

100-word Introduction

Located just north of Ocala's downtown, the Midtown area is poised for transformative revitalization. In the midst of a flurry of redevelopment and improvement projects ushering in a downtown renaissance, the Midtown Master Plan sets a community-driven vision for the long-term role of the city's Midtown area. The plan focuses on the redevelopment of catalytic opportunity sites in a way that fits the existing historical and industrial chic context of the Midtown area, while also incorporating supporting strategies related to connectivity, social services, streetscape and building design, placemaking, and branding to comprehensively revitalize Midtown.

Innovation

The Midtown Master Plan is a comprehensive action plan that brings a lot of issues to the forefront that are not typically covered in a small area plan. One of the strongest examples of this is the social services section of the plan. The plan lays out strategies for implementing a collective impact approach and a housing first model, which are both innovative best practices in the fields of housing and social services that still face resistance from many service providers and other jurisdictions. By laying out strategies for these issues in the Midtown Master Plan, within the context of connectivity and redevelopment strategies, it better ensures that these social service strategies will be realistic and successful.

The proposals for Midtown's catalytic opportunity sites are also very innovative, because there is currently no proof of concept for the residential densities or mix of uses proposed. To overcome this hurdle, the city analyzed the market potential for urban residential development in the city's core, conducted detailed pro forma analyses to ensure redevelopment feasibility, and proposed

catalytic opportunity sites as a major component of the Midtown Master Plan. The city will enter into public-private-partnerships to incentivize the development of strategically selected sites in a way that fits the community's vision and will catalyze future redevelopment projects in the private market.

Community Impact

The local community played a larger role than city staff in shaping the goals and strategies of the Midtown Master Plan, which helps to ensure that the plan's community impact will be a positive one. By using stakeholder and focus group interviews, committee and community meetings, workshops, games, and design charrettes, staff were able to keep the community in the driver's seat of the planning process.

The community impact of a successful revitalization of the Midtown area won't be measured in changes, but rather in footsteps, in activity---in life. The Midtown area has great bones in the form of its street grid, proximity to downtown, large employers, and beloved landmarks such as Tusawilla Park and a thriving arts center. What the area lacks is good connectivity to the downtown and other areas of the city, a collective and well-designed approach to social service provision, and a walkable environment with a sustainable mix of land uses that includes high-density residential development. This plan lays out the roadmap to a vibrant and active Midtown.

Funding

Throughout the Midtown Master Plan, there are many recommendations that strategically direct public and private investments toward projects that are going to help realize the community's vision. The plan is action-oriented, so it was important to community stakeholders and staff alike

that we leverage investment dollars to the greatest extent possible, so that many of the strategies can be implemented quickly.

One great example of how the plan achieved this goal is in the connectivity section of the plan, where road diets were recommended for several streets in the Midtown area, especially NE 8th Avenue. To implement this road diet that was so important to the community quickly and effectively, we split the road diet project into two phases. In the first phase, the road diet is implemented via paint only in order to make a big positive impact with minimal investment dollars. In the second phase, state funding would be leveraged in order to offset the cost of moving curbs, raising medians, and other capital improvements necessary to make the road diet a success. Strategic funding recommendations like these can be found throughout the plan.

Problem Solving

Everything in the Midtown Master Plan ultimately boils down to problem solving, because the planning process was driven by the local community members, who deal with these problems day in and day out. The community ensured that the Midtown Master Plan would be an action-oriented plan geared towards implementation.

One example of a problem that the Midtown Master Plan seeks to solve is that there is significant unmet demand for urban development in the city's core. By identifying catalytic opportunity sites for redevelopment, some owned by the city and others owned by collaborative private owners, and committing to negotiate with developers in the form of a public-private-partnership to facilitate redevelopment projects that take the community one step closer to its vision, the Midtown Master Plan helps to break down that local perception that urban residential development is not feasible in the city's core.

Other examples of problem solving can be found throughout the plan regarding connectivity between Midtown and adjacent districts, social service coordination, streetscape design, placemaking, and branding.

Applicability to Other Communities

The strategies of the Midtown Master Plan are specific to our community, but this is the type of plan that we think should be replicated and used in many communities across the country. First and foremost, the Midtown Master Plan is a community-driven action plan. While it may seem obvious that a plan should be community-driven and action-oriented, any planner will be able to tell us that it's difficult to walk the line between visioning and planning when a plan is largely community driven. It requires time and understanding on all sides, and it requires that the community be put in the driver's seat in a genuine way for the duration of the planning process. By doing so, the community developed a realistic understanding of the limits and opportunities in Midtown, and the recommendations in this plan became infinitely more valuable---and every goal was backed up by a significant number of recommendations.

Another way that the Midtown Master Plan is applicable to other communities is in our use of catalytic opportunity sites. In many cases, the community vision that a master plan is hoping to realize involves some sort of land use change. In those cases, the use of catalytic opportunity sites is an incredibly valuable way to leverage limited public dollars to spur the type of redevelopment that a community would like to see, because it provides a proof of concept that is usually lacking and a sense of comfort in the private sector that comes from knowing the local government is supportive of these types of changes in the community.

Other Things to Tell the Judges

The Midtown Master Plan was adopted a year ago, but several of the plan's most important recommendations have already been fully or partially implemented. Some of the most notable recommendations implemented recently as a result of the Midtown Master Plan are included below:

- Development opportunities for the catalytic opportunity sites were advertised immediately after adoption of the plan, and the city is currently in negotiation with developers for multiple sites;
- Several segments of the Osceola Trak have been constructed and others are currently under construction, providing a vital multimodal link between the Downtown and Midtown areas;
- A form-based code with design standards for the Midtown area has been drafted and is currently in the public hearing process, with City Council adoption expected in August;
- The first phase of a NE 8th Avenue road diet has been completed, which included paint only, and added bike lanes, pedestrian crosswalks, and left turn lanes to the road to help reconnect Midtown to neighborhoods to the east;
- A turn movement off of Silver Springs Boulevard into the Midtown area has been incorporated into a DOT improvement project that will likely be completed in the next year;
- The city is working with social service providers in the Midtown area through coordination with the Continuum of Care (CoC) to ensure that service providers in Midtown are operating effectively as part of a larger network of services; and

- Staff have proposed changes to the city's affordable housing incentive fund through an ordinance currently in the public hearing process to help facilitate the creation of more affordable housing, which will help realize both redevelopment and social service goals.