit organizations that have developed trust with them?

### **Parking for Disabled Persons**

The excess of parking property is a critical issue in the urban core. Forum organizers wanted this issue to be addressed in the forums. The most strongly agreed-upon action receiving 100% support addressed the need for churches to have access plans for mobility-challenged persons. The five Cathedral District churches already have access for differently-abled persons, but improved parking might be an issue for further consideration. People want to make access and egress from church facilities as safe and convenient as possible. In at least one case, the possibility of First United Methodist and St. John’s Cathedral collaborating on a shared parking arrangement could be considered. People movers – golf carts, trolleys, and buggies – were mentioned as ways to help people travel from where they park to church entrances.

## **Parking Lots**

Over 60% of forum participants strongly agreed that some of the current parking properties could be acquired and re-purposed for commercial or residential construction. However, people were not as comfortable conversing about alternative approaches to parking property. Few people were aware of city codes, land-bank strategies, or how to work with those who own property used for parking. This aspect of the Cathedral District development is best left in the hands of people with more technical and legal expertise. While people understood the dilemma, they felt less prepared to address possible solutions.

## **Leafy-Green Neighborhood.**

There was significant interest in creating a leafy-green neighborhood with trees, lighting, sidewalks, and an environment designed for pedestrians. People resonated with a variety of ideas to improve pedestrian safety such as painted crosswalks. The recent CDJ, Inc. efforts to work with the city to acquire and plant fifty or more trees in the areas designated for additional residential development as illustrated in the Torti-Gallas scenarios garnered significant interest. Some people suggested that a group be developed to assist in identifying tree locations and possibly monitor and water the trees.

Many forum participants acknowledged that as the downtown and north bank of the St. John's River develop and more jobs are created, the Cathedral District will become an attractive area for mixed-income residences where people will be able to walk, cycle, and bus to work and back. The Cathedral District's proximity to the corporate, commercial, and entertainment venues offers a prime location for new residents of all ages.

People were interested in the concept of public art being located at points of entry or "gateways" to the Cathedral District as well as efforts to create more small parks or green spaces. Some people suggested designated outdoor spaces for prayer and contemplation. Other said that until safe spaces like playgrounds are created for children, families would not feel drawn to reside in the neighborhood. The tiered Main Street space was identified as a potential site for a "designation playground," but the area is a gathering place for many without homes or steady employment.

## **Conclusion**

Forum organizers hoped that by bringing "ordinary" people together to dialogue about an "extraordinary" and creative urban development project, more people would feel invested in the future of the Cathedral District. Outcomes from the six forums verified this hope. There are people willing to become involved in a variety of efforts to create a stronger sense of community by hosting events to which residents, employees, worshippers, and visitors could be attracted. Five historic churches offer "public space" for concerts, art exhibits, and hospitality. The Parks at the Cathedral residents desire to be included in community building. An annual Billy Goat Hill Festival could be a distinctive annual event. Block parties could help draw attention to ground breaking for residential and commercial construction. Trees, lighting, and public art will provide a healthy environmental atmosphere.

In addition to the above-mentioned improvements, the development process is faced with the reality of un-housed residents who are drawn to the District. What to do? What will it take to collaborate with NGOs, the city, churches, and other entities to care for displaced persons and at the same time improve the District's open spaces and streets?

In spite of the many challenges, CDJ, Inc. and District stakeholders have taken a significant step forward by becoming more aware of expert consulting agency recommendations and understanding that much can be done together to create the city core into a healthy, resilient, compassionate, and spiritually gifted urban neighborhood.



## Creating a Vibrant Neighborhood in the Urban Core

### Answers to Post-Forum Questionnaire

#### 1. Do you agree or disagree with the statements below?

The combination of strongly and somewhat agree are ranked from high to low.

- 100% (St. A 81.6% and SoA 18.6%) Churches need to have access plans for mobility-challenged persons.
- 95.7% (StA 83% and SoA 12.7%) Rally citizen willpower to advocate for District development and improvement.
- 94% (StA 77.5% and SoA 16%) Plan for more green space and parks in the District.
- 93.6% (StA 61.7 and SoA 31.9%) Some parking land should be used for residential or commercial development.
- 91.5% (StA 64.5% and SoA 27%) Hold more forums.
- 91.2% (StA 56.5% and SoA 34.7%) Upgrade selected surface parking to conform to city. Code standards.
- 89.6% (StA 63.1% and SoA 26.5%) Create attractive crosswalks and intersection bump-outs.
- 89.6% (StA 48% and SoA 41.6%) Churches should collaborate on shared parking.
- 85% (StA 55% and SoA 30%) Build a Cathedral District playground with the help from KaBoom, a community build organization.
- 80% (StA 50% and SoA 30%) Add bike lanes to District streets.
- 74% (StA 36% and SoA 38%) Reducing the amount of parking is imperative.
- 67.6% (StA 40% and SoA 27.6%) A “land bank” strategy is needed to acquire parking land.



- Parking – creatively!
- Parking is an income stream for churches.
- Master plan features. Formation of a neighborhood association.
- One comment was that green space becomes “unhoused” gathering places – so parks may not be appropriate at this time.
- Loved the idea of church parking consortium and shared shuttles from designated parking areas.
- Welcomed the idea of CD shared church event calendar.

**4. What could citizens working together with elected officials and nonprofit organizations do to address this issue?**

- Get the word out.
- Create a community forum or event and develop spaces with green spaces.
- Citizens have all the ideas because they live and breathe it (Cathedral District neighborhood) every day of their lives.
- We need the city to pay attention to this area. (The city) has focused on LaVilla and Shipyards but needs to prioritize Hogan’s Creek.
- More information to residents.
- Convince more stakeholders of the advantages of developing mixed-income (residential) spaces.
- I have 100 ideas!!
- Implement some of the projects.
- Adopt-a-tree plan.
- Collaborate unified message of needs, offer solutions and hold authorities accountable.
- Work collaboratively with churches, businesses, residents, government, etc.
- Nothing. Government and NGO’s never have anything positive to offer.
- Heighten awareness and enthusiasm.
- Build housing – affordable to all by using mixed residential. Think about old school like Riverside. Big homes near duplexes, townhomes, and apartments.
- Vision that is attainable.
- Select priorities and objectives - parks, schools, residential – and work od definable and achievable goals.
- Create interfaith events to solidify this (forum participants) as a real group.
- Publicize opportunities. Within the district.
- In order to achieve all these goals, we must address the unhoused/mentally ill population – provide resources and educate. (Everyone in Jacksonville should know where shelters./food banks/kitchens are and how to direct people there.)
- Develop effective plans.
- Achieve success that would not have been possible without elected officials.
- I like the idea of forming a community organization such as RAP for the Cathedral District (Riverside Avondale Preservation)
- Pull together people with experience, desire, and training to effectively and efficiently solve problems.
- (Collaboration) would present a stronger, more viable force.
- We need to make our political leaders do. their job and solve this homeless issue!
- Create a workforce group to meet and come up with solutions.
- I wonder if the CDJ could strengthen the connections with collaborative/partner organizations as mentioned by Ginny and the \$35,000 grant: Downtown Vision, Episcopal Land Bank Foundation, Downtown Dwellers, Jaxson, among many more you already know and work with.
- Give more than lip service and provide support.

**Demographic Data**

**Gender** Male – 52.2% Female – 47.8%

**Age** 31-45 – 14% 46-64 – 41.8% 65+ - 44.1%

**Ethnicity** Af. Am – 16.2% Asian Am – 2% Caribbean – 2%  
Hispanic – 4.6% White – 73%

**Zip Code** 32202 – 28%

32207 – 13%

32210 – 10%

32218 & 32208 – Each Zip totals 7% (14%)

32205, 32223, 32277, 32211 & 32256 – Each Zip totals 4.6%. (23%)

32224, 32258,32257,32225, 32217, & 32206 – Each Zip totals 2% (12%)