



The Broad Impacts of the Emerald Trail

On May 11, 2022, The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida hosted a Donors Forum to discuss the impacts of the Emerald Trail project. The event also included a field trip through Downtown Jacksonville to see existing sections of the trail and areas under construction. The program began with an overview of the Emerald Trail from Kay Ehas, CEO of Groundwork Jacksonville:

- Groundwork Jacksonville, Inc., was formed in 2014 as a partnership between the City of Jacksonville, the U.S. National Park Service, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and Groundwork USA, which is a network of 22 trusts across the nation dedicated to equitable and sustainable revitalization and change in communities. Groundwork Jacksonville was developed under former Mayor Alvin Brown and is the only such trust in Florida.
- With much of the urban core consisting of designated brownfields and 30 percent of the residents in the area living in poverty, the Emerald Trail project was conceived to be a catalyst for cultural asset revival, the addition of needed green space, and the revitalization of economic development and neighborhoods in downtown Jacksonville.
- With an understanding that the trail and restoration projects would be community priorities over the next 10 years, The Community Foundation became engaged early on by making a grant to support the trail system Master Plan completed by the Path Foundation. Subsequently, TCF worked with interested donors to facilitate additional donor advised grants.
- The Emerald Trail master plan encompasses nearly 30 miles of contiguous trails, greenways, and parks that link 14 historic neighborhoods to Hogans Creek, McCoys Creek, and the St. Johns River. The trail links to 16 schools, two colleges, and 21 parks, with 13 additional schools and 17 additional parks located within a three blocks radius.
- Many communities impacted by the trail do not typically have a voice in decision-making. In order to bring them to the table, Groundwork Jacksonville involves them through visioning boards, community meetings, and community engagement programs that build trust, foster community leaders, develop pride and ownership, and capitalize on the needs, strengths, and skills of individual neighborhoods.
- Phase 1 of the McCoys Creek restoration is currently under construction, with Phase 2 beginning later this year. This has been accomplished with a combination of state and federal grants and is expected to be completed in 2024. The Hogans Creek restoration is a more complex undertaking and will take approximately 2 ½ years, once started.

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

- The first two segments of the trail – the LaVilla Link and the Hogans Creek Link – are currently underway. There are five more trail segments to be built, which will be partially funded by the City's gas tax. The project is expected to cost approximately \$212 million over the next six years, and private funding will be an important component to make up the public/private funding gap.
- Benefits of the trail include access to many different parts of the city for all residents, elevation of downtown communities, the promotion of racial and social equity, and significant positive economic impacts, including an increase in home values and growth of local businesses.
- Current challenges include accelerating private funding to cover costs that are not part of public funding and continuing to effectively engage the communities along the trail.

Below are highlights from four guest panelists who discussed the broader benefits of the Emerald Trail:

Highlights from Ennis Davis, Senior Urban Planner with Alfred Benesch & Company:

- The Emerald Trail is a significant step toward reversing damage to urban communities, which have historically suffered from intentionally discriminatory federal policies and local zoning.
- The trail brings needed infrastructure to parts of Downtown Jacksonville that have often borne the brunt and the expense of infrastructure projects that have been implemented for the benefit of everyone else.
- Protecting the history and significance of the neighborhoods impacted by the trail is important and may require reconsidering zoning policies and other existing constraints, in order to make sure any future development keeps these places affordable and accessible for existing residents to live, work, and play.

Highlights from David Miller, Co-founder of Brightway Insurance:

- The pandemic has changed the paradigm of how people work and think about where they want to live. Quality of life is more important than ever.
- The Emerald Trail is a highly desirable amenity – to add to the list of advantages in Northeast Florida such as the climate, beach, parks, river, etc. – that will help attract companies and workers to the area. It will enhance the value of Jacksonville as a destination.
- Having 30 miles of trail in the urban core is an ideal opportunity to focus on building up and investing in existing communities and connections, instead of simply attracting "big development" and outside investors.

Highlights from Nipa Shah, MD, Chair of the Department of Community Health and Family Medicine at University of Florida, College of Medicine, Jacksonville:

- The Emerald Trail will provide needed and necessary green space and access to outdoor amenities for a large segment of residents who do not currently have any.

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

- Getting outside and into natural spaces can improve health factors such as cholesterol, glucose, and cortisol levels, resting heart rate, and overall wellness. Also, outdoor exercise such as walking helps posture, mobilizes joints, helps with insomnia, and improves vision when people leave their screens and focus their eyes far away.
- The UF community is an excited partner of the Emerald Trail project, as students in the pharmacy program want to include a healing garden along the trail and engineering and design students want to assist in the planning and design.

Highlights from Padrica Mendez, Resident of Hollybrook neighborhood near McCoy's Creek, a Duval County school teacher and Board Member of the North Riverside CDC:

- From the beginning of the Emerald Trail creation, Groundwork Jacksonville has helped North Riverside, and other communities, by asking directly how they can better help their neighborhoods. Groundwork Jacksonville has solicited resident input during the master planning process. They also assisted the CDC in creating a vision statement and 10-year equity plan, in securing grant funding to create a case manager and construction manager, and in helping residents obtain funding to rehabilitate homes.
- Neighborhoods in these areas are understandably skeptical of organizations who offer to implement change because, in the past, plans have not necessarily been followed through. But Groundwork Jacksonville has done a great job of gaining community trust and helping the communities create leadership to bring their own plans to fruition. This will ensure the history and culture of these communities will be celebrated and reflected in the trail.
- Our communities are learning environmental stewardship through this process, and organizations like CREST (Community Restoration Environmental Stewardship Training for ages 13-18) are helping and educating young people with activities such as field trips, work in water sampling and air quality, bird watching, and cleanups. This education and engagement is very important for the entire city to be good stewards of the trail.

Ways you can get engaged.

- [Learn more about Groundwork Jacksonville](#) and their initiatives that restore urban creeks, build community engagement and local advocacy, facilitate environmental youth education, and lead the efforts around the Emerald Trail.
- Learn about [volunteer opportunities led by Groundwork Jacksonville on their website.](#)
- Contributions to support the Emerald Trail efforts can be made through the Groundwork Jacksonville [website.](#)

Additional Resources

- Photos from the event are [available here.](#)
- A recording of the full program can be [viewed here.](#)
- View the [Trail Master Plan here](#) on the Groundwork Jacksonville webpage.