

## Memorandum

To:	Stephen Benson, AICP, CNU-A; Frank Hall, AICP, CNU-A
CC:	Thomas Huggins, Ariel Business Group
Subject:	Commercial District Vision Plan
Project:	15th Street Neighborhood Commercial Corridor
From:	Blake Drury, AICP; Wes Shaffer, AICP
Date:	August 15, 2022 (Revised: October 13, 2022)

### Purpose

Tampa City Planning Department (Client) has contracted GAI Consultants and Ariel Business Group (Consultants) to develop a neighborhood commercial district plan for the 15th Street corridor in East Tampa. The boundaries of the Study Area encompass the blocks on either side of 15th Street from I-4 to the south and Lake Avenue to the north. This plan will build on previous planning efforts in the East Tampa CRA (Community Redevelopment Area) and incorporate recommendations relative to new opportunities within the Study area. The plan will (1) Evaluate the Study Area's performance as a mixed-use neighborhood commercial corridor; (2) Identify key themes and issues surrounding the growth and development of the Study Area; (3) Develop strategies that address the identified themes and issues; and (4) Outline recommendations for future land development code updates that support the continued role of the corridor as a mixed-use neighborhood commercial corridor.

This memo delivers the third task assignment of the project: a *Commercial District Vision Plan* outlining the following:

- A vision statement for the Neighborhood Commercial District based on existing conditions, data trends, and community input.
- Key themes and issues identified through community engagement activities, data analysis, and field research,
- Strategies & Solutions that promote Economic Opportunity in the district.

### Vision Statement: Future 15<sup>th</sup> Street

Future 15th Street serves the needs and aspirations of its neighbors through:

- *safe and productive **movement*** for walkers, bicyclists, drivers, and transit riders
- ***inviting outdoor spaces*** that welcome a sense of place, safety, and cultural identity
- *robust **urban forest*** providing comfort, beauty, and environmental quality
- *convenient **access*** for people, goods, and services
- *successful **neighborhood-serving businesses*** that support the daily needs of surrounding residents.

## Key Themes & Issues

### **Movement: Right-of-Way Allocation**

A corridor's nature is to move people through their day both in the physical sense of facilitating travel and in the philosophical sense of accomplishing life's daily objectives. People rely on 15<sup>th</sup> Street to get to work, meet with friends, shop, or find services. To this end, the 15<sup>th</sup> Street corridor should afford people the opportunity to move about each day as safely and productively as possible.

As identified in the *Existing Conditions Report*, car ownership/use among neighboring households is lower, meaning many people moving through 15<sup>th</sup> Street do so by foot, bicycle, scooter, or bus. However, a high incidence of severe injury and concerns expressed by focus groups participants highlight 15<sup>th</sup> Street's shortcomings for facilitating safe and productive movement for the broadest range of potential users.



A typical street section encompasses a 50-foot right-of-way of which roadway occupies 34- to 36-feet. This area accommodates two travel lanes, on-street parking, waste removal, emergency vehicle access, and bus transit. 15<sup>th</sup> Street's design splits the remaining 14-16 feet of right-of-way to the sides, crowding together walkways, landscape/furniture zones, utility poles, bus stops, and, in many areas, retail parking and vehicle storage. Bicyclists and electric scooter riders often opt to share this limited space, considering the roadway unsafe, particularly counter-flow riders. Moreover, this limited space also precludes the siting of covered bus shelters, forcing transit riders to wait for hour-long headways in the Florida elements.

*Future 15<sup>th</sup> Street reallocates right-of-way to balance the needs of multiple modes of movement, prioritizing walking, biking, and transit ridership.*

### **Inviting Outdoor Spaces: Safety & Comfort**

Both the walking audit and focus group discussions reveal a desire by neighbors to socialize and engage with each other. However fast cars, drug dealing, and violent crime along 15<sup>th</sup> Street are by no means inviting.



Spaces that are safe and comfortable tend to attract people which in turn makes them safer and more comfortable. Today, the corridor benefits from a legacy building stock that features big front porches, human scale form, and transparency from windows and doors. However, the few pockets of space that appear unwelcoming have the potential to degrade overall comfort and sense of safety along the corridor. For instance, the fence around Cuscaden Park projects a sense of exclusion despite it being a public park. Many of the non-residential properties crowd the street edge with parking or vehicle storage, segregating pedestrians from the building facades and forcing them to meander from their walking path. Newer homes tend to have smaller, recessed porches that shy away from the public realm, reinforcing a message of segregation and seclusion. Vacant buildings present a tired and neglected appearance that the neighbors may internalize, reflecting their claims of feeling "forgotten" or "neglected."

The City of Tampa can do a lot to improve sense of safety and comfort within the public realm, but many of these issues – such as loitering, vacant buildings, and vehicle storage – require coordination and collaboration across a broad coalition of stakeholders, including land and business owners, neighbors, and people visiting 15<sup>th</sup> Street. Fortunately, the Focus Group discussions indicated interest on behalf of land and business owners in resolving these issues.

*Future 15<sup>th</sup> Street promotes social cohesion, sense of place, and safety through attractive and inviting outdoor space.*

### ***Urban Forest: Limited Space and Conflicts with Powerlines***

Satellite imagery reveals a corridor with high surface temperatures due to low vegetation – a fact that was also apparent during the walking audit in June 2022. Moreover, Centers for Disease Control (CDC) PLACES 2021 data indicates that approximately 1 in 5 respondents living proximate to this corridor reported 14 or more days during the past 30 during which their mental health was not good. Finally, the 2014 National Air Toxics Assessment indicates this area has elevated risk of exposure to respiratory hazard.



The need for more trees was frequently mentioned during the focus group discussions, which makes sense because street trees are among the most productive public realm investments that a community can make. Research shows that urban tree canopy reduces the urban heat island effect, enhances air quality, and serves mental health needs. Urban tree canopy also provides wildlife habitat, stormwater attenuation, carbon sequestration, and aesthetic character – all of which translate into higher property values and neighborhood desirability. There is also evidence linking tree canopy and lower crime rates. Finally, street trees can help calm traffic by helping to visually narrow the street, encouraging drivers to drive slower.

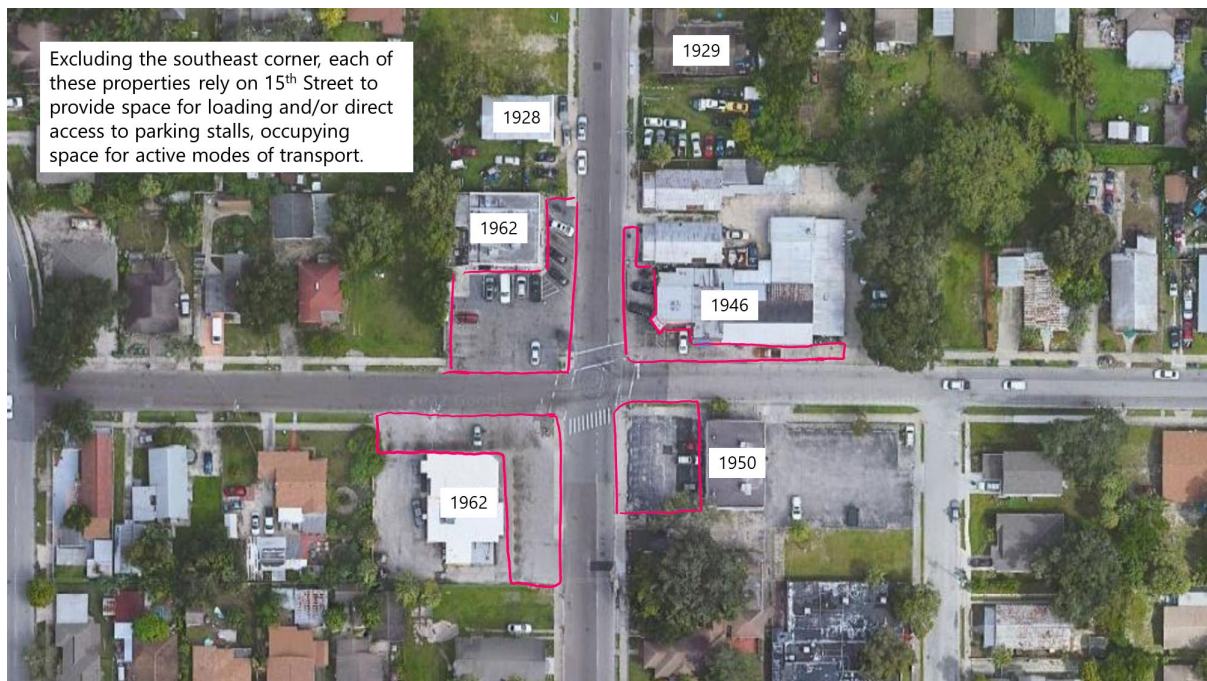
The corridor presents two major challenges to providing more tree canopy: (1) allocating adequate right-of-way space to accommodate root zone and (2) conflicts with overhead powerlines as canopy matures. Depending on the species, canopy trees need a minimum of 7-8 feet of space to grow strong roots, though structured soils can reduce this requirement. Similarly, canopy trees need air space to fan out their limbs without impeding powerlines to other structures.

Ideally, street tree canopy includes a variety of species to encourage resilience. Monoculture canopy can be susceptible to disease and eventually result in “canopy collapse” as they age out at the same time. Monoculture canopy blossoms and drops leaves at the same time, potentially overwhelming the area with a concentration of pollen or leaves in the stormwater system.

*Future 15<sup>th</sup> Street features robust and diverse tree canopy, helping to cool temperatures, clean air, and water, and promote a sense of community character.*

### **Access: Patchwork of Strategies**

To an extent, the evolution of 15<sup>th</sup> Street suffers from bad timing as it pertains to access. Most of the buildings existing today were built between 1920 and 1970, signaling that this corridor grew up in a period of transition from pre- to post- widespread automobile use. As a result, today's corridor consists of a patchwork of properties that were designed *without* automobiles in mind and others *with only* automobiles in mind, each employing a different strategy for access, loading, and parking. The common thread between these strategies is a reliance on 15<sup>th</sup> Street to provide space.



For instance, at 26<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the corner properties rely on the right-of-way to support direct access to parking stalls and/or provide area for loading. Upon approaching and immediately following this intersection, a series of driveway cuts and a prevalence of informal on-street parking further complicates how people move through this space and access property.

Since the operation of these properties is so dependent on how 15<sup>th</sup> Street is designed today, it is likely that any design alterations to 15<sup>th</sup> Street will be a source of conflict with some property owners. It will be important for the City to continue to collaborate with property/business owners to resolve potential conflicts. Ultimately there are multiple strategies for improving access, parking, and loading along the corridor, each of them requiring a stronger delineation of public and private realm space and recognition for non-automobile modes of travel.

*Future 15<sup>th</sup> Street makes it easier for business and residents to access their sites in an efficient manner.*

### ***Neighborhood-serving businesses: Retail, Services, and Experiences***

The corridor currently supports small grocery/convenience stores, barber & beauty shops, restaurants, multiple auto repair & body shops, a wholesale seafood business, law offices, and religious institutions. Focus group participants voiced appreciation for many of these businesses, because they frequent these places to meet their daily needs. Focus group participants also expressed a desire for more “experience-oriented” businesses such as coffee shops, galleries, and “funky little shops.” In numerous instances, focus group participants referenced other corridors and places that emulate what they hope to see along 15<sup>th</sup> Street, such as King State coffee shop.

Over the years, it has become exceedingly clear that transportation infrastructure influences the form



and function of land use and vice versa. Investments in walkability and public space will promote uses and businesses that are oriented around foot traffic and accessibility, such as the funky shops that a person driving by might not notice or appreciate.

*Future 15<sup>th</sup> Street grows as a place where people find the goods, services, and experiences they are looking for on a daily basis.*

## Strategies & Solutions

If the public realm and policy framework prioritizes automobile operations, then the uses along the corridor are more likely to be car-oriented uses. If the public realm and policy framework prioritizes walkability and comfort, then the uses along the corridor are more likely to be pedestrian oriented uses.

### **Strategies to expand Movement**

#### **1. Traffic Calming: Narrowing Roadways & Shrinking Intersections**

Narrowing traffic lanes and making intersections more compact are essential interventions for calming traffic and reallocating space to safely facilitate more modes of travel. The City can pursue such a redesign without ruling out the possibility of making 15<sup>th</sup> Street a two-way corridor in the future.

Today, there are typically 34 to 36 feet between curbs, with no physical or striped delineation of parking lanes. As a one-way street, this wide expanse of roadway encourages faster driving. This memo proposes two typical sections for Future 15<sup>th</sup> Street – one that works within the existing curbs and one that proposes a narrowing of the existing curb width. Both options keep two travel lanes, each no greater than 10-feet in width. Both options also aim to preserve existing waste removal operations and clear ways for emergency vehicles.

#### *Option A – The Additive Option*

This option proposes to resurface the street and add striping to demarcate narrower travel lanes and tighter curb radii at intersections. This approach would not require any changes to the existing curbs but would include the addition of bulb outs to help physically and visually narrow the roadway. These bulb outs would create space for on-street parking and continuous sidewalks.

#### *Option B – The Trail Extension Option*

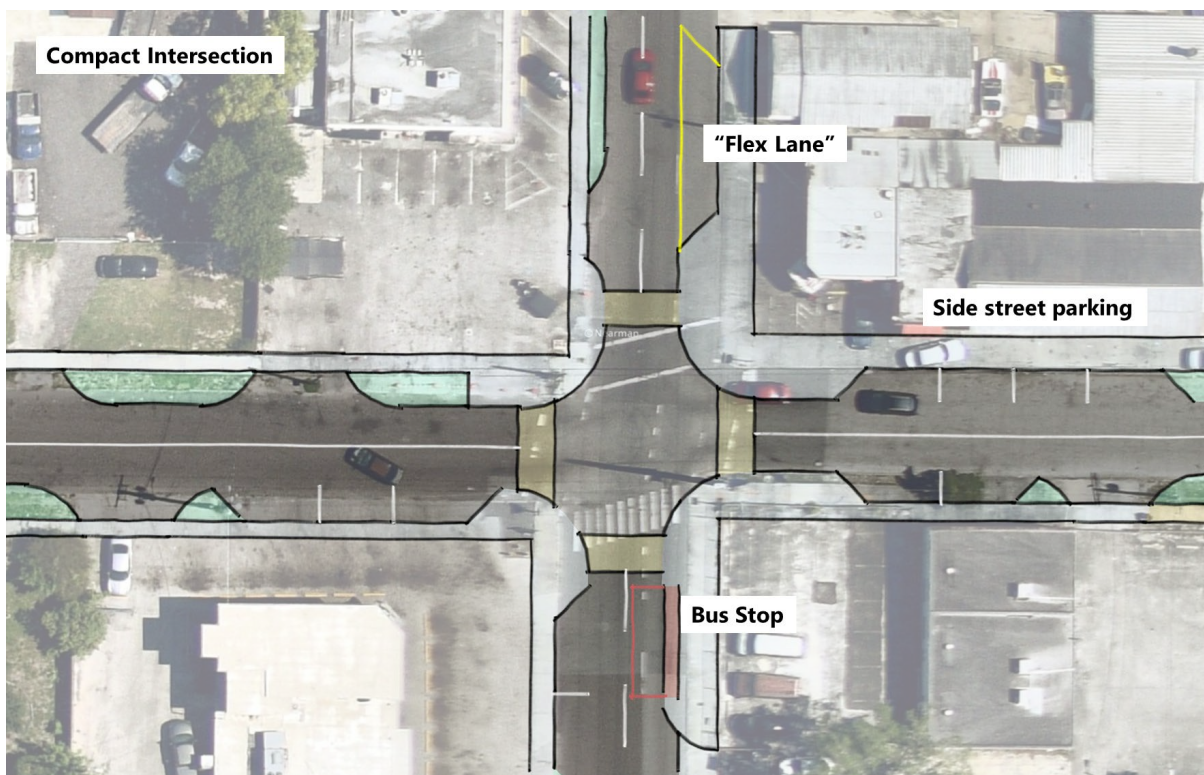
This option proposes altering the existing curbs to extend the Green Spine Trail north of 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue as a 10- to 12-foot-wide concrete sidewalk. Keeping in mind the need for greater street tree canopy, this memo proposes that this trail extension follow along the east side of 15<sup>th</sup> Street to allow for parking and wider landscape/furniture zones along the west side – away from the overhead transmission lines.



### *Compact Intersections*

Traffic engineers often design intersections that widen upon vehicle approach to accommodate turning lanes and wide turning radii. In a walkable context, we want to design intersections that narrow upon vehicle approach, slowing cars down and making it easier for pedestrians to cross. This is particularly important at the commercial nodes along 15<sup>th</sup> Street at 21<sup>st</sup> Ave., 26<sup>th</sup> Ave., and Lake Ave.

These intersections are also close to bus stops so the additional sidewalk area afforded by narrowing the intersection could allow space for a proper bus shelter without impeding other pedestrian traffic.



## 2. Enhancing Walkability: Wider & Continuous Sidewalks

All trips begin and end with walking, so to the extent that 15<sup>th</sup> Street can make it more convenient and comfortable to walk, fewer trips will require an automobile in between. For one, sidewalks need to be wide enough to accommodate more people – some walking side by side, others pushing carts or strollers, wheeling wheelchairs, or riding scooters and bicycles at slow speeds. As previously mentioned, a walkable corridor can influence surrounding land uses to orient more for people on foot and less for people in cars.

If the overhead transmission power lines are to remain along the east side of the right of way, this may be the preferred side for a significant sidewalk widening, as proposed by *Option B* described in the previous section. A concrete sidewalk with a width of at least 10-feet could support slow-speed scooters and bicycles, in addition to walkers of all ages and abilities.

Where sidewalks intersect with driveways, their grade should remain constant, rather than dip down as they do today. This means that there needs to be additional space outside of the walkway to all the driveways ramp up to the property's grade. Side streets may also be candidates for continuous sidewalks in the form of raised crosswalks.



## ***Strategies to create Inviting Outdoor Spaces***

### ***3. Parks & Public Spaces without Borders***

Public spaces, such as parks and plazas, should be welcoming to the public and only include barriers when it is necessary to protect the public interest or safety. Ragan Park is a good example of this because its perimeter is widely accessible. Where barriers around public space is necessary, the City should use fencing and landscaping in a manner that signals intention and thought, as is the case with the fencing around a stormwater facility between E 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Avenues on 15<sup>th</sup> Street.

Unfortunately, Cuscaden Park establishes a barrier using a chain-link fence, restricting access to the park while also communicating low quality of design standards for this public space. The City and broader community should determine if this barrier is needed. Certainly, the corner at 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue could provide public space, accessible from the street, in the form of a plaza or pocket park. Where this barrier is needed, there should be a more visually attractive element.

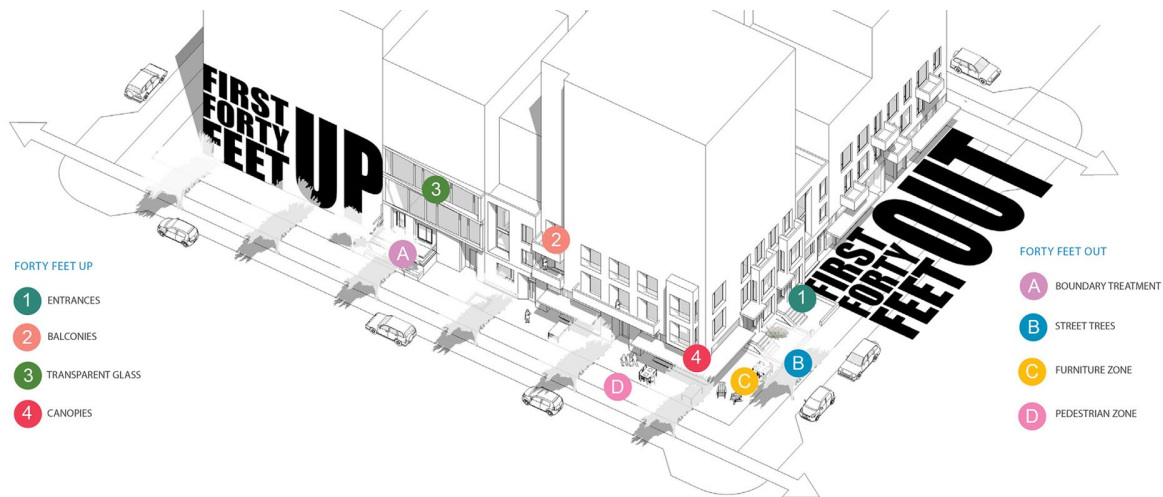


In addition to enhancements to Cuscaden Park, there are areas along 15th Street, particularly at major intersections/retail nodes, where outdoor seating, waste receptacles, art installations, and landscaping can create pockets of great public space.

#### 4. *The First Forty Feet: Private Contribution to Public Space*

Coined after an urban design firm named, First Forty Feet, this strategy posits that area within the first 40-feet of *horizontal* space from a building's edge, and the first 40-feet of *vertical* space from a building's ground elevation matter to the public realm experience. The first 40 feet is where doors, windows, porches, verandas, arcades, balconies, roof terraces, cafe seating, the building's material, and other simple details can bring private and public life together to promote encounters that can create community. This is the area that makes or brakes the sensory experience of a place worth lingering in or one you want to avoid.

There are ways that the land development code can encourage these elements within the first 40 feet, but this memo recommends a "light touch" approach that encourages coordination and collaboration with private property owners on strategies to enhance their property's interaction to the public realm. Before resorting to code enforcement measures, which may be necessary in some extreme instances where vehicle storage is spilling into the public realm, "the first forty feet" could be an opening to a line of communication with property owners.



### **Strategies to grow Urban Forest**

#### 5. *Right Tree, Right Place*

The two primary challenges to adding tree canopy along 15th Street are: (1) limited planting space within the right of way and (2) limited vertical space due to overhead transmission lines. The City can overcome these challenges with a reallocation of right-of-way and the right tree plantings.

Most canopy species native to Florida would require upwards of 20 to 30 feet separation from overhead power lines. Since the power lines are on the east side of the right-of-way the west side is the more suitable side for planting canopy trees. Of course, there are Florida native species, such as Dogwood, which are suitable to plant under powerlines. Most local utility companies have resources regarding which trees are safe to plant near power lines.

The images on **Page 8** illustrate that the west side of 15<sup>th</sup> Street could host larger canopy trees within bulb out planting zones, while the east side could include smaller understory trees that grow beneath powerlines.

## Strategies for safe & productive Access

### 6. Getting more out of Side Streets and Cross Access

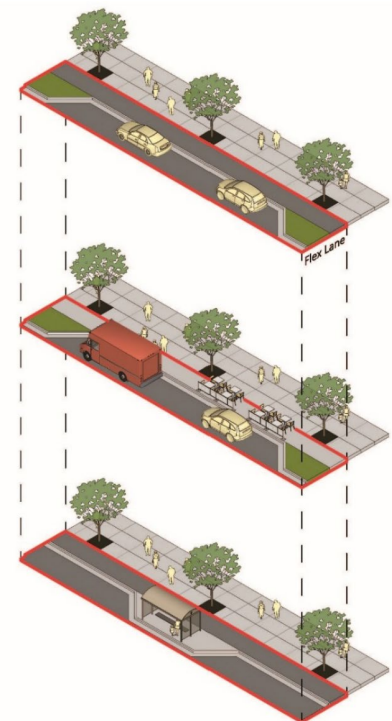
The redesign of 15<sup>th</sup> Street should prioritize the movement of people and not necessarily bear the weight of accommodating operations such as direct access to on-site parking. Side streets along 15<sup>th</sup> Street with 50-feet or more of right-of-way offer opportunity for parking capacity, site access, loading and unloading. Alongside the resurfacing and/or rebuilding of 15<sup>th</sup> Street, many side streets should also receive some reinvestment to establish formalized space for parking and flexible curbs.



Moreover, private redevelopment should include cross access between properties (such as an alleyway) to reduce the need for access on primary or secondary streets, freeing up space for on-street parks, wider sidewalks, etc.

### 7. Flexible Curb Management

Since 15<sup>th</sup> Street must do so much to accommodate business and residential access and operations, curb space becomes exceedingly valuable. As such, the City should pursue curb management strategies that provide the highest and best utility of this space. A "flex lane" is a building block toward that end. Flex lanes are like parking lanes (though they could be two or three feet wider) that provide for a range of potential uses throughout the day: from rideshare pickup, to food truck vending, loading/unloading, on-street dining, package delivery, transit pick-up, and on-street parking. This memo suggests that flex lanes are most valuable at key intersections/nodes with higher non-residential activity (such as 21<sup>st</sup> Ave., 26<sup>th</sup> Ave., and Lake Ave.) and can be located on both/either 15<sup>th</sup> Street or the side street. These lanes must be signed and painted to communicate their flexible utility and should be dynamically priced (a.k.a. demand-based metering) to maximize their functionality during periods of peak demand.



## ***Strategies to promote Neighborhood-serving businesses***

### ***8. "Light-touch" land development regulation***

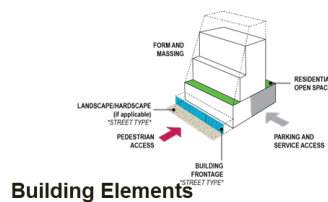
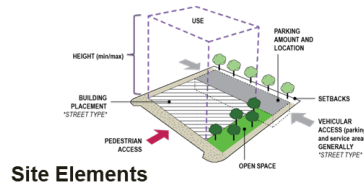
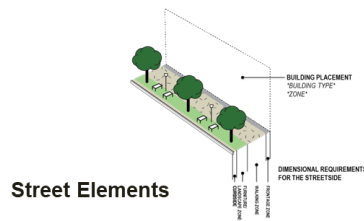
Over the years land use regulations have become complicated and burdensome to the extent that they are often in and of themselves a barrier to good urbanism. 15th Street's legacy building form and scale are a great foundation, but the focus group participants and recent new developments reveal that the existing land development code may be limiting potential reinvestment. This is where a lighter touch land development regulation could help the City and community promote good urbanism while allowing new development typologies and ideas to emerge.

#### *Regulating what matters: elements of good form*

A light-touch approach first asks, "what are the most important regulations we need to assure a safe, comfortable, and equitable built environment?" and trusting that landowners and developers will figure out the rest. Life safety regulations such as building and fire codes are not within the purview of this memo, that affect "character" are the primary focus.

The American Planning Association's January 2018 publication of Zoning Practice proposes a handful of "minimum elements of good form." This memo builds upon these ideas to address the specifics of 15<sup>th</sup> Street:

- Building scale – buildings should maintain a "human scale" not to exceed six stories.
- Building orientation – buildings should orient toward 15<sup>th</sup> Street without vehicle use areas in between.
- Eliminating minimum parking requirements – parking problems stem from an automobile-oriented environment. Reducing parking problems begins with creating a walkable environment. Unfortunately, minimum parking requirements worsen parking issues by inducing demand for parking and occupying space that could otherwise facilitate other travel modes.
- Flexible density/intensity controls – maximum density and intensity controls arbitrarily dictate and displace the efficient allocation of floor area. In reality, density and intensity are subjective concepts that are not intuitively perceptible to people. So long as the building form, scale, and associated activity is right, then density and FAR (Floor Area Ratio) are less important.
- Two of the following three:
  - Minimum transparency – requiring a minimum amount of ground and second story windows, balconies, or other openings.
  - Durable building façade materials – requiring durable materials such as brick for street facing facades
  - Publicly accessible seating and landscaped areas
  - Meeting all three could result in an entitlement bonus



Does it affect the public realm's:

EXPERIENCE?

CHARACTER?

FUNCTIONALITY?

If "YES" - develop a standard

If "NO" - don't regulate in code

### Expanding allowable uses

Getting people onto 15th Street is the best thing we can do to support the success of the corridor and mitigate some of the unsavory elements, like loitering and drug dealing, that exist today. Expanding the range of allowable uses along this corridor can create more reasons for reinvestment and redevelopment to accommodate people through land use.

Zoning Practice from August 2022 suggests that retail corridors should expand uses to include:

- "Artisan" manufacturing (craft brewing/distilling, urban manufacturing such as makerspaces)
- Museums, art galleries, and artist studios
- Shared commercial kitchens
- Animal boarding
- Urban agriculture
- Offices, including medical and dental
- Daycare

The zoning map designates significant parts of the corridor as residential, these areas should allow some extent of non-residential uses, either as live-work units, small stand-alone spaces, or vertically integrated mixed use.

### Facilitating a smoother approval process

Simpler development standards and an expansion of by-right allowable uses should go a long way to reducing the burden of a long and arduous approval process. Moreover, nonconformities should not hold up the approval process so long as new development meets code and that these nonconformities do not threaten health or safety. Expedited/administrative approval should be the standard on smaller projects (<15,000 square feet of floor area).

### **9. *Land Value Capture***

If successful, public improvements and infrastructure enhancements should result in land value appreciation over time. To the extent that this appreciation is “unearned” by the landowner, there should be a mechanism for the public to capture some of this value to offset the public expenditure of the improvements. The City could then recycle some of this value into further enhancements and improvements within the neighborhood.

Capturing this land value appreciation can also animate landowners to reinvest in their property, addressing, along the way, many of the issues shown in this memo. This is especially the case for landowners who are holding vacant or underutilized land as their tax burden would increase proportional to the appreciation in land value.

Being that this corridor is part of the East Tampa CRA, there are multiple ways to pursue land value capture strategies. Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is the most common strategy. However, there are other approaches including “land value tax,” which focus tax levies only on the land value, rather than the building value, to incentivize efficient land use.

### **Conclusion**

These strategies and others can help catalyze new economic development opportunities that embrace safety, comfort, culture, and commerce. As the City develops and implements these strategies, it is important to stay connected with the local community and continue to collaborate with property owners, business owners, and residents.