



Architect Shawn Balon talks with community members about the Jackson Ward reconnection project during a meeting in April.

NEWS

A BRIDGE TO SOMEWHERE

Gentrification concerns cloud an ambitious plan to reconnect Jackson Ward

By Don Harrison

When it comes to reconnecting a community, the devil's in the details. Just ask the approximately 35 residents, most from Jackson Ward, who gathered at Ebenezer Baptist Church in late April to participate in a public discussion about the city's new Reconnecting Jackson Ward project. On the surface, this meeting is about soliciting citizen input for a feasibility study about a proposed, block-long bridge deck over Interstate 95. But the conversation is really about how the city can start correcting old wrongs. "The northern half of Jackson Ward is completely isolated from the rest of

Richmond," says Maritza Pechin, deputy director of the city's Office of Equitable Development. "It's in the middle of Richmond, and you'd never know it."

Born from the city's Richmond 300 Master Plan, which Pechin helped to shepherd, the study is being conducted in partnership with the Virginia Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment and the Virginia Department of Transportation. This action plan seeks ways to remedy the physical and economic separation of Jackson Ward caused by the construction of interstates 64 and 95 in the 1950s and '60s. "It's a major problem," Pechin says. "And this project is all about how we can connect it better,

and to do so in a way that honors the history and helps create an awesome mixed-income community."

The study is being funded with \$825,000 from VDOT. There's also the potential for federal dollars through President Joe Biden's new Reconnecting Communities program, a \$1 billion competitive grant initiative that allocates federal funding to state and local projects across the country affected by infrastructure policies of the past. In December of last year, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg toured Jackson Ward with then-Gov. Ralph Northam, Mayor Levar Stoney and U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine, as well as other government officials, using Jackson Ward as an example of the kind of urban area that could be helped by the grant program.

"What you see in Jackson Ward is how transportation dollars can serve to disconnect," Buttigieg said during his visit. "We have a chance to do something about that."

Federal dollars can't do it alone, however. Any grant would require local or state matching funds, along with other funding sources — not a sure thing in Virginia's current political environment.

"It could be that there are limited things they can do right now and will have to get more ambitious later," says Thad Williamson, a University of Richmond professor who specializes in urban politics, social justice theories and public policy. The project, he says, needs to incorporate the planned redevelopment of Gilpin Court, the city's oldest public housing complex, which sits north of I-95 within the project study area.

"It's critically important to have Gilpin Court integrated back into Richmond again," Williamson says, "but it's just as important that people connected to the neighborhoods be a part of the process."

At Ebenezer, the question is how to connect. City planners detail the engineering challenges of grade separations, vertical clearances and preferred street grids, surveying the crowd on what amenities they hope to see from a potential >

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new landscape of parks, buildings and roads reclaimed from the highways — Black history monuments and venues for the performing arts are popular choices among those surveyed.

During a Q&A session, the assembled first want to talk about possible gentrification.

Project consultant Ebony Waldon references a set of initiatives: Park-Related Anti-Displacement Strategies, also known as Greening Without Gentrification. “These are things that can be put in place from a policy perspective to protect the surrounding area,” Waldon says. “This is not a new problem. It’s not unique to Richmond. When amenities go in or new really nice things go in, you do have the problem of gentrification.”

The project team unveils a list of five “possible amenity elements” gleaned from surveys and a previous public meeting in March. Cliff Chambliss, who attended the earlier gathering and has family ties to

Jackson Ward, recommends during the meeting that “reparations” be listed as a sixth. “Obviously we have an area of the city where families were displaced, homes were destroyed — and it’s important for the Black community to have an equitable stake in this new narrative,” he says. “It’s cute to have art, and the park, and public recognition, but something more tangible is very important. Any land that is created should be sold or given to Black people.”

The project planners respond favorably to Chambliss’ point but suggest that it’s a consideration best left to the Jackson Ward Community Plan, administered by the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, soon to begin its own community input gatherings.

The area where the bridge deck would be constructed generally extends from Belvidere Street to east of the North First Street bridge over I-95. After gathering the input and surveys from the two public meetings, the project team will meet with focus groups, develop a draft plan and



Maritza Pechin, deputy director of the city’s Office of Equitable Development, leads the discussion during a meeting in April.

cost estimates, and hold one final public gathering the last week in June.

Attendee Donte McCutchen, a lifelong area resident, says he’s excited and hopeful about the possibilities of Reconnecting Jackson Ward. “It will give us the chance to remember that we’re one community,” he says. “I just hope we don’t connect to the wrong side of history.”

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