



North Florida

# CLAY COUNTY HIGH RIDGE INITIATIVE



Technical Assistance Panel Report | July 19 & 20, 2023  
Keystone Heights, Florida

## About the Urban Land Institute (ULI)

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) is a nonprofit education and research institute supported by its members. Its mission is to shape the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide. Established in 1936, ULI has more than 48,000 members worldwide representing all aspects of land use and development disciplines. The North Florida District Council was formed in 2005 and has nearly 600 members serving 34 counties, including the cities of Jacksonville, St. Augustine, Gainesville, Tallahassee, Panama City and Pensacola.

## What are Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)?

The Technical Assistance Panel program is an advisory service available to a community, nonprofit, public entity or private enterprise that is facing real estate or land-use issues. Typically, a two-day session, the TAP program brings together a cross-section of experts who do not have a vested interest in the project to examine the issues from multiple angles and produce recommendations and implementation strategies based on market conditions, sound information, community realities and best practices.

The District Council assembles a panel of ULI members chosen for their knowledge of the issues facing the client. The interdisciplinary team may include land planners, architects, market and financial analysts, developers, engineers, appraisers, attorneys and/or brokers who are well qualified to provide unbiased, pragmatic advice on complex real estate and land-use issues.

To ensure objectivity, panel members cannot be involved in matters pending before the client, currently work for the client or solicit work from the client during the six months following the TAP program. In addition, they are not compensated for their time, but they are reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses, such as overnight lodging and transportation to attend the TAP.

## How Does the Program Work?

TAP members are briefed on the issues facing the client and receive detailed information relevant to the assignment including project history, detailed maps of the study area, relevant demographics and other relevant data necessary for an understanding of the task at hand. During the two-day program, TAP members tour the study area, interview stakeholders (business owners, city council members, etc.), and work collaboratively to produce preliminary findings and recommendations which are presented at the end of Day 2 to the client. A complete report follows within about eight weeks with detailed recommendations.

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ULI Advisory Services identify creative, practical solutions for complex land use and development challenges.

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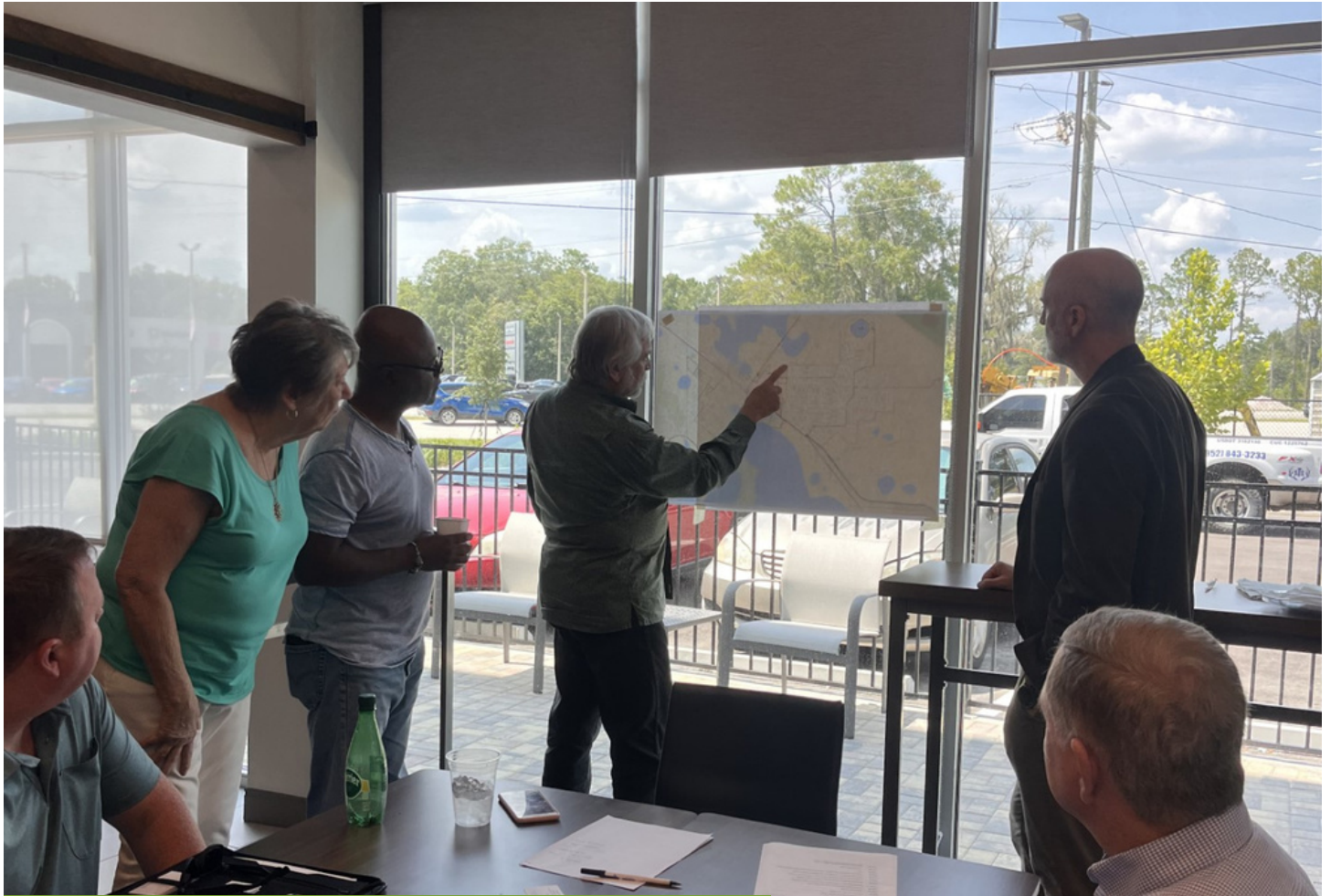
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PHOTOS: Panelists studying the High Ridge area

# TAP SCOPE OF WORK & PANEL PROCESS

## TAP SCOPE

The High Ridge Initiative (HRI) engaged the ULI North Florida District Council to convene a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) to study the High Ridge Estates neighborhood and surrounding area in Keystone Heights in Clay County. This study area currently contains a neighborhood with over 1,500 lots, 500 plus dwellings, private and public roads, with surrounding businesses and a local community center across the street from the neighborhood known as Mission of the Dirt Road.

The TAP was asked to recommend the following:

1. A long-term vision for empowerment zones and a redevelopment program of nonconforming and commercial structures for the study area and surrounding area that would promote economic growth, affordable housing, sound development practices, livability; and
2. Highest and best uses for the study area, including identifying a range of uses that would be compatible with existing, committed, and planned uses; and
3. Strategies for public facilities to promote mobility to, from, and within the study area for buses, safety vehicles, sidewalks and bike paths for residents, as well as any resulting adjustments to current land use, transportation, and recreational and open space plans.

## PANEL PROCESS

The ULI North Florida District Council assembled a group of accomplished ULI members who have expertise in real estate development, growth management, land planning, site development and engineering, making for an intensive two-day workshop to address the challenges facing the High Ridge Estates community.

Prior to convening, TAP members received information on High Ridge Estates and Clay County, including the community's history, the county's 2040 Comprehensive Plan, building and zoning information, land development code, demographics, maps, and other pertinent information.

Orientation on Day 1 included an introductory presentation by Clay County representatives, including Troy Nagle, Assistant County Manager; Chereese Stewart, Assistant County Manager; and High Ridge resident Rev. Carey Morford, Mission of the Dirt Road.

Panelists toured High Ridge Estates and interviewed various stakeholders to hear their assessments of the community and attendant issues. Interviewees included Clay County Commissioner Betsy Condon; Melisa Blaney, Clay County Utility Authority (CCUA) Service Availability Manager; Chereese Stewart, Assistant County Manager; Karen Lake, former Mayor, City of Keystone Heights; Lynn Rutkowski, City Manager, Keystone Heights; Peyton Beattie, UF/IFAS Community Development Extension Agent;

Douglas Conkey, St. Johns River Water Management District; and Joe Wiggins, Vice President, Wiggins Construction Company of North Florida, Inc.

At the end of Day 2, the ULI panel shared their observations and recommendations with Clay County representatives and stakeholders.

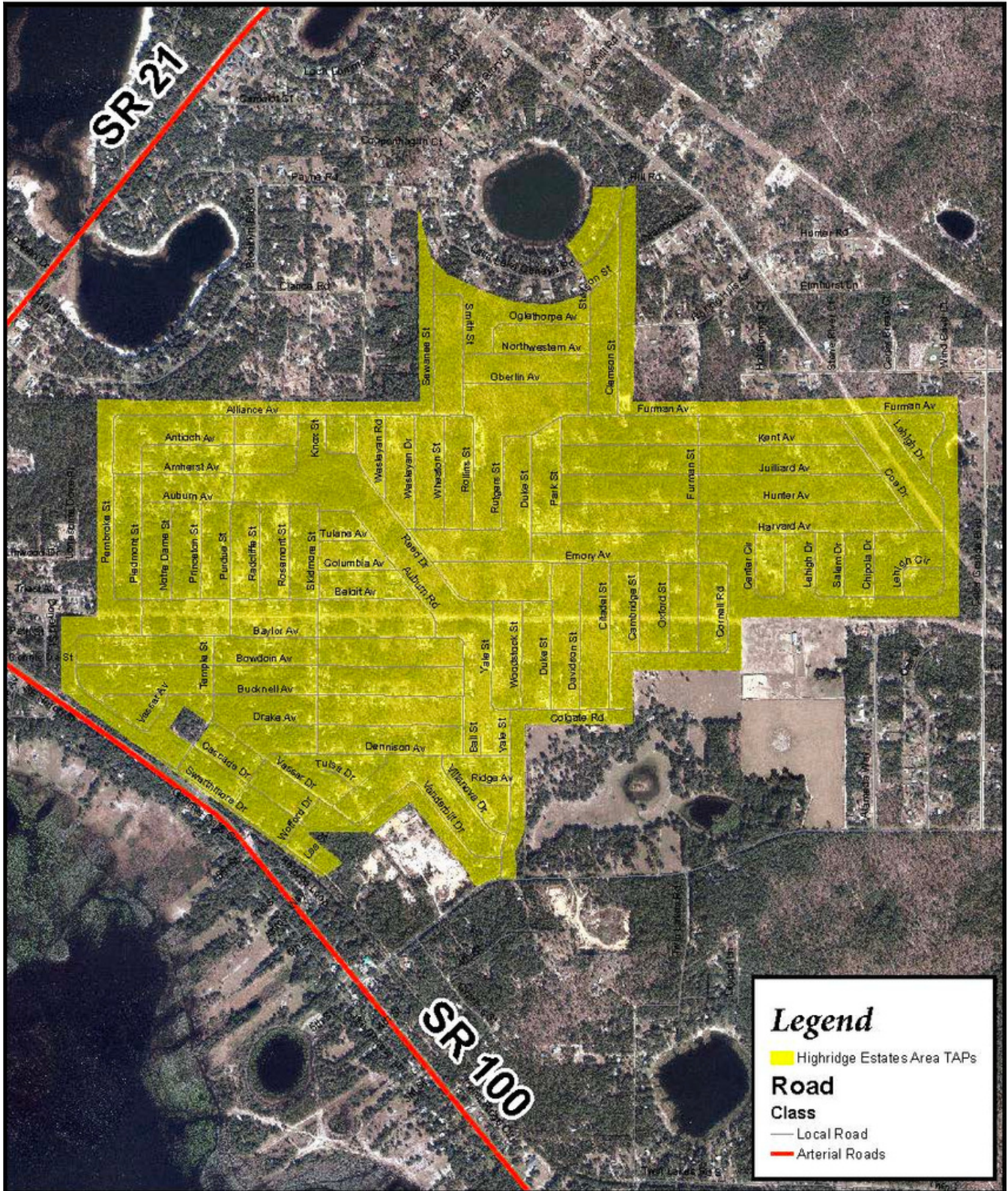


IMAGE: High Ridge Estates Area Map

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Clay County and the High Ridge Initiative seek to redevelop High Ridge Estates, a blighted 1,070-acre subdivision in an unincorporated area of the county adjacent to Keystone Heights. The subdivision was platted in 1969 with 1,683 one-third-acre parcels. The original developer abandoned the property.

Most of the roads are private and unpaved, with the exception of a loop paved by the county in 2014. Of the community's 509 dwellings, the large majority are mobile homes about 60 percent of which are owner-occupied. Homes are on well water and septic tanks. Many wells are shallow and some have gone dry.

The estimated average annual household income is \$30,000, and it is estimated that approximately 40 percent of households live on \$24,000 or less. There are people living in campers, sheds, tents and homeless encampments throughout the community. The property is littered with trash and junk. Residents complain about safety, drugs and crime.

Two driving forces are expected to help spur economic development in and around Keystone Heights—the Black Creek Water Resource Development project, which will replenish area lakes, and an expansion of the Keystone Heights Airport, which seeks to develop an industrial park and bring in “qualified targeted industries,” including aviation/aerospace, infotech and a range of manufacturing opportunities. Together, these two forces are expected to accelerate growth in the southwest portion of the county over the next decade. High Ridge and its abundance of high and dry undeveloped lots well below market rate will likely generate interest from real estate developers and buyers.

The panel recommended the creation of a public-private partnership to redevelop the subdivision, including infrastructure, assemblage of lots and needed financing, and rebranding the community.

The highest and best use is for the community to remain largely residential with in-fill housing choices for a variety of household incomes. Panelists recommend rezoning to include multifamily, such as duplex, triplex and quadruplex housing, as a means of increasing affordability.

The highest priority is paving the roads, which are in extremely poor condition. Unless the road issue is addressed, redevelopment would be difficult. The county's acquisition of right of way is imperative. Community Development Block Grants and other federal grants are available for road paving. The county should also explore lower-cost alternative solutions to paving with asphalt as an initial measure to improve access.

Panelists also recommended that the county do the following:

- Coordinate with Clay County Utility Authority to conduct a feasibility study to determine the probability and cost of extending water to the community;
- Develop a stronger relationship with the County Sheriff's Office;
- Lobby JTA/Clay County Transportation for a bus stop and shelter at the community entrance;
- Tap into the county's CDBG funding for covenant enforcement to schedule regular clean-up days.

As previously noted, the economic development of Keystone Heights Airport could serve as an economic engine for this community. Grants are available to help extend water and sewer to the airport property. The panelists recommend the airport authority's establishing strong collaborative relationships between the three jurisdictions for which the airport resides, Keystone Heights, Clay County and Bradford County, as well as with Enterprise Florida and area economic development entities. In addition, the panel recommends identifying a champion(s) who can support development efforts at the airport.



# Summary of Recommendations

## High Ridge Estates

1. Create a public-private partnership.
  - Use CDBG funds to adopt clear ownership of road right of way and for paving.
  - Develop a dirt-to-pave road schedule/funding. Consider alternates to asphalt.
  - Rezone to include affordable housing, duplexes, triplexes and quads.
  - Cluster initial development to create critical mass.
  - Determine if Florida's Live Local initiative is an opportunity for infrastructure improvements.
  - Enhance mobility with east-west/north-south collector roads and a ped/bike trail.
  - Develop a crossroad transportation and neighborhood commerce hub.
  - Acquire lots for recreational space and stormwater retention.
  - Rebrand the subdivision.
2. Implement a water utility cost study.
3. Lobby JTA Clay County Transportation for a bus stop/shelter.
4. Implement a proactive community policing effort.
5. Schedule regular clean-up days.
6. Step up code enforcement; initiate an awareness campaign.
7. Continue to build a strong collaborative community bond.
8. Identify and pursue funding sources.

## Keystone Heights Airport

1. Seek a grant to fund water/sewer extension.
2. Develop collaborative relationship between the Airport Authority, the three jurisdictions for which the airport resides, and economic development entities.
3. Identify champions; seek state legislature and federal representative support.
4. Seek Airport Infrastructure Grant for infrastructure/roadway projects.
5. Work with Northeast Florida Regional Council to develop federal grant applications.

# BACKGROUND

**“I want the citizens of Keystone Heights to think of High Ridge Estates as a great neighborhood.”**

- Betsy Condon, Clay County Commissioner

High Ridge Estates is a low-income neighborhood encompassing 1.67 square miles in an unincorporated area of southwestern Clay County just outside the Keystone Heights city limit. The 1,070-acre subdivision includes 1,683 platted parcels of land with 509 dwellings, of which about 60 percent are owner-occupied. Another 81 lots are “improved.” Most vacant lots are owned by people out of state.

Select Western Lands, Inc., a branch of a New Mexico company, platted the land into one-third acre lots in 1969 to be developed as a 55+ community—a development that never happened after the company abandoned the property. Select Western Lands created a similar platted-land scheme in Deming, New Mexico, drawing unsuspecting out-of-state buyers with the promise of cheap land and sunshine. In both cases, landowners were left with dirt roads and a lack of services.



PHOTOS: Dirt roads throughout the neighborhood





PHOTOS: An array of housing throughout High Ridge Estates

Most High Ridge roads are private. In 2014, the county paved a main loop in High Ridge and they continue to maintain all paved and graded roads. Some 20 miles of dirt roads remain, dotted with ruts and potholes, making entry difficult for emergency vehicles, school buses, etc.

There are no sidewalks and no retention ponds. When it rains, some of the 262 children in the community who go to school in Keystone Heights are unable to get to the school bus stop due to road conditions. At community meetings High Ridge residents cited the need for paved roads as the most important issue. However, in a recent Alfred Benesh & Co. Dirt Road Study conducted for the county the two High Ridge roads included in the study were considered low priority for road paving, although the study did not include the entire neighborhood.

Mobile homes make up the majority of dwellings. People are living in campers, sheds, tents and homeless encampments. Lots seized by the county for unpaid property taxes are sold for about \$5,000, or one-half appraised value.

Recently, two homes were built on an unpaved portion of Reed Street by Wiggins Construction and sold for \$250,000 each. Wiggins is interested in developing additional homes in the community if roads are paved. He is currently planning a development of single- and multifamily homes adjacent to High Ridge.



PHOTOS: New development in the High Ridge area

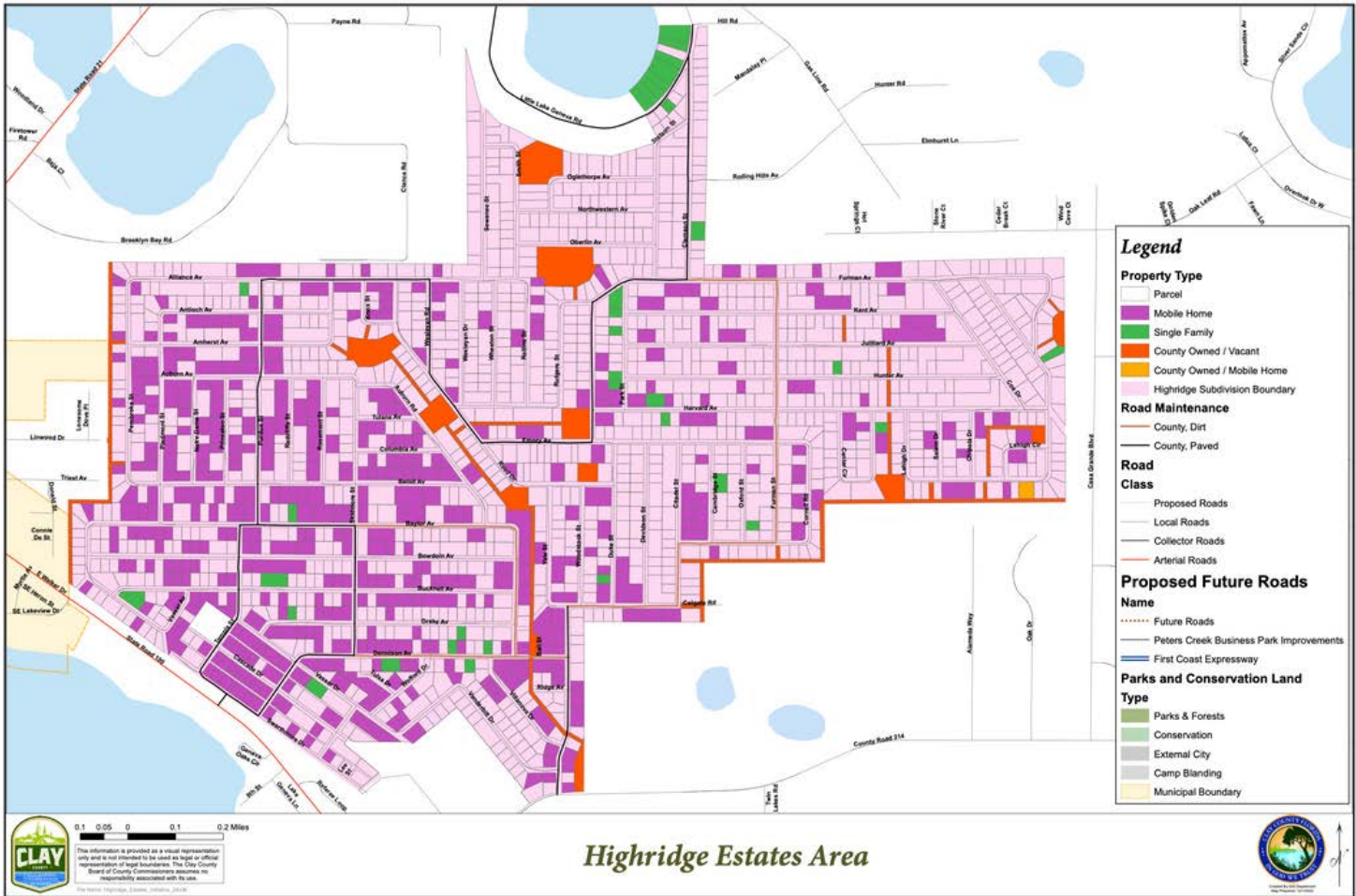


IMAGE: High Ridge Estates Area Map

All homes are on septic and most homes are on wells. However, shallow wells are going dry. There are homes with no running water, requiring residents to run hoses from working wells to their houses. The cost to drill a well is purportedly \$13,000. This is beyond the financial ability of most current homeowners in a community where the estimated average income is \$30,000 and approximately 40 percent of households are estimated to live on \$24,000 or less.

The Clay County Utility Authority (CCUA) only has water capacity to serve 500 to 600 homes in High Ridge. Extending water service into High Ridge would require a 75 percent commitment by residents. As a cost-recovery project, CCUA would pay for the extension upfront, while residents would incur an additional monthly charge to cover the cost over time.

Regarding wastewater, the utility is currently at capacity at their Keystone Heights plant. CCUA is beginning to plan and design an expansion of their existing facility with construction expected to begin in 2025. Plans do not currently include extending water or wastewater service to High Ridge.

Regarding neighborhood services, internet is available for most of the neighborhood. And although the county provides trash pickup and recycling, High Ridge Estates has become a dumping ground for discarded items such as tires, mattresses, etc.



PHOTO: Debris

Residents have raised concerns not only about trash and rubbish but about walking safety, safe places for children to play, property maintenance, lack of code enforcement, drug sellers and users, and other criminal activity.

With respect to code enforcement, Clay County has only three code enforcement officers for the nearly 605 square miles of the county. Officers only go in to investigate a code complaint if called in and are prohibited by state law from investigating a violation based on an anonymous complaint. Furthermore, officers cannot enter a property if their view of it is obstructed, such as when a high fence has been erected.

In addition, the High Ridge area is a food desert. The closest store selling groceries is Dollar General, which is more than a mile from the subdivision’s entrance. There is no public transportation stop near the High Ridge community.

Jacksonville Transportation Authority’s Clay Community Transportation (CCT) service operates two bus lines from Keystone Heights. The Green line runs from the Keystone Heights post office to the VA Clinic on College Drive.

CCT’s Magenta line runs from the Keystone Heights post office to Gainesville. To supplement coverage, CCT offers a shuttle service that, if available, will pick up passengers from their locations and drop them off at a regular bus stop. A reservation is required. In March 2023, a transportation study presented to the Clay County Board reported low ridership and productivity for the Green and Magenta lines.

Efforts to improve quality of life for High Ridge residents have had limited success. A High Ridge Property Owners Association (POA) established in 1989 was dissolved in 2005. There are unconfirmed statements that suggest that there was a history of malfeasance and monies were misappropriated.

Mission of the Dirt Road, a Wesleyan church and community center, was established in 2016 to offer ministries and services to the High Ridge Estates residents. The church has been in its current location across from the main entrance to the community since 2020. The Mission hosts classes, support groups, neighborhood events, clean-up days and other community-building activities, including tool lending, showers, youth activities and health services programs.

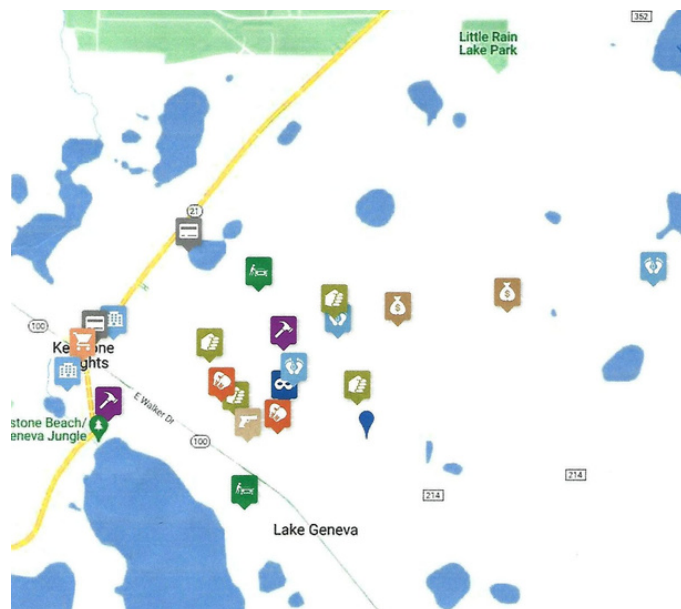


IMAGE: Lexis Nexis Risk Solutions Community Crime Map July 13 - August 12, 2023



There is an expectation that the area around Keystone Heights will benefit from two driving forces that could help spur economic development—the Black Creek Water Resource Development project and an expansion of the Keystone Heights Airport.

The primary goal of the \$100 million Black Creek Water Resource Development Project is to increase recharge to the Upper Floridan aquifer in the Keystone Heights region and Lower Santa Fe basin by diverting up to 10 million gallons per day from the South Fork of Black Creek during wet weather high flow periods. The water will flow through a 17-mile pipeline and filtering system into Alligator Creek, which flows into Lake Brooklyn. The project will help meet future water supply demands while replenishing regional area lakes, including drought-stressed lakes Brooklyn and Geneva. The water is expected to start flowing in late 2024, but it may take four years for the lakes' water levels to rise to former levels. Improvement in the lakes is expected to draw people to the area for recreation and tourism. It is also possible that project could have a positive impact on the shallow wells in High Ridge Estates.



PHOTO: View of Lake Geneva

Keystone Heights Airport sits three miles north of the city of Keystone Heights, encompassing 2,482 acres. The property straddles both Clay and Bradford counties and abuts the southwest perimeter of Camp Blanding. Keystone Heights acquired the property from the federal government in 1947. However, the airport's address is in Bradford County. The Keystone Heights Airport Facility District was established to assure “the proper and safe operation of the Keystone Heights Airpark, to protect the public investment in the airport, and to protect and promote the public utility of the airport.”

The airport accommodates private and corporate aircraft and provides fixed-base operator services. In addition, branches of the military utilize the property for various training exercises.

Development plans are in the works with an eye toward attracting industrial, manufacturing and commercial development to the property and extending runway length in order to accommodate larger aircraft. Currently, the airport lacks water and sewer infrastructure. A feasibility study is underway to determine the cost of providing the water/sewer utility to the property.



PHOTO: Lake Geneva at a low water level





PHOTO: Keystone Heights Airport Map

An interlocal agreement between Keystone Heights and Bradford County regarding the airport was amended in May 2019 as part of Bradford County's \$2.3 million Florida Job Growth Grant for airport infrastructure improvements to provide broadband internet access and a second road to provide access to 1,300 acres of developable land. As required by the grant, the agreement acknowledges that the improvements will remain the property of Bradford County and that Bradford County shall be responsible for maintenance of the improvements in perpetuity.

Bradford County qualifies as a Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) County, whereas Clay County does not due to its population which is heavily centered around Orange Park. As such, Bradford County has the capacity to tap into grants available only to rural counties and may need to be the lead in seeking airport infrastructure grants.

The airport is currently governed by the Keystone Heights Airport Authority (KHAA), which is comprised of seven members (4 City of Keystone Heights seats, 1 Bradford County Seat, 1 Clay County Seat, and an Officer from Camp Blanding). Each is appointed by the City of Keystone Heights City Council.

At its August 7, 2023 meeting, the Keystone Heights City Council voted to change the governance of the airport. Under the proposed ordinance, the City Council will have the authority to hire and fire the airport manager; the Keystone Heights city manager will supervise the airport manager; and the airport manager will be required to provide monthly updates to the Council. Readings of the ordinance will be made at the September and October City Council meetings for public comment.



PHOTO: Keystone Heights Airport Entrance

# ANALYSIS

## WHAT WE HEARD

**“Growth”**  
**“Code Enforcement”**  
*“Homelessness”*  
**“community”**

**“ROADS”**  
*“lack of pride”*  
**“water/sewer”**  
**“crime/drug use”**

**“SAFETY”**  
**“HEALTH CARE”**  
**“SQUATTERS”**

**“Blight and Trash”**  
**“generational poverty”**  
**“food desert”**

High Ridge Estates has long suffered from neglect. The subdivision faces myriad issues—from unpaved roads to shallow/dry wells to homeless encampments. It wears the stigma of blight and crime. Vocal High Ridge residents, backed by the efforts of the Mission of the Dirt Road, are resolved to turn High Ridge into a thriving community. The High Ridge Initiative has the support of county and local officials. If the subdivision can be redeveloped with affordable and workforce housing, the county would benefit from additional property taxes.

There are several forces in High Ridge’s favor. It is located between two arterial roads—state roads 21 and 100, which intersect in Keystone Heights. Developer Joe Wiggins is planning to develop 50 acres of residential units with commercial development abutting SR 21 and a mix of housing that will abut High Ridge on the west end.

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**“Rebuilding distressed neighborhoods to achieve community stabilization is a large task requiring a long-term, multi-disciplinary effort.”**

- “Neighborhood Branding and Marketing,”  
NeighborWorks America

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High Ridge Estates provides a source of affordable lots to this area of the county. The community is close to Lake Geneva and Lake Brooklyn. Once the Black Creek Water Resource Development Project gets underway and lake water levels rise, the area, including High Ridge, will likely generate greater interest from real estate developers and buyers.

## Strengths

- Available land
- Accessible to state roads
- Electric availability
- Location
- Local government/leadership
- Mission of the Dirt Road
- Nearby lakes
- No wetlands/flooding
- Potential workforce
- Proximity to airport/Keystone Heights

## Weaknesses

- Absentee/Fractional Ownership
- Blighted properties
- Challenges for students
- Food desert
- Homelessness
- Illegal dumping
- Lack of infrastructure
- Lack of safe water/dry wells
- Lack of sewer/available wastewater capacity
- Limited community education
- Perceived safety
- Unenforced codes

## Opportunities

- Assemblage of lots
- Available land for development
- Community cohesion
- Jobs creation
- Potential expansion of airport
- Property improvement
- Steer growth

## Threats

- Access to CCUA water/sewer capacity
- Access for emergency vehicles/school buses/healthcare
- Crime/Drug use
- Health of neighbors
- Perception of neighborhood
- Resistance to change
- Stagnation/decline

What's more, there is a drive to develop an industrial park at Keystone Heights Airport, which can be a catalyst project for the entire area. Cecil Field in Jacksonville is almost at capacity as is Gainesville Regional Airport.

Opening up the Keystone Heights Airport's developable land has the capacity to bring in so-called "qualified targeted industries," including aviation/aerospace, infotech and a range of manufacturing opportunities, all of which offer significantly higher wages than the average area wage.

Providing educational opportunities and good-paying jobs can help attract new residents, keep current residents and spur further residential and commercial development in the area.

The addition of water and sewer is fundamental to the ability for industrial park development. Funding sources are available, such as the Florida Job Growth Grant Fund. Suwannee County was awarded more than \$1.9 million through the Fund to expand water distribution infrastructure and treatment facilities at a 500-acre industrial park to support commercial businesses moving to the area.



The highest and best use for High Ridge is to remain largely residential and provide in-fill housing choices for a variety of household incomes. New data shows that 73% of current homes are mobile homes that would not qualify for SHIP or CDBG because of their age and lack of meeting building code related to storm safety.

Household incomes include:

- Market rate housing [ $>120\%$  of area median income (AMI)]
- Workforce housing [80% -120% of AMI]
- Affordable housing
  - Low-income [50%-80% of AMI],
  - Very low-income [30%-50% of AMI]
- Extremely low-income housing [ $<30\%$  of AMI]

Rezoning will allow for some multifamily construction, such as duplexes, triplexes and quads, as a way to offer more affordable housing.

Commercial development on SR 100 along the front of the High Ridge property is not feasible since there currently is insufficient depth for such development. Any commercial development would most likely be at a crossroads, such as at SR 100/SR 214.

### 2023 Area Median Income

HUD uses area median income (AMI) as a benchmark for determining housing eligibility for affordable housing properties. AMI is the midpoint of a region's income distribution. Percentages vary by number of people in a household. Clay County is part of the Jacksonville HUD Metro Fair Market Rent Area. For 2023, AMI for a family of four in this region is \$93,300. Income limits for a family of four are \$70,800 (low-income); \$44,250 (very low-income); and \$30,000 (extremely low-income).

The prospective Wiggins mixed-use site abutting SR 21 and High Ridge could be promising. It would provide jobs and services. With the acquisition of land, there is an opportunity to extend a road from High Ridge connecting to that development and providing High Ridge residents with east-west access to SR 21.

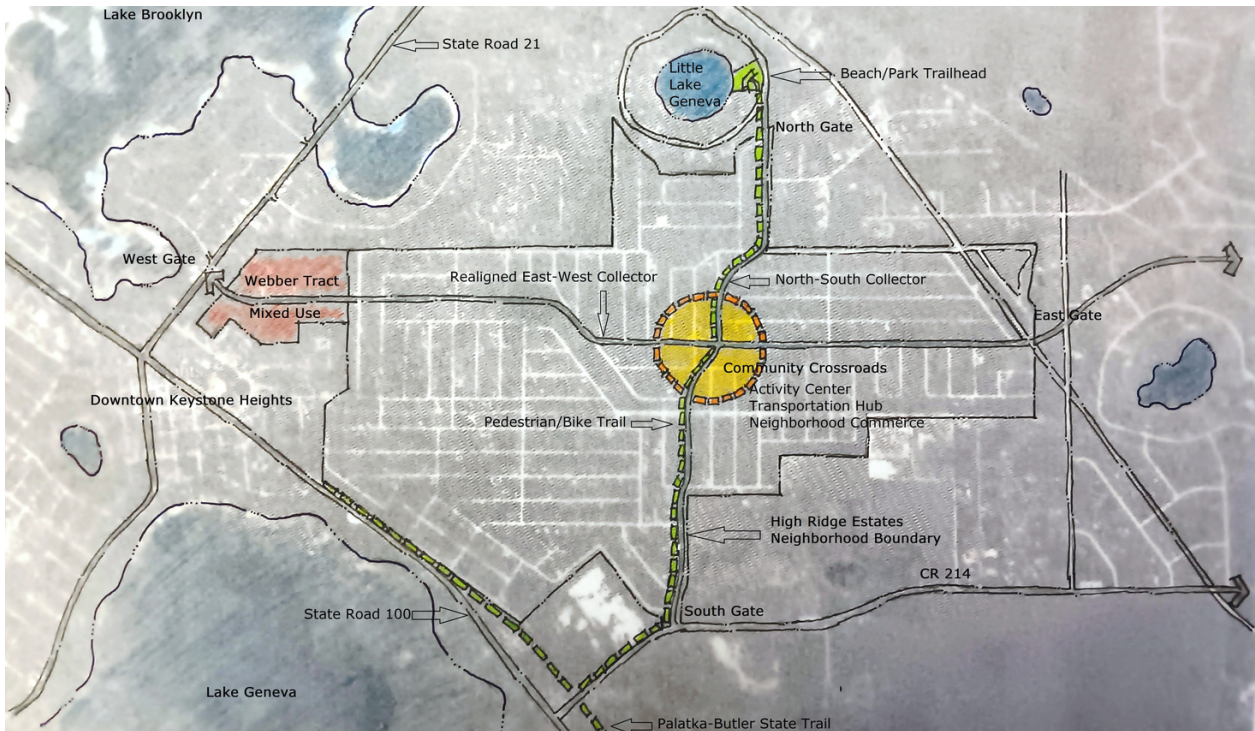


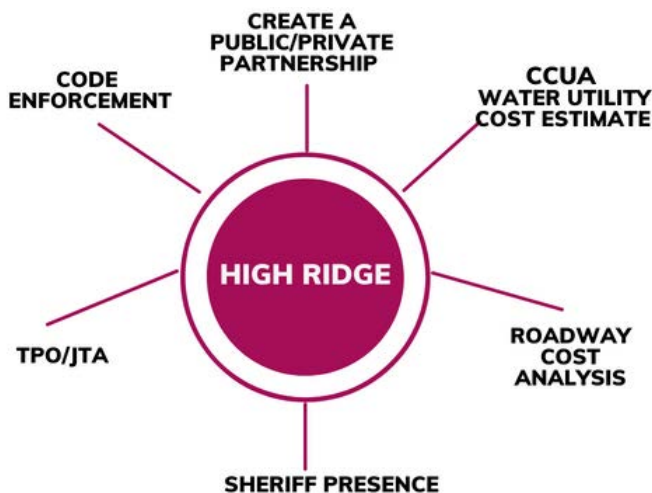
PHOTO: Proposed vision for the High Ridge area

A north-south collector road also could be created to connect the Palatka-Butler State Trail system with a multipurpose trail as part of a recreational opportunity. The crossroads of the east-west and north-south collector roads is a prime spot to be developed as a transportation hub and neighborhood commerce center.

Residents complained of a lack of safe recreational space in the community. Consideration should be given to acquiring lots to create future open space as well as stormwater retention opportunities.

## Implementation

There is a benefit to creating a public-private partnership (P3) with an affordable housing developer to steer assemblage of lots, redevelopment and needed financing. A P3 can distribute the risk between the public and private partners, redevelop the community and help to achieve the county's key public objectives. Florida's State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) dollars are available to fund new construction, construction and gap financing, and acquisition of property for affordable housing. In addition, investment in infrastructure is needed to support redevelopment.



*slard/Chey/Keystan/HighRi*

## Ten Principles for Successful Public/Private Partnerships

1. Prepare properly for public/private partnerships
2. Create a shared vision
3. Understand your partners and key players
4. Be clear on the risks and rewards for all parties
5. Establish a clear and rational decision-making process
6. Make sure all parties do their homework
7. Secure consistent and coordinated leadership
8. Communicate early and often
9. Negotiate a fair deal structure
10. Build trust as a core value

*Mary Beth Corrigan et al., Ten Principles for Successful Public/Private Partnerships (Washington, DC: ULI, 2005)*

Dirt roads slow down economic development. Private roads could be paved with the creation of a Municipal Service Benefit Unit. However, given the failure of past such assessment proposals and the income level of many homeowners, passage of an MSBU is unlikely. Another option is to create a Municipal Service Taxing Unit for dirt road paving in unincorporated communities in the county.

Alternatively, the county needs to acquire right of way in High Ridge. Establishing clear ownership of right-of-way may not be easy and will require a determined educational and communications effort. Homeowners must see a benefit to them.

In addition, laying asphalt is expensive. Thinking out of the box may be required. The county should implement a roadway analysis to determine various paving alternatives, their attendant costs and funding options. Various funding opportunities exist, including a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG). Clay County's 2023-24 CDBG Annual Action Plan includes \$523,450 for public infrastructure.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law includes several programs that also help finance road paving. The Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP) discretionary grant program supports planning grants and capital construction grants, as well as technical assistance, to restore community connectivity through the removal, retrofit, mitigation, or replacement of eligible transportation infrastructure facilities, including roads, that create a barrier to community connectivity, e.g., mobility, access, or economic development.

The Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) discretionary program supports the development of a comprehensive safety action plan (Action Plan) that identifies the most significant roadway safety concerns in a community and the implementation of projects and strategies to address roadway safety issues. SS4A requires an eligible Action Plan to be in place before applying to implement projects and strategies.

Beyond roads, expanding water and sewer services would increase the opportunity for development. The county should seek a cost estimate from CCUA. Should the utility extend service, residents would pay an additional monthly charge to cover the cost over time. Low-income residents could qualify for the federally funded Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program that helps income-qualified families with water and wastewater costs. The Florida Department of Commerce administers the program in the state.

## Case Studies

In February 2022 Levy County's Board of County Commissioners approved a soil stabilization pilot on two dirt roads. A protein additive was introduced to the existing dirt roads to accelerate the cohesive bonding of soil particles into a cement-like base that resists water. A layer of chip seal can be added once the road is solid. If successful, the process could be added to the Florida Department of Transportation's approved products list.

In November 2020 the Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners approved a project called "50 in 5" using chip sealing to provide a hardened, stable roadway as an alternative, more affordable solution to asphalt paving of county dirt roads. The county dedicated \$2 million a year for five years toward the project to chip seal 50 miles of dirt roads. It was funded from excess revenues generated by a half-cent county sales tax implemented in 2019 to cover critical infrastructure needs.

Wildomar, Calif., created an Unpaved Roadway Enhancement Program also using double chip sealing as a more affordable solution to paving. Homeowners along privately owned dirt roads can petition to get their roads chip sealed if they agree to dedicate right of way and pay a low yearly fee for routine maintenance. [See *program details*, <https://www.cityofwildomar.org/DocumentCenter/View/757/Unpaved-Roadway-Enhancement-Program-Forms-PDF?bidId=>]

In addition, the High Ridge Estates location is eligible for USDA Rural Development programs, such as Revolving Funds for Financing Water and Wastewater Projects. The program helps qualified nonprofits create revolving loan funds to provide financing to extend water and waste disposal systems operated by state and local governmental entities in rural areas. The loans can be used for pre-development costs for water and wastewater treatment projects.

The Rural Community Development Initiative Grant, another USDA Rural Development program, helps support housing, community facilities and community and economic development projects in rural areas. Public bodies, nonprofit organizations and qualified private (for-profit) organizations are eligible to apply.

Other pressing issues include crime and blight. The community needs to work with the Clay County Sheriff's Office to increase patrols in the community. Efforts should be made to encourage community engagement through the Sheriff's Neighborhood Engagement Team (Sheriff's NET).

Junk, junk vehicles, trash, debris and non-permitted structures dot the High Ridge landscape. Many residents may not be aware that these are in violation of county code. A campaign initiated by community leaders to educate residents on county standards, the need to maintain health, safety, and property values, and the code enforcement process can bring greater awareness to the issue. Communication and education must be done regularly and consistently. In addition, community clean-up days, which the High Ridge Initiative has already started, should be a regularly scheduled event. Clay County's CDBG 2023-24 Annual Plan includes \$50,000 for code enforcement, which can be used to support communities for clean-up days.

The High Ridge Initiative should also continue to work with JTA's Clay County Transportation (CCT) to lobby for a bus stop and shelter at the community's entrance. A campaign to raise awareness of CCT's shuttle service would be beneficial as well.

The High Ridge Estates name is associated with dirt roads, crime, drugs and poverty. Rebranding can and has revitalized numerous distressed communities. However, simply changing the name without any improvements will not erase the community's image. At the same time, despite any improvements to promote neighborhood well-being that might occur over the course of the next five to 10 years, development may be stymied by the stigma attached to the name. Therefore, once positive changes begin to happen, rebranding the neighborhood could drive a new population to the area. Examples could include Geneva Heights to take advantage of proximity to Lake Geneva or Keystone Park to reference proximity to Keystone Heights and elicit a parklike setting. Renaming should include not only the subdivision itself but the college street names that now easily identify the area.



PHOTO: Sign in front of Mission of the Dirt Road

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## High Ridge Estates

1. Create a public-private partnership to redevelop the subdivision, including infrastructure, assemblage of lots and needed financing.
  - Establish clear ownership of road right of way. Develop an educational communications campaign to demonstrate the benefit to residents. Use CDBG funds to adopt rights of way and for paving.
  - Develop a dirt-to-pave road schedule for the community and a means for funding it. Consider alternates to asphalt to accelerate improvements.
  - Rezone High Ridge to include single-family housing, duplexes, triplexes and quads as highest and best uses.
  - Determine if Florida's Live Local initiative is an opportunity for infrastructure improvement.
  - To create critical mass, cluster initial development in one section.
  - Enhance mobility with an east-west collector road to connect to SR 21 and a north-south collector road and pedestrian/bike trail that connects Little Lake Geneva to the Palatka Lake Butler State Trail.
  - Develop a transportation and neighborhood commerce hub at the new crossroad identified above.
  - Assemble lots to create future open recreational space and stormwater retention opportunities.
  - Rebrand the subdivision with a new community name and street names.
2. Implement a study with Clay County Utility Authority to determine the capacity and cost/feasibility to extend water utility into the community to current households and future development.
3. Lobby JTA Clay County Transportation to add a bus stop and shelter at the High Ridge community entrance.
4. Work with the Sheriff's Office to implement regular mobile patrols as part of a proactive community policing effort.
5. Allocate CDBG funds for code enforcement to schedule regular clean-up days.
6. Step up code enforcement to eliminate violations and nonconforming structures. Initiate a communications campaign to educate residents on county standards, the need to maintain health, safety, and property values, and the code enforcement process.
7. Continue to build a strong collaborative community bond. Work with the High Ridge Initiative to address the need for social services to the community.
8. Identify and pursue funding sources.



## First Steps

1. **Create a steering committee comprised of elected authorities and nonprofits.**
2. **Hire a consultant to manage the steering committee's goals and objectives.**
3. **Determine roadway infrastructure cost estimates.**
4. **Determine CCUA cost estimate for water and sewer.**
5. **Implement JTA/TPO engagement for neighborhood transportation.**
6. **Improve law enforcement presence in neighborhood.**

## Keystone Heights Airport Development

1. Seek a grant to fund water/sewer extension, e.g., Florida Job Growth Grant Fund Public Infrastructure Grant.
2. Develop a collaborative relationship between the Keystone Heights Airport Authority and Enterprise Florida, Bradford County Development Authority, Clay County Economic Development Corporation, Clay County Development Authority, Clay County Chamber of Commerce, North Florida Regional Chamber of Commerce, and North Florida Transportation Planning Organization in order to advance industrial development at the airport.
3. Seek Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Airport Infrastructure Grant for runways, taxiways, safety and sustainability projects, and roadway projects.
4. Identify champions who can bring forces together, e.g., seek support from state and federal legislative representatives.
  - State Sen. Jennifer Bradley, District 6 (Clay/Bradford) and former State Sen. Rob Bradley
  - Rep. Bobby Payne, District 20 (Clay County), chair, Infrastructure Strategies Committee
  - Rep. Charles Brannan III, District 10 (Bradford County)
  - U.S. Congressman Aaron Bean, District 4
5. Work with Northeast Florida Regional Council. NEFRC is the dedicated Economic Development District for the Economic Development Administration, providing technical assistance for the development of federal grant applications.

# ABOUT THE PANEL



## **Lara Diettrich**

Half Associates, Inc. | Jacksonville, Florida

Lara K. Diettrich is the senior planner/project manager overseeing Half and Associates, Inc. Land Planning Services for the Northeast Florida region. She has been providing professional services for over 23 years in a vast array of urban, rural and regional planning projects in Northeast Florida and surrounding cities and counties throughout the state.

Her professional background is comprised of a full spectrum in the public and private sectors, having also been a small business owner for 13 of the 23 years. These services include but are not limited to: Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Code/Land Development Regulation management, application, and updates; Community Redevelopment Area planning and implementation; economic development initiatives; brownfields planning; charrette and community outreach facilitation; urban infill, new development, and redevelopment; expert witness testimony; and public hearing representation. A special niche has been in planning in the military sector by providing services such as: installation land use and zoning; site planning and space programming for installation expansion and/or new development; 1390/91; Anti-Terrorism Standards; JLUS; Florida Statutes and Army Regulations; land use compatibility studies; and expert witness testimony.

Diettrich's professional organizations include the Urban Land Institute North Florida Council (Board of Directors), American Planning Association, and Florida Planning and Zoning Association (Past President). She has served in public posts such as a Jacksonville Planning Commissioner (2013-2015), Jacksonville Public Service Grants Council (2016-2021)/Council Chair (2018-2020), Northeast Florida Regional Community Institute Member (2012 - current), Northeast Florida Regional Leadership Academy Graduate (2012), and University of North Florida MPA Stakeholder Committee (2019-current). Of various project awards over the years, Diettrich was the recipient of the 2016 George W. Simons, Jr. Award and a 2015 Jacksonville Business Journal, Women of Influence.

She holds both a bachelor of arts in political science and a master of public administration/policy analysis from the University of North Florida.



## **Tom Fallin, PE**

BGE, Inc. | Jacksonville, Florida

Tom Fallin has more than 30 years of experience in engineering with the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), municipal governments, and private sector consulting firms. His expertise is in large and complex projects that involve a wide range of partnerships and require innovative solutions. He specializes in planning, design, construction, and program and project management.

Fallin began his career with the USACE and most recently served as the city engineer for the City of Jacksonville, Fla. He earned a master of engineering degree in civil engineering from the University of Florida. He also holds a bachelor of science degree in industrial engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology and is a licensed engineer in both Florida and Kentucky.

A retired Lieutenant Colonel in the USACE, Fallin served more than 20 years across the United States and on overseas assignments. He is active in several professional organizations, including serving on the boards of the Northeast Florida Branch of the American Public Works Association and the Jacksonville Post of the Society of American Military Engineers.



## Peter King

Bellatrix Ventures, LLC | Jacksonville, Florida

Peter King is the founder of Bellatrix Ventures, a planning and land development consulting company based in Jacksonville, Fla. Bellatrix specializes in strategic location of development projects, including multifamily, hotel and telecommunications using advanced GIS analysis. Bellatrix also creates long-range planning documents for military, local government and private organizations with real estate holdings, as well as code planning for local governments.

Prior to founding Bellatrix, King was the planning director for Nassau County, where he oversaw several critical customer service and policy reforms. He also has previously served as senior planner for the city of Jacksonville, where he earned a Mayor’s Award for his work there, and as interim planning director for the city of Fernandina Beach, where he was recognized for his leadership. Simultaneously, under Capella Ventures, Peter adaptively reused seven historic structures for affordable housing using local and federal incentives.

King also is a licensed real estate salesperson specializing in commercial real estate and focusing on adaptively re-using buildings for small businesses in Northeast Florida.

He holds a master’s degree in urban and regional planning from Texas A&M University and a bachelor of arts degree from the University of South Florida.



## Adam Moorhead

A.C. Moorhead Company | Jacksonville, Florida

Adam Moorhead is owner and managing broker at A.C. Moorhead Company in Jacksonville, Fla., a company specializing in land real estate sales. He earned a bachelor of engineering degree in civil engineering from Vanderbilt University and a master of business administration from the University of Miami.

Prior to becoming a licensed real estate broker, Moorhead served as a civil engineer from 2002 to 2013 in the commercial and heavy industrial design-build industry for various companies, gaining valuable experience working on projects throughout the United States. In southeastern Washington state, he worked on the Hanford Vit Plant for the U. S. Department of Energy—one of the largest environmental clean-up projects and one of the most complex construction projects in the country.

Moorhead transitioned into real estate in 2014. He worked in residential and commercial sales with Summit Realty Partners, National Land Realty and eXp Commercial LLC in Jacksonville prior to starting his own firm in April 2023.

He is a member of the Northeast Florida Association of REALTORS® (NEFAR), the Florida Chapter of the REALTORS® Land Institute (RLI), and the Urban Land Institute of North Florida (ULI), and is an affiliate member of the Northeast Florida Builders Association (NEFBA).



## **Don D. Patterson**

Reva Development Corporation | Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Don D. Patterson is president of REVA Development Corporation and the managing member of MFK|REVA Development, LLC. REVA Development Corporation is a community development corporation providing quality resources in real estate development to facilitate the creation of unique, vibrant and sustainable community development. Established in 2004, the company operates under Section 501(c)(3) of the IRS Federal.

Patterson is an accomplished real estate development professional excelling in a variety of areas including predevelopment, conceptual planning, preliminary engineering, financing, construction administration, lease up, construction close out and maintenance of a Community Housing Development Corporation (CHDO) designation as outlined in HUD Federal Regulations. We continue an on-going relationship with a dynamic knowledge-base of experts in providing services in community redevelopment and often collaborate with for-profit and non-profit organizations for the benefit of underserved communities.



## **Michael J. Saylor**

Black Dog Planning, Inc. | Jacksonville, Florida

Michael Saylor is president of Black Dog Planning, Inc., where he practices land planning, project team management and consultation in the areas of real estate development and redevelopment, environmental resource management, and all facets of infrastructure planning and design.

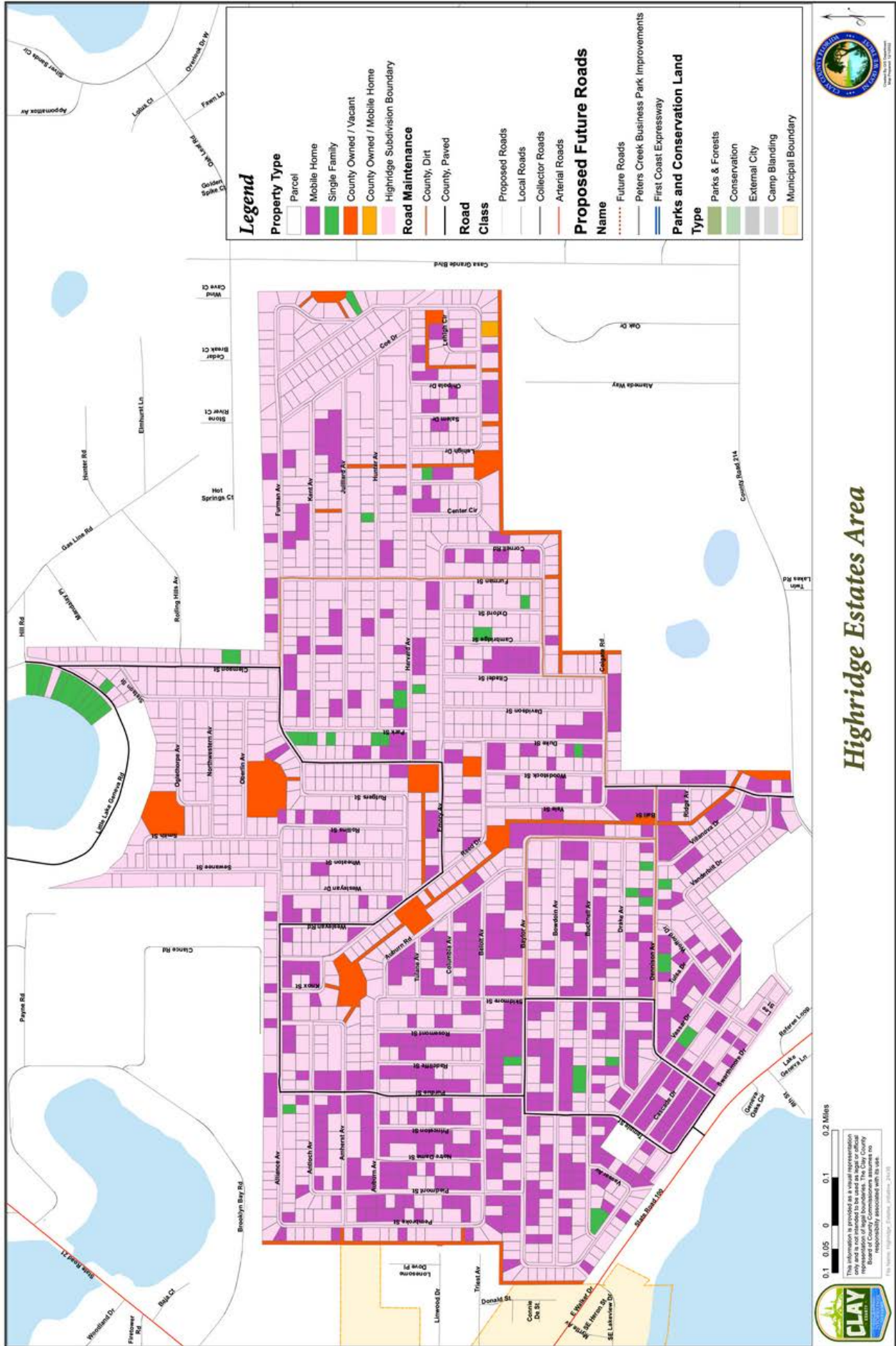
Michael has spent 49 years in the fields of urban planning, community design and project management, having worked in local government; a national land development company; his own 125-person consultancy; a top-five global engineering firm, and as director of planning for the largest incorporated municipality in the lower 48 states. His skill set also includes the management of complex interdisciplinary teams and business development/marketing for design professions.

Michael specializes in highest and best land use analysis and land use encroachment studies; large scale land planning and resource management; subject matter expert in planning, transportation, community redevelopment, career, and corporate transition; and waterfront industrial and intermodal logistics facility development.

# APPENDIX

High Ridge Estates Property .....pg. 30

Proposed Vision for High Ridge Estates .....pg. 31







The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to shape the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide