

# Talks focus on connecting Laney-Walker area, downtown

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Monday, June 25, 2012

Connecting the Laney-Walker and Bethlehem neighborhoods to downtown Augusta's business of discussion at roundtable meetings Monday, the first day of a three-day conference to develop a program for the area.

A panel commissioned by the American Institute of Architects reviewed the master redevelopment plan for Laney-Walker and Bethlehem with key members in the revitalization project.

Mayor Deke Copenhaver, Planning Director George Patty, Traffic Engineer Steve Cassell and Development Manager John Paul Stout were among the city's representatives.

"A lot of groundwork has been done inside this boundary," said Michael Davis, a Boston architect and conference's team leader. "The development team said to us, 'How do we take this to the next level?'"

Augusta was one of seven cities that received a grant from the institute for the sustainability project. The \$15,000 grant was supplemented by a \$5,000 contribution from the city.

In 2008, the city began a massive revitalization initiative in Laney-Walker and Bethlehem to improve downtown development. A special 50-year hotel/motel tax that generates \$750,000 a year funds the \$3 million investment.

Davis said R.A. Dent Boulevard acts as a physical and cultural barrier between the bustling downtown and Sciences University and a dilapidated neighborhood.

He also said more development on Ninth and 12th streets would help connect downtown and Laney-Walker.

Copenhaver said the lower level of the Augusta Canal is a logical connecting point between downtown and Laney-Walker.

Entertainment and arts investments should also extend beyond Broad Street into Laney-Walker.

Also participating Monday were Bob Munger, the director of the nonprofit Augusta Greenway Foundation; Augusta Executive Director Erick Montgomery; Christine Miller-Betts, the director of the Lucretia Mott Museum of Black History; residents; architects; and real estate agents.

Participants cited a lack of transportation infrastructure, bus service, public safety and retail opportunities in the neighborhoods.

Discussions also continued about a perceived disconnect between the city's vision for transit and community involvement, especially with longtime residents.

## ATTEND A MEETING

The panel will deliver its findings and make recommendations for a sustainability program on Wednesday night. The community meeting will be held at the downtown Augusta library, 8 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

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