

Opinion

## **Friday's Editorial: Grand plans are emerging for Cathedral District**

Posted at 2:01 AM

You can't understand Jacksonville without appreciating the role that the faith communities have played in this city.

This is especially true Downtown where churches even today are magnets for worshippers from throughout the county.

Developments led by St. John's Cathedral Downtown remain the anchors of a neighborhood that includes high-rises of senior citizens and some market rate housing.

Grand plans for another phase of development were approved in part by the Downtown Investment Authority.

Those plans were the subject of six community meetings recently conducted with a deliberative model used by the Kettering Foundation. Unlike panel discussions or town hall meetings, groups of 12 to 18 people share their concerns over two hours. A neutral moderator keeps the discussion on track.

"Meaningful change takes place when citizens are fully engaged as co-creators of their communities," the report states.

The groups received information on the Cathedral District's plans from its consulting firms, the Urban Land Institute and Torti Gallas and Partners.

Plans include converting the former Community Connections (YWCA) building into apartments and opening a K-8 charter school.

The Cathedral District includes 36 blocks anchored by five historic Christian churches. There are about 2,000 residents and a few businesses.

Among the services in the area are Volunteers in Medicine for the working uninsured, Family Promise for the homeless, the Cathedral Arts Project and Aging True for seniors with limited assets.

One of the major goals of the new Cathedral District is to provide more balanced developments, not just focused on the needy.

One of the unusual issues there involves too much parking. More than half of the surface area is devoted to parking. That's not just for churches but for absentee landowners, state-owned property and businesses.

Churches could share parking and people could be required to walk further. For those unable to walk, golf carts, trolleys and other vehicles could help.

So what should be done with the former parking lots? Some of them could be used for new residences and businesses, to produce solar energy or provide space for farmers markets and vegetable gardens.

There are plans to plant at least 50 trees, and for creating small parks and green spaces for prayer and contemplation.

"Others said that until safe spaces like playgrounds are created for children, families would not be drawn to reside in the neighborhood," the report stated.

The Main Street Park across from the Main Library was identified as a potential playground though it's now used by transients.

The idea of creating more parks run into the possibility that they would simply become gathering places for the "unhoused." And that produces a conflict for faith groups that minister to these people.

"The tension between a leafy green, safe walking neighborhood and an urban district that attracts people who are destitute has no easy answers," the report stated.

"Participants struggled with a clear tension between safety for residents and visitors and a compassionate approach to caring for the needy," the report stated. "In fact, some said that until this issue is substantively addressed, efforts to improve the Cathedral District might be compromised."

Citizens were interested in public art used as part of gateways that mark boundaries to the Cathedral District.

Apart from the exciting development plans, the forums illustrated the need for more communication and collaboration among the stakeholders.

There is a clear need for a more formal community organization modeled on the Riverside-Avondale, Springfield or San Marco areas. The district needs an organized voice to advocate for its area and the people it serves.

Residents advocated an annual festival with blocked streets, food and entertainment. Another less ambitious idea involves block parties or ice cream socials.

“I rarely meet anyone outside our residential complex,” said a resident.

Nevertheless, development is on the way.

“Many forum participants acknowledged that as Downtown and the Northbank 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 report stated.

It’s a story being played out throughout Jacksonville’s Downtown in many ways.