

Highland Community
Stakeholder Interviews
and
Completed
Questionnaires

Interview with Mayor Walker E. Reid, III (Current Mayor – Gastonia)

Speaker 1 [00:00:02] Mayor Reid, you grew up in the Highland neighborhood, correct?

Speaker 2 [00:00:13] Would be on 716. No more street. Number Street B OIC.

Speaker 1 [00:00:31] Did you live there while the ditch was being constructed?

Speaker 2 [00:00:36] Yes.

Speaker 1 [00:00:47] Was the construction project before your time on city council?

Speaker 2 [00:00:55] Yes, it was before.

Speaker 1 [00:00:58] Okay. So at that, when that construction was going on, you were just a resident?

Speaker 2 [00:01:03] Yes. I came on the city council in 1995.

Speaker 1 [00:01:16] How would you describe the residential communities to the north prior to the construction to relocate and lower the tracks? So in thinking back about what that community was like? Just kind of give us your personal perspective about what it was like growing up in that community.

Speaker 2 [00:01:39] I felt a sense of isolation. The railroad tracks determine. A lot of them people saying. Tell him it's teenage. You need to get back across the tracks. You have no business on this side of the track. There was a negative thing. Growing up where most day amenities we didn't have a lot of the advantages that a lot of other communities have. I remember Winn-Dixie being downtown as a grocery store, and on Saturday morning we had to come to Winn-Dixie to buy groceries. And I remember my mom and dad shopping it best as far as the furniture store being downtown. But that railroad track has always been the divider. I remember when I became a firefighter, I worked at Station 2 that was located on Marietta Street, and it was always labeled as working on the other side of the tracks, our work and other on the side of the town where a lot of people didn't want to work. So me born and raised there. That did matter. But I know why they lowered the tracks because when that train came through, it shut down. Traffic crossing north and south to get in different direction. I remember that different crossovers would be inclined. Trucks used to get hung up down there because the topography crossing at MLK now across all the crossings, it would shut the town down when a train came through. But I also remember Highway 7 was a two lane. And I remember also being on there and that was a big thing and being able to walk to see Sears when it was open. But then the schools were different. Attended Highland Elementary School first through third grade. We didn't have the energy that other schools had. The building was run down. I went to Wilson School for fourth and sixth grade. I went to Highland in the seventh grade. I ended up going to Ashley Junior High. And that's what I was exposed to on the side of town. This felt like I was in a new city because people on the north side of town didn't venture out to other areas in the city. Now, I remember that there was a lot of black owned businesses on the square. There was the real estate business on Marietta Street on the square. And there was a cab lot and a few attorney offices. There were restaurants, nightclubs. It was like we had our own black Wall Street. But when they came through and did the courthouse project, which I got to blame for that. But I remember running with that courthouse and jail was coming up out of the ground when I ran for office in 1995. It was being constructive. But I remember

all those things took away from that community and left it as a desert. I mean, when I ran for office, there was no school. Our school had closed. There was no bank where we used to have a credit union open on the square. There was no retail. I remember five convenient stores doing that on the 321 corridor that was supporting that community with food goods. And I know people were paying probably three times as much to buy what they could have from a grocery store. And so it seemed like the north side has always been isolated. From the southside and downtown. Downtown to me was the meeting place on Saturdays. So most people got out, came out and said that was a routine for us on Saturday. We were paying bills. We were going to eagles. I remember going to the movie that's in the theater, the way theater brings movies downtown that was the central centerpiece of downtown. There was the Valley by the railroad tracks. And so I thought about. About. I never did understand that. You came there and you did what you had to do, but you had to go back. You had to go back to not having what you needed to survive. And I think that aroused my interest to want to get involved in politics. I became sick and tired of being sick and tired. Instead of talking about it, I wanted to do something about it. So I ran for office and I served from 1995 to 2011. And took a six-year sabbatical and came back and ran for mayor in 2017. But I never have got over that deficit. But the railroad tracks and Highway 7 only made it worse because it was just a distance. So to try to change that mentality, I don't know what, if anything, could be done to cover the railroad tracks. Included in more of downtown to bring that community closer. That you could benefit from the tracks being covered but still be utilized in the way that they are being utilized. Something has to be done.

Speaker 1 [00:09:06] Yeah. So that's exactly what why we are looking at this. This feasibility study is needed to show if it would it be feasible to cap or put a lid on the tracks. The trains would operate as they are today, that you would have developable land on top, whether it's for a park, residential, office commercial, or all of the above and a multimodal transit station. These are the things that we're hoping would come from a feasibility study to let us know what could be done if we were to cap the ditch.

Speaker 2 [00:09:48] I don't see Highway 7 changing with the traffic that feeds off I-85 if it's slowed up or whatever. But I think it starts with the tracks. If we can bring the downtown closer to the community, and add more. Pedestrian friendly things.

Speaker 1 [00:10:20] Yes, and that's exactly what we could potentially do with Highway 7. You could do more high visibility crosswalks, you could potentially do some planted medians, some other things to slow traffic somewhat. This feasibility study would cover that as well. The scope of the feasibility study will not just look at the railroad, but what we could do for NC 7 as well. To reconnect the community. So when you were talking about the things the community had, you know, the businesses that closed up shop, they had moved. Can you think through the timing of that? Do you feel that was that happening before the railroad ditch project or did some of that occur because of the ditch project?

Speaker 2 [00:11:29] I think the majority of it happened after. I think the railroad ditch declined property values. So it made it more feasible for slum lords to come to the north side. And basically, you know, invest in it the way you want to do it because the railroad track, in my opinion, what the detriment. It was definitely indicated that when you cross those tracks, you are going into a whole different culture. That was recognized as the Black side and you take it for what it's worth. With the railroad going underground, I don't think the property was as valuable after that. So I think it was just a breeding ground for others to come in and buy property and develop it and do whatever. So we would attract a

lot of slumlords that came in and build housing that I don't think was feasible. It was basically like being treated like second class citizens.

Speaker 1 [00:13:02] We have heard similar things in previous interviews. The railroad was the dividing tracks from one community to another, one color to another. Some have felt that lowering the tracks got them out of sight as that divider. Do you think it helped at all the perception of the tracks divided the town? Or was that still there, regardless of you being able to see the tracks or not?

Speaker 2 [00:13:52] I think it brought more attention to it because you saw the tracks. You saw the trains. And then it became a ditch. So in reality, you didn't have crosswalks to get to the other side of town, to downtown, to the south side. It has left a picture in your mind. I've got to go down this incline across this ditch to get to the other side of town. Not saying that was the case, but it was a definite divide. I mean. It was about like in a war where you dug ditches to keep the enemy from coming into your camp. You made it difficult for them to come into your camp because they had to go down this ditch to go down, come back up. Well, I think those tracks being lowered into a bid ditch further divided cultures. I mean, it was already evident that the north side was the black side of town. But this ditch made it perfectly clear there's a division. It made the situation worse.

Speaker 1 [00:15:40] Think about the time leading up to the construction project. Since you were living there, do you recall any public outreach that the city did to tell the residents what was going to happen? Do you have any recollection of that?

Speaker 2 [00:16:08] Actually, I was a teenager at the time. So, no, I don't recall of any meetings. I don't recall, a big public outcry because I don't think a lot of people knew what was going to happen. Same way the courthouse and the jails were handled. I think there was a committee formed, a decision was made and it happened. And then this project coming up out of the ground. As I said earlier, I was a candidate running for council, mainly because I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. We can't get a grocery store. We can't get a drugstore. I mean, we can't get a bank or lending institution. We can't get retail. I mean, it was it was a pretty bad pill to swallow.

Speaker 1 [00:17:37] During the construction, what do you remember of what those impacts were? I've seen some photos and old newspaper articles where, I mean, it looks like a bomb had gone off. I'm just trying to think through the mobility aspects of trying to get out of the Highland area and travel south. Do you recall what that was like during the construction?

Speaker 2 [00:18:12] It was devastating. I think right around that time I just started driving. And of course, you didn't have the sense of fondness that you had prior to going across town. Just trying to maneuver to get across into downtown, into the south side of the city.

Speaker 1 [00:19:07] Do you recall specific businesses that had to be relocated? In talking to Ed Munn yesterday, there were two projects going on. There was this downtown revitalization project that was getting land. You had the courthouse and stuff like you mentioned that was moving in and then you had the railroad being lowered and Highway 7 shifting everything to the north. But do you recall during that time, specific businesses that were along Airline Avenue before it was relocated north. Do you remember specific businesses that had to relocate?

Speaker 2 [00:19:53] I remember a lumber company. I'm trying to think of the name. Big business. And right there two thirds of the company's work was lost. Yeah, but the lumber company there, they did a thriving business. Dodge. Dodge always had a car lot there. Then you had Napa Valley State. But I remember Wholesome Bakery where they processed the bread. There were certain times of the day that the smell was good. You could smell it in the air all through the neighborhood. They had a store there where they sold cakes and things of that nature. But the bakery had a nice business. I remember some people left along Airline. It was home and the people had to pack up and move.

Speaker 1 [00:22:30] There was a dairy there, like an ice cream store or a creamery?

Speaker 2 [00:22:36] Yes, it was right there. When you cross the railroad tracks at US 321, there was ice cream there. And that was a very popular business. But like I said, there were a lot of good businesses. All those streets were cut up and those businesses torn down. People lived there too. All that was taken out.

Speaker 1 [00:24:07] Do you feel that the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks had an impact, positive or negative, on the surrounding residential communities after the project was complete? Community impacts could include aesthetics, community cohesion, and you talked about access to public facilities and services. Employment impacts, property values, impacts on public health, displacement of people or businesses, community regional growth and historic preservation. So it sounds like there were a lot of negative impacts to a number of those things, in your opinion?

Speaker 2 [00:24:59] Yes.

Speaker 3 [00:25:01] I'm kind of hearing a theme. This is the third interview that we've done. It seems like lowering the tracks was a really good first step. Because it removed that psychological barrier. But in the process you almost created another problem. And it's almost like the project was never completed. We lowered the tracks, but we still left a physical barrier there that should have been replaced or covered or something.

Speaker 2 [00:25:56] I agree. I think the benefit of lowering the tracks served its purpose. It didn't shut down the city going north and south. It's like it was it was started and not finished. I agree.

Speaker 2 [00:26:26] Yeah. It might have had good intentions, but it didn't work.

Speaker 2 [00:26:46] I don't want to come across as being too negative, but I think I've been as factual as possible.

Speaker 1 [00:26:51] I appreciate that. And, one of the things that Ed Munn said is, with the funding that the city had received from the Housing and Urban Development HUD grants for this redevelopment of the downtown area, everybody had these big plans to lower the tracks and take out that visual barrier and create more space for parking and more space for development and that all these great things were going to come and move in and build in downtown.

The initial study to raise or lower the tracks began in 1970 and then funding came along and land acquisition started and was still going on into the early 1980s. The project was supposed to begin really in 1983, and it was delayed. Delayed again. Excavation finally began in 1986. The project was completed in early or late 1990. They finally had a

dedication event in 1992. So there's like all these big promises were made of how great this was going to be. And then the project went on from 1970 to early 1990s. You're talking. 20, 30 years. This project lasted and by that time no one was going to come down and buy in downtown and redevelop at that point because the project had taken so long they found other places to go.

Speaker 2 [00:29:13] Okay. I graduated high school in 1974. I got married in 1978. I became a council member in 1995. So. 1975, 1995. You see the time lapse? Yeah. All the changes that took place during that time.

Speaker 3 [00:29:53] You know, the other thing that jumps out too, is right when the railroad ditch project wrapped up, that's almost the same time that the courthouse relocation basically bought up all of the property around the old square.

Speaker 2 [00:30:08] Exactly right.

Speaker 2 [00:30:12] That was just another slap in the face.

Speaker 3 [00:30:22] Yeah. It was just it was like one after another.

Speaker 1 [00:30:45] You can look historically over the nation of these big transportation projects that are done to make things better. But then there's those unintended consequences. But quite honestly, I guess, you know, back in the day, some of the consequences, to be frank, were intended. You know, history shows that now and it's our time to fix things.

Speaker 2 [00:31:15] Well, I'm glad to see that that. That it is changing. The thought process is changing because at the time I don't think there was any consideration for those in the Highland community. Most people took a loss.

Speaker 1 [00:31:46] I think we need to be thinking through, you know, a community is only as strong as its weakest areas.

Speaker 2 [00:31:59] I think the north side of town is still trying to recuperate from all of that. And I was just saying it happened back to back. Now. There's a lot to deal with.

Speaker 1 [00:32:19] This is kind of bringing us to a different project, but kind of thinking through, you know, the railroad, the moving of Highway 7, the widening, and then after that was done, you've got the building of the courthouse.

Speaker 2 [00:32:48] I don't think the courthouse was a big deal, but when they built the two jails, I think that's what brought about the anger, because we can get two jails in our community, but we can't get basic amenities that we need. To live with every day. I mean, that was the ultimate slap in the face, really, if you think about it.

Speaker 3 [00:38:24] All right, Mayor. One more question. Also, when we're talking about Highland and all the displacement that has happened, do you remember US 321 as a two lane road?

Speaker 2 [00:39:30] Yes, 321 was mainly a two lane road. That's why it is mind blowing to see what's going on now. From Airline to I-85, it was a two lane road.

Speaker 3 [00:40:16] One of the previous interviews said something about how the widening of 321 also played a role. And, and a lot of the hurdles that Highland had to deal with.

Speaker 3 [00:41:46] The area that I refer to as the square where you said it was like a lot of black owned businesses there.

Speaker 2 [00:41:52] The black Wall Street.

Speaker 3 [00:41:53] The black Wall Street. I think that would be a great addition to add to the map, Randi, to show exactly where you cut off, like where this project cut it off.

Speaker 2 [00:42:06] It was service stations, beauty salons, drugstore attorney offices, cab yard, restaurant, pharmacy, pool hall, nightclubs. I mean, you name it.

Speaker 2 [00:43:10] Again. I don't want to come across as being negative. We got to experience a lot of things growing up.

Speaker 1 [00:43:22] And it's good to hear those personal perspectives. You can see what's in the media, that everything was great, and this was a wonderful thing. The city was leading the charge to better connect the community. But those that we've talked to from the community certainly have a different perspective than what you saw captured in the newspaper.

Interview with Ed Munn (Former Planning Director/City Manager – Gastonia)

Speaker 1 [00:02:33] We have identified some stakeholders; some were staff members that had worked on the project. And I've sent the questionnaire to a number of other community members just to kind of get personal perspectives of the project and what it meant for the communities, what it meant for downtown business owners in areas. There's a lot of transportation projects that do a lot of good for communities. There might be some negative impacts that come along with it that we're not really sure of when we're first starting to work on projects. The Reconnecting Communities Pilot grant will be awarded on a competitive basis, and looking for projects that reconnect communities by removing, retrofitting or mitigating highways or other transportation facilities that create barriers to community connectivity, including to mobility, access or economic development. So we are looking at the history of what the Highland community once was, and what it is now and trying to look at how the railroad ditch has created a barrier to mobility, even though, you know, it was done because it was a safety project, which that made a lot of sense for the community and it did allow for connectivity on I think four or five total crossings. But you know, the lack of free flow access across the railroad has created barriers for connectivity.

Speaker 1 [00:08:45] Mr. Munn, you lived in Gastonia, correct?

Speaker 3 [00:08:51] Yes. I moved to Gastonia in 1975 to be the planning director. Then, about a year into my tenure, the city council decided they were going to abolish the Redevelopment Commission, and the Redevelopment Commission's responsibilities were to administer the two urban renewal projects we had. One was an urban renewal project R-81, which was the downtown, and a lot of that was central business district, but it also went across the tracks. And then the other one was R-142, which was a very linear looking project boundary and it was mostly commercial and it was really to move the railroad tracks. It was primarily, as you said, a safety project, because when I came to Gastonia in the seventies, everybody was talking about how horrible it was with the train traffic. There was a lot of train traffic and then there were a lot of accidents and deaths associated with it. And I thought it was just a wonderful idea to move it. And so they came up with the idea of using federal urban renewal money to do it. An environmental impact statement was done, and I saw the report actually many years later. This all precedes my time. But they looked at three options. One was to move the railroad tracks north and put it in the trench. Another one was to move it, and have all the roads go over the railroad track. That was a little bit more like what Rock Hill did. And then there was a third one, which was interesting, which was a new railroad alignment up around I-85. And then there would be two long spurs, one spur from downtown Gastonia, heading up toward the new alignment on the east and one to the west. But there would be no railroad for about, oh, maybe four or five blocks, and a new railroad would be built. So long story short, they went through that process. And the cost, I think, was around late, late 1960s, early 1970s, and concluded that they should go forward with these urban renewal projects. City Council was strongly supportive of it at the time, all the way through, actually, the State Department of Transportation was because they saw this as a safety issue. The railroad was supportive of it, too, because they had too many at-grade crossings and it's more efficient for them to remove the at-grade crossings. So all of this was there to be done. And also, at the same time, there were some kind of macro trends going on. One was that the downtown itself was suffering because it had not been built. This was the opening of the mall. The mall opened at the same time in the mid-seventies. And so everybody's flocking to the mall and leaving downtown. And they thought all this will be the panacea. If we can do this, we will be able to have a big parking lot behind our stores. And won't that be all this good

economic development? Of course, they didn't know that this thing was going to last as long as it did. This design came up in the early seventies, and it's not till 1992 that the thing was completed. And so during that period of time, you had basically a flat period of disinvestment. The project didn't have the economic impact or anything that people back then thought it would.

Speaker 1 [00:13:11] That's great information. When I was looking through old news articles, it looks like the study to raise or lower the railroad tracks began in 1970, in conjunction with the Downtown Redevelopment Project, funded in part by the HUD Grant Urban Renewal Program. They decided to relocate and lower the tracks, moving the tracks an average of 200 feet to the north. The City was looking to increase traffic flow and increase parking downtown. Land acquisition was still going on in the early 1980s. The project continued to face delays due to funding. It began as a \$3.5 million project in 1970, and then the cost estimate went to \$16 million in 1983.

Speaker 3 [00:14:24] One thing, to give you some perspective to the project itself. Those urban renewal projects had a certain amount of money and then certainly the cost inflated, but they're also part of the project the state was going to build. I think the Marietta Bridge was the state's bridge, a couple of bridges were the states, maybe all of them and also Long Avenue. And all of that construction was wrapped into the site and it got really complicated because you had all the state highway stuff in addition to doing away with Airline Avenue and building this new thoroughfare of Long Avenue. And so that all those dollars got put in there as well.

Speaker 1 [00:15:10] Yes. It said roughly \$12.77 million was programmed in the STIP. The news article stated that 67 businesses and 77 homes were relocated.

Speaker 3 [00:15:31] That was for both urban renewal projects.

Speaker 3 [00:15:43] If you look at the drawing of where R-81 is. Most of it is just R-142, then that's one part of it. But there were two urban renewal projects. The grant application should talk about trying to fix or some of the problems that were as a result of those two projects.

Speaker 3 [00:16:51] As I recall and it's been a long time and I might be wrong, there was a little development called Ten Yard Road, which was some substandard houses that were right next to the square. The Square was the African-American commercial center. But the ten yard road had a lot of very, very substandard houses that was all torn down by the time I arrived in the mid-seventies. But I thought that might have come from the first Urban Renewal Project, and the second one had little bits and pieces. I think the second one might have even gone all the way out to Firestone.

Speaker 1 [00:17:50] Then I found it wasn't until November 23rd of 1983 that the first lots were acquired for the rail relocation. Excavation began in June of 1986. And 1.4 miles trenched.

Speaker 3 [00:18:25] I think it was I think it was finished in 1989.

Speaker 1 [00:18:32] Yes. They had the dedication event on April 10th, 1992.

Speaker 2 [00:18:42] But I think essentially, like substantial completion was 1989, I think. But there was still just cleanup work and little things that drag out until 1992.

Speaker 3 [00:18:55] This is a 20+ year project, you know, and so that had quite an impact.

Speaker 1 [00:19:05] Yeah. Do you recall any public engagement that occurred before, during or after the construction project?

Speaker 3 [00:19:16] Yes, because they used federal funds. There were required public hearings. And then there were also a lot of neighborhood meetings. During the construction, there was actually a newsletter, I think, trying to remember what the name of the newsletters were. But the planning department was producing the newsletters. Also the Engineering Department and the Planning Department were very much engaged in this, mostly the planning department on the HUD side and then the engineering department on the DOT side. We had the regular neighborhood meetings and project meetings going on. And in newsletters.

Speaker 1 [00:20:13] Maybe we can track down some of that. So how would you describe the residential communities to the north of the corridor prior to the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks? Jennifer Davis was talking about The Square and what all was there. There was a movie theater, a post office and a library and restaurants and things. She couldn't exactly remember when those businesses went away. Was it in any way related to the railroad project or was it something different?

Speaker 3 [00:21:32] If you look at the old aerial photographs along Airline Avenue, you'll see that all of Airline Avenue was commercial. I'm trying to think if there was any residential, but I don't think there was a because the old Remington Hotel was there and everything. But that was all torn down by the mid-seventies. But there was a big strip of commercial buildings that were from Broad Street all the way down to Chester. But then to the north, behind it, back around Page Street is where the square was.

Speaker 3 [00:22:57] Some of those businesses that were there were the Excelsior Credit Union. And I remember Doctor Smith's. He was the pharmacist, which later became Smith's drug. Back then it was the square, and that area was a product of segregation from the decades before. So there is this small little area of black businesses that were there and served a niche. They served their community. And what was going on in the mid-seventies, though, is that in a residential and commercial way, with all the old Jim Crow laws gone and had been gone for now several years, that was beginning to break apart. Segregation was gone. And so now if you are going to go to the drugstore and you're African-American, you just go to any drugstore. But before you weren't allowed, you know, so you went to your local one. And the credit union, Excelsior Credit Union, was really good to provide loans to African-Americans because the banks wouldn't. Well, once the fair housing bills and banking bills and community reinvestment stuff started in the seventies, well, that started breaking apart and people started moving. All African-Americans could live all across different neighborhoods in Gastonia. So Highland started losing population as folks moved out and the I guess the economic vitality of the businesses started to erode because they were based upon that niche. The folks, the customers were from that community. And so as that community got dispersed, it impacted the commercial businesses. So then along comes the Urban Renewal Project. And so the Urban Renewal Project identified buildings that were substandard housing, or if they're commercial, if they were located in the middle of where the railroad was coming. All of those things were where those properties were acquired. And then once they said that your property is going to be acquired, nobody was making investments around you.

Nobody is making investments in the property. So things start to decline. And I think that happened during that period of time.

Speaker 1 [00:26:13] Yeah, that's good. Good point.

Speaker 2 [00:26:17] So the duration of the project probably had as much negative impact as the physical separation of the project.

Speaker 3 [00:26:28] Yes. If you're going to go in and do something like that, you need to do it quickly and not have people in limbo because construction was over a period of time. But the other thing was, well, we're going to tear it all down. This stuff's not going to be here anymore. So people don't invest in that area.

Speaker 1 [00:26:53] So then the construction lasted for four years. How would you describe the impacts on the residential communities surrounding the project? During construction? We know that a lot of the businesses had moved out, but thinking through their access. While this construction was going on, did the communities to the north still have adequate access if they wanted to get into downtown or if they wanted to get over to U.S. 74? Do you recall what that looked like with detours and stuff?

Speaker 3 [00:27:37] If we're focused on the neighborhoods to the north, which is primarily the Highland community, they were the census tracts that before urban renewal had the lowest income. They were the primarily African-American neighborhoods. And they had the little neighborhood square, which was their commercial area. They really couldn't access prior before the project blocks downtown because what was happening first, the Jim Crow laws, but then secondly, what was happening to downtown as it was imploding. There used to be a Belk downtown. There used to be all these places. And they were all shuttered. So now people that lived in Highland as well as everywhere else, were trying to get to suburban places to do their shopping. And one of the long term problems, and I guess it's still that way today, is that the neighborhoods to the north in the Highland community always wanted to have a real grocery store. There continues to be a grocery dessert. And the Urban Renewal Project didn't help it at all, because there was commercial opportunity there, but with all the construction, you're demolishing buildings and your moving the railroad. Nobody is investing in that area. So you're not getting any new commercial investment over at least a 20-year period.

Speaker 1 [00:29:35] That's good to make that tie in of the project and the barriers that it took down a lot of barriers because you're taking down the rail and allowing access at the same time.

Speaker 3 [00:29:52] That barrier, the irony of it was that this was a project that was supposed to make us more connected by removing that. That old railroad train was noisy and killed people. All the rest of the stuff that we were going to have, these modern highways over top of it that would connect people. But the problem was that in the design of the cut itself, instead of a vertical cut, they laid it back in a diagonal which took up a whole lot more space. And in fact, we were critical of that back then. But they didn't value the land at all. And then we build a five lane boulevard, Long Avenue, which was wide, not a lot of pedestrian connection there. And then what happened was all along Airline, where businesses used to be. Now you have government buildings, the courthouse and the jail. And when the county built the courthouse and jail, they did not go vertical. They went up about four blocks, four stories. But then they put the jail in the back towards Highland and put a parking lot and took out all of Walnut. And Walnut was a beautiful street. And those

homes that were there were not substandard at all. That was the area along Walnut, which was very close to the square was really those homes were very nice and a lot of history to them. And sadly, they got eliminated. And then we put the police station up there and then you got the ABC store and then the water plant. The water plant had to expand. So now you've got multiple blocks of government buildings and parking lots that block connectivity with those northern residential areas to the downtown. It spreads it out even further, the five lane highway and then the cut, all of that.

Speaker 2 [00:32:17] Yeah, it's interesting that because on the south side of the ditch, the city went in and put parking lot creating more physical distance. I just quickly did a measurement from the wall of the courthouse, across the ditch to the back wall of the building, there is 550 feet. That's a whole row of buildings that disappeared. There's no commercial activity on. It's just parking and then railroad ditch and then a five lane corridor.

Speaker 1 [00:33:00] And that's one thing that I've found in the news. Newspaper articles with the project touting to the purpose of the project was to increase traffic flow and increase parking downtown. That was one of the main goals of the project.

Speaker 3 [00:33:18] Yes, correct. So the idea was that this Long Avenue connection to the interstate was going to bring all this development along the corridor from Highway 7. And also 321 was going to fill up and then everybody was going to come to Gastonia. And Gastonia was at that time, I mean, a regional center, all these areas from around Gaston County and Lincoln County, they would come there, but that didn't really transpire.

Speaker 1 [00:33:58] We've been focused on the ditch project, but the creation of a five lane highway probably is more negative.

Speaker 3 [00:34:40] Yes, I think you've got to look at Highway 7 and try to soften that and try to put that on a bit of a road diet and try to reclaim as much land and make it usable for people.

Speaker 2 [00:35:18] I'm not so much against the railroad grade separation, but I wish they'd come up with vertical walls and created a tunnel. That way, we would actually have more land that we could have put more buildings on.

Speaker 3 [00:35:36] We were talking about that back in the late seventies trying to get that project amended, but it had developed too much momentum. And they said, no, if you do that, we'll have to start all over again. It'll take 20 years. Well, it took 20 years anyway. But they didn't value the land. They just said, it will be cheaper if we lay it back and not do a vertical cut and not cover it. And also, we did the wide highway and by the time you've done that, you just have this huge space through there that's not usable.

Speaker 3 [00:36:58] You can look at what happened in Charlotte when they widened Independence Boulevard. I mean, Independence is a wonderful freeway, but it absolutely destroyed neighborhoods on either side. It destroyed commercial. And they're trying to fix that, you know, but it's hard to do. I think it might be that this project here really has such potential to create a special space in the heart of the city.

Speaker 1 [00:37:29] I'm thinking about the expanse of the corridor. If we're thinking not only the railroad ditch, but then looking at that area of Highway 7. It paints a different picture.

Speaker 3 [00:38:13] I think going westward, it went all the way up almost to where almost to the where the FUSE is.

Speaker 3 [00:38:26] So there's extra land. Whenever they built the railroad, there's still some extra space there. But the idea of trying to connect the downtown with the FUSE as you work on this project and try to make that a very pleasant place to be and people will want to come and build residential and commercial because of this this very large space that's down there.

Speaker 1 [00:39:02] Do you recall any specific businesses that had to be relocated?

Speaker 3 [00:39:12] You know, it's a good question. I think Smith Drug, Litton Locksmith, Excelsior Credit Union, Wholesum Bakery. Now, I'm not sure about the Gazette. I'm not sure if the Gazette moved before the Urban Renewal project or if they were part of it.

Speaker 1 [00:39:52] What was the name of the bakery?

Speaker 3 [00:39:53] The Wholesum Bread Bakery. Ironically, later, it became a temporary garage for the transit system.

Speaker 3 [00:41:58] There were also tire stores and machine shops. I think there was an ice cream place.

Speaker 3 [00:43:16] The city spent a whole bunch of money underground, underground electric, they redid the water, sewer and all that stuff. And so that's where they put a lot of it. It also went north beyond Long Avenue, that line where Long Avenue is now, and actually over there by the water plant. But most of the money was spent south. But they did acquire land. Which gets into your relocation numbers.

Speaker 1 [00:43:53] Do you feel the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks had an impact, positive or negative, on the surrounding residential communities after the project was complete, including the construction of the five lane highway. Community impacts could include, aesthetic values, community cohesion, access, public facilities. Tax and property value change. We've talked about displacement of people and businesses.

Speaker 3 [00:45:24] It would be interesting if you could go back in time and do it all over, you know, and it's a shame about The Square. I think you had actually small entrepreneurial businesses that were there. It's too bad that couldn't have stayed and grown. Highland has always needed a commercial area. A commercial area north of the railroad tracks, as well as a commercial area south of the railroad tracks. And having commerce back and forth, I think would affect it. And I think the Rail Ditch Project probably put an end to anything like that. I mean, would some of this stuff have happened anyway because the conditions of the buildings were not good? There was a lot of blight and there were the other trends of disinvestment in the heart of the city anyway, because of suburbanization and actually in a weird way, integration which worked. Also, there's the other side of it is that if you lost that ability to have a niche market, but could that have, you know, like today we would try to work that. Try to expand that niche market and build on it, you know? So you can you can blame it somewhat.

Speaker 1 [00:47:19] What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad ditch can have for the residential communities, for the businesses in the downtown area? And then if the railroad trench were to be capped, what are your ideas for redevelopment?

Speaker 3 [00:47:35] Well, I think it really could make a positive difference for residential as well as commercial, because you would be recapturing land and then you have an opportunity to do something with it in the heart of your city. And if you could have something that makes it more attractive, well, investors want to follow areas that are attractive. And so there would be incentive for people to live around the area and also for commerce to occur there. I would imagine that a lot of it would be park, that there would be an aesthetic feature, art work, history, something that grabs people's attention, something that says we're coming back, we're going to Gastonia. There's a restaurant there and all this beautiful linear park. There's the mall. Can you imagine Washington, D.C., without the mall? Can you imagine where I live in Charlotte without beer and the park? And that's only been there just a little bit. And so I think that's going to be a lot of it. And on the edges of it, can you get some commercial and residential development? I think it's a lot of park land, but it could be some extra parking. It could be some extra development maybe.

Speaker 1 [00:50:30] Do you have any additional comments for us, anything else that you can remember as you were working on the project? Is there anybody else that we need to make sure that we're talking to? I do have an interview questionnaire for Jack Kiser. Is there anyone else that you can think of?

Speaker 1 [00:53:07] Do you recall any members of the community or business owners in particular that we might reach out to?

Speaker 3 [00:55:11] If you could get someone who grew up in Highland who will have childhood memories. We see the world differently, maybe better even. But you have to get to someone like that who was in Highland, who can give you the richness and the detail.

Speaker 3 [00:56:42] You know, if you think about it, we had Mayor Jeffers and we also had a ward, four representatives. We had two African-American members on the council all during that time. And they really believed in the project. They just thought it was going to be quick. But what they didn't think would happen was the way the jail moved and the parking moved all the way back to Walnut. And all of that just kind of pushed everything further and further away. And it took so long. And that because everybody was interested in a quick project to change the psychology of what could be possible in downtown and in Highland, but it drug on and on and it didn't change the psychology. So this made it worse.

Interview with Jennifer Davis (Lived in the Highland Community)

Speaker 1 [00:00:02] The City of Gastonia is working on a grant application to U.S. D.O.T. to apply for funding to complete a feasibility study to cap the railroad ditch that runs through the center of downtown Gastonia and improve Highway 7. The purpose of the Reconnecting Communities pilot discretionary grant program is to fund projects that reconnect communities by removing, retrofitting or mitigating highways or other transportation facilities that create barriers to community connectivity, including to mobility, access or economic development. This is a new grant out of the new infrastructure law, the bipartisan infrastructure law. The idea to cap the corridor is not something new that we just thought about with this funding opportunity. This is something that the City of Gastonia has talked about for quite a few years, and has been in a number of planning exercises. But really, the next step is to do a feasibility study to determine if it's feasible to cap the railroad ditch. And then also what would the impacts to the community be, what would the cost be, and what are the development potentials? There have been a number of ideas floated, and we want to leave all on the table. Could it be redeveloped into a park? Could there be a multimodal transit facility? Could it be redeveloped into housing, into commercial space, office space? We need this feasibility study to help us determine what that could be. Do you any questions so far about the intent of the project?

Speaker 2 [00:02:37] I understand the intent. What I can't envision is when you say capping, what does that mean. Would it move somewhere else? Does it just disappear? Well, I mean, what does it look like?

Speaker 1 [00:02:49] We would essentially put a lid on top. We would put a platform over it. And then all the space would be able to be developed.

Speaker 1 [00:03:06] There's been a few things that the city has worked on. All right. I'll see if I can share my screen here. All right, you tell me if you can see when you see this. This is something that the planning department had put together where it shows pretty much there's a lot of green space. There is some developed buildings with a parking deck. You can see some other things. But a lot of that would be green space that would just be built right on top of the railroad. So the railroad tracks would stay in their current location. You would just build a cap on top.

Speaker 2 [00:03:57] Wow.

Speaker 1 [00:03:58] Here is another.

Speaker 2 [00:04:05] Wow.

Speaker 1 [00:04:07] So this is something that was included in the NC 7 corridor study that was completed a few years ago. This takes a look at not really capping the whole thing. You can see the railroad, the ditch here. This shows it being capped and developing a potential multi-modal transit station. We are trying to get light rail to come into Gaston County. What would that look like if light rail came all the way into Gastonia and there's a station, there would be elevated platforms. So if it's capped even further, you can see greenspace, different buildings there, development potential. So those are just a few of the things that we've looked at in the past. So again, the railroad would stay, the trains would still continue to operate as is; it would just be underneath this new development.

Speaker 2 [00:05:37] Wow. Okay. So that's great. Okay, I got it.

Speaker 1 [00:05:48] And if we can get this feasibility study underway, that could lead to additional funding opportunities through the federal government. So, if all goes right, we could see this in the next ten years. So it starts with a plan, though. That's what we're trying to do, a feasibility study.

Speaker 2 [00:06:12] Okay.

Speaker 1 [00:06:13] What we are really looking to get out of some of these interviews with different stakeholders in the community, and if you if you grew up in the Highland community or in a residential neighborhood near here, whether it was to the north or the south, or you lived through that construction and know what the communities were like before the project to lower the rail into the ditch. And then what happened through construction and then your perception of things after the construction project was completed in the early nineties.

Speaker 2 [00:07:25] I can't remember the construction taking place, but I know what it was like before the tracks were lowered. Because I lived in the Highland neighborhood on North York Street. This was before the water treatment plant was there. I mean, all of that is just new. So what I recall as a little girl is living on North York Street which ran from what we now know as Airline Avenue straight through the Highland community down to Caldwell Street, which then came out on what is now 321. And 321, I think, was a two lane highway that split the Highland neighborhood. So I'll have to think way back and give you a couple of markers where. My church set where the jailhouse parking lot is now. And across the street from my church was the old Highland school. There were two buildings there. One was the elementary school. One was the high school. And this was all before the Highland High School was built where it is now. So how I recall these things is I had three older brothers and a sister. We all graduated from there, the youngest one next to me graduated in 1955. And I think the new Highland School was built shortly after that because I graduated from the new Highland School, what's now Highland School of Technology, in 1964. It was closed in 1966. And while it reopened, it became a middle school and it was going to be closed for a while. And then while I was on the Gaston County School Board, we opened the Highland School of Technology. So on that side of the tracks in that whole neighborhood and in fact, right across the street from where I lived. And next to me was kind of like little strip malls. We had everything in that neighborhood that you would have in a small city. There was a credit union. There was a movie theater. Across the street from my house was a grocery store and a couple of restaurants. One was an ice cream shop, and then there was a restaurant next to it, and then there was a nightclub next to that. All of these things sat in the middle of the houses that were on North York Street. Next to my house was another little strip mall which had a post office, a beauty shop, a shoe repair shop, which my uncle ran. There was a laundromat. There was another restaurant that was called Big Daddy's. And Friendship Church is still there. But all down the street were businesses and homes. And when you got to what is now Long Avenue, there were other strip malls. There was another strip mall that had a couple of other restaurants, and all of these were black owned businesses. We used to call that are The Square, and that's where the Credit Union was and a couple of doctor's offices, a dentist office, another church, Third Street Presbyterian Church was on that strip. All of that was in the Highland community. But when you cross the tracks, you were in the downtown area, you were on Main Street. I remember walking through there and well, in those days you could walk anywhere and go anywhere you want to and not have to worry about things that you worry about today. The public library was down on Second Street, and I used to walk to that library. And before they closed the Highland schools, the two buildings, our library, the

school library was where I walked to from my home. And then one of those buildings became the Elks Club, the Moose Elk Lodge. And Gregory Funeral Home was on the other side of the elementary school building. But it was Martin's funeral home then. And across the street from that the Delta sorority had a house. I mean, it was just a really vibrant, viable community. But we were always stuck. Now the fact that the railroad seemingly divided the black neighborhood from a white neighborhood, although there were blacks who lived in other places in the city. But that's just the way it was. And we talked about it. We talked about the division that it caused. I can remember downtown was very viable. We had a Leon Snyder and a couple of stores. We had two movie theaters. There was a Woolworth's and Eagles and a dress store. And I think downtown began to lose some of its vibrancy when Belk moved out to the what is now the Eastridge Mall. That's when it lost a lot.

Speaker 1 [00:14:04] This paints a good picture of what the communities were like before the project to lower the rail. So there was already the rail corridor that divided the black community from the white community.

Speaker 2 [00:14:24] Yes.

Speaker 1 [00:14:25] We see that across the nation historically where communities developed around rail. Did you see that the divide of communities after the rail was lowered? Do you think that had an impact at all on that division of communities?

Speaker 2 [00:14:55] I retired from IBM in 1993. And while I never moved out of Gastonia for the for the majority of my career, I worked in Charlotte. So in the early 1990s, I was living where I am now, which is in Forestbrook off of Union Road. So I've been here since 1976. My husband and I were married in 1968. I still had friends and family who lived in that neighborhood, but I have very vague memories of that construction taking place. But my perception was it was a good thing. That was the perspective that I remember. But here's the thing that I don't like because I kind of think about things in terms of how they affect people mentally and emotionally. Even though they may not say it, I think for the people that I knew, it was considered to be a good thing. It seemed like it was creating a more connected community, if I could say it that way. But there are still people who lived there then that have been misplaced or displaced to other places who remember the impact.

Speaker 1 [00:16:42] Can you give us some of their names? The people that we could reach out to?

Speaker 2 [00:16:48] I twin cousins who also lived in that neighborhood. They're both retired educators. One of them is Jacqueline Robinson. It was their dad who ran the shoe shop in that area. And Jocelyn and her husband live in a house right near Highland High School. They live near Highland Hills. Jocelyn not only will probably remember everything, she probably got my uncle's pictures of everything. I'm sure the two of them will remember a lot of that stuff. I can email you her contact information and Jacqueline's as well. And I think they might be interested in talking with you. They're ten years younger than me, but were around that neighborhood as much as I was. I'm trying to think of and they will probably know people who still live there. And I'm trying to think of others who still live in that community. There were three churches. Third Street was displaced as a result of the city being built in its complex, and I can't remember when that was being built. Third Street Presbyterian, which is now on Highland Avenue, was displaced. My church, Epworth United Methodist, was displaced. Costner funeral home was displaced.

Speaker 1 [00:19:42] These were businesses that were displaced with the with the railroad ditch project?

Speaker 2 [00:19:51] I can't remember.

Speaker 2 [00:20:27] I can't remember the businesses being displaced because the railroad tracks ran right through the community.

Speaker 3 [00:20:52] A lot of the pictures that I've seen back in the day show when the railroad tracks were at grade and you can see cars kind of parking around them and stuff. And there's the old depot and it seems like on the north side of the tracks, there was maybe one street worth of businesses that front your traditional downtown storefront type businesses, you know, just along the street, maybe two or three blocks long of businesses that fronted and looked out on to, I guess that was Long Avenue or might have been Airline at the time.

Speaker 3 [00:21:33] So it would have been an Airline Avenue and it was a number of businesses. I guess that was kind of my question too is as we were talking earlier about, you've always heard at least I have grown up in the South, you know, the folks that live on the other side of the tracks. Right. That was that was our racial boundary.

Speaker 2 [00:21:54] Right.

Speaker 3 [00:21:55] And so I wonder if those businesses on the north side of the old tracks. Every one of them got just bulldozed that whole long strip of those three or four blocks of those businesses. Now, I was wondering if some of those might have been sort of the African-American frontage into downtown.

Speaker 2 [00:22:20] I think it was. I'm trying to think those things are still in check here. You remember the old train depot was on the other side of that track. Where the tracks ran through the city. There was a train depot.

Speaker 3 [00:22:38] Right.

Speaker 2 [00:22:39] And then that, of course, that got demolished. I can't seem to remember what else was there. There used to be a dairy. Sunrise Dairy. And something else was up there.

Speaker 3 [00:22:52] There was a creamery or something. Yeah.

Speaker 2 [00:22:54] Yeah. I just can't recall all of that. And you know where Oakland Street is? Another person that might have some good memory about this is Carol Sanders. Carol and his family lived on Oakland Street down near the cemetery. Carol will remember some of those things. I can send you his contact. And then I have I have a brother and a sister who left here but returned. My sister came back in 1990. I think my brother came back in 2010. They may both remember some things about that.

Speaker 1 [00:24:59] That would that would be great. I'm going to send a questionnaire out, but at the same time, invite anyone that wants to do an interview like this. If they have busy schedules and can't schedule time for an interview, but want to give us information just on a written questionnaire that would be helpful. Pictures would be amazing to include

in the grant application. If you can pass along those names and contact information, I'll reach out to them.

Speaker 1 [00:26:27] We are trying to understand the history of the railroad ditch and how it further divided that community from the downtown area. Even though there were some safe connections that were created with the bridges that still exist today, that folks could drive or walk over to get into the downtown, it still created that barrier for people to get in and out. Those communities to the north, the residential communities in the north, the minority communities, what they looked like before this railroad project to lower the rail and then after and what we know today that a lot of what you were describing with the strip malls and the post office and the theaters and that is no more. Was it the project to lower the railroad that kick started some of those businesses going out of business? Or was that something that was already happening?

Speaker 2 [00:28:00] Some people might see them as negative and others might see them as an improvement. One of the first ones I remember is the water plant. Because that displaced a lot of a lot of the community in the houses, and the Boys and Girls Club used to sit in that area. The building of the courthouse complex was another one that was probably more impactful to the community than the railroad project.

Speaker 3 [00:29:32] Well, I just want to make sure when you say lowering the railroad tracks and again, I'm going to refer back to when I was growing up and we always talked about how it was, you know, people lived on the other side of the tracks. Was it that the tracks were visually removed? So there wasn't that barrier, that thing that you saw, that was the wall between us?

Speaker 2 [00:29:59] I think so.

Speaker 3 [00:29:59] It was removed.

Speaker 2 [00:30:01] I think so. And, you know, that's as much a mental impact, because even when after the Civil Rights Act was passed and a lot of things changed and we could go to the movie theaters, because before that, if we were allowed to go to the movie theaters, you sat in the balcony, you know, as black people, you just weren't allowed to do that. But that railroad track was there. If you wanted to go to any of the stores downtown and a train was coming, you had to wait. And I have friends who remind me that when I was in college, I was working for the summer in a plant that is on Union Road. The building is still there, but the plant is no longer. I remember driving across the track with two of my friends at like 6 a.m. in the morning. And it was dark and I did not hear or see the train. And I drove around the bars. I drove across the track before the bars came down and just made it before they came down. I'll never forget that. That was 1966 or somewhere around then. So you remember that if you were going downtown, if you wanted to go to the store, if you wanted to go to the library, it was down there. You had to wait at those tracks sometimes for a train to pass. So my perception is that it was a positive thing. And I would think then if you do something with a park or greenspace, that I see that as a positive thing because it says a lot about Gastonia. It says a lot about growth. Now, other people might have a different opinion, but I would think that would be a very, very positive thing.

Speaker 3 [00:32:20] I wonder if the story becomes more that the lowering of the tracks was a good first step. But we lost the walkability. We lost not just the storefronts, but now the only way across is you have to be in a car. You can't walk to the library anymore. And I wonder if that might be some of this. That might be an interesting part of the story is that it

was a good first step at removing a barrier between the communities, but now we need to take that next one, to complete the project.

Speaker 2 [00:33:10] Yeah. And we have lost the walkability.

Speaker 3 [00:33:15] We have. You can't even with the bridge, you know, the walkway that we put on MLK on the side of it. Still the only people I see walking across it are attorneys.

Speaker 3 [00:33:28] You know, you never see people like we used to. But that's because also, like you were saying, a lot of the housing and a lot of the store ownership and a lot of the businesses got torn down. And now it's just a government complex.

Speaker 2 [00:33:42] Were there a lot of trains around the area? Was there a lot of train traffic? Did the trains take a while for them to pass?

Speaker 2 [00:34:26] There were two trains that came through every day. I think there were two that went north and two that went south. Let me say it that way, because my mother was from Philadelphia, so we often could get on that train and travel to Philadelphia. And then I had a brother who lived in Atlanta. So you get on the train traveling south to Atlanta. So there were at least two passenger trains. And I think they ran twice a day. And then there were the freight trains that came through. So, yeah, they were frequent. They were frequent in all my childhood nights. I remember those passenger trains running through and Gastonia was a stop. And then I don't remember when you had to go maybe to Charlotte to catch the passenger train. But freight trains. Yes. They came through all the time.

Speaker 1 [00:35:43] And I was thinking to with the redevelopment of the area, I know that the lowering of the tracks was really kind of that first thing, like the city's portion of that funding came from a HUD grant, but it was some type of downtown revitalization. So the lowering of the tracks was phase one of some of the potential redevelopment.

Speaker 3 [00:36:55] Jennifer, when you were saying there's that big round thing that's out there now, that was where the Boys and Girls Club sat, and that was right across the street from the original treatment plant. But the original treatment plant only took up like about a half of that block.

Speaker 2 [00:37:18] Right.

Speaker 3 [00:37:19] And there's those other concrete basins that are down by the credit union. You know, those weren't there probably until I want to say maybe the 70s or so. Those things displaced somebody that was living in that area.

Speaker 2 [00:37:38] Rankin Avenue was a street of houses.

Speaker 3 [00:37:47] Yeah. You can still see the old driveway, aprons and sidewalk and stuff.

Speaker 2 [00:37:52] And North York Street, right until you got up that corner, there was an apartment building up there and a taxicab company that faced the light. It faced the tracks on the corner right before you crossed Long Avenue. That little strip place right there I can't even remember what was in there, there was a restaurant that was called

Flo's. The Excelsior Credit Union was right there. Smith Drug was across the street from the credit union that eventually moved downtown. And then Dr. Smith lived in the neighborhood near Highland High School because he lived right across the street from my cousin. It seems like something else. That's what that's what I recall. The water treatment plan displaced the Boys and Girls Club.

Speaker 1 [00:42:34] Thank you so much for calling in and giving us this perspective. And again, very helpful.

Speaker 2 [00:43:14] US 321 was another divider in the neighborhood.

Speaker 3 [00:43:43] So that's another one. We're constantly battling to try and bridge some of that connectivity.

Downtown Gastonia Reconnector Project

Stakeholder Interview Questionnaire

September 2022



The City of Gastonia is seeking a Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP) Grant from USDOT to fund a feasibility study to cap the railroad channel that runs through Downtown Gastonia. This channel creates a barrier that limits mobility, connectivity, accessibility, and economic development for our disadvantaged communities to the north.

This questionnaire will aid in getting personal accounts and perspectives on the original project to trench the railroad. As well, it will provide insight into opportunities and/or obstacles that it has created for surrounding downtown communities since the project was completed in the early 1990s.

Name: James L. (Jack) Kiser

Email: jkiser7749@gmail.com

1. Did you live in Gastonia during the construction of the railroad ditch project?

Yes

2. Were you directly involved in the project (i.e. City staff, land or business owner who was displaced/relocated, etc.)? If yes, please explain.

Yes, as City staff. I was hired first by the City in Sept 1976 as Community Development Administrator in the Planning Department. At the time of my hiring, the railroad trench project had been planned by, I guess at least 10 years. Also, at the time of my hiring the City decided to dissolve the semi-autonomous Redevelopment Commission and move those responsibilities to City staff. Initially, the completion of the 2 redevelopment projects was put under a separatee division of the Planning Department, but after about 2-3 years the pre-CDBG redevelopment projects were consolidated in the Community Development Division under my direction. At that time, there were still some households and businesses that were scheduled for relocation. Those were completed under my supervision.

3. Please describe any public engagement before, during, or after the construction project that you recall or may have participated in?

I did not participate in any public engagement during my tenure because that was completed (from an Urban Renewal standpoint) long before I came to the City in 1976. I was responsible for public engagement for the CDBG program, but that dealt with other projects. To the extent that NCDOT engaged the public during those years, any coordination with them on the trench project would have been done by the Public Works Dept. I have examined the overall master redevelopment plan for the Highland neighborhood that was done years before my 1976 arrival. I was told that there were many people from the neighborhood that were unhappy that the City had chosen the first phase neighborhood project as the one artfully drawn to enable the railroad trench project. (as opposed to a phase that would be more residential oriented). But that is hearsay, since that hearing was done years before my hiring.

4. How would you describe the residential communities to the north of the rail corridor **PRIOR** to the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks?

Very poor housing conditions. CDBG funds were used to rehabilitate owner-occupied homes and to deal with slum rental conditions in 1977 thru 1985. Other HUD funding was also used to improve living conditions.

5. How would you describe the impacts on the residential communities surrounding the project **DURING** construction?

I left City employment in August 1984 but returned in Jan 1992, as Director of Planning (over various functions including but not limited to, Transportation Planning and Community Development (CDBG, etc. HUD programs). During the time of my absence the RR trench construction took place. I recall the project was completed about a year after my return to the City in Jan 1992. Since my job was in Charlotte as Centralina COG Planning Director, I never moved from Gastonia. I cannot speak to disruption to surrounding residential communities during construction. But as someone who lived about a 2-mile drive from the site, I viewed the construction disruption as something manageable, albeit it seemed to take forever.

6. Do you recall specific businesses that had to be relocated? Any businesses that were forced to close because relocating was not possible?

Many businesses were relocated prior to my supervision of the redevelopment project. Some business relocation efforts continued and were completed during my supervision. These I recall: Square Drugs, Costner Funeral Home, Mr. Nobody Tire and auto service, Litton Locksmith, a furniture store, a seed and feed store where the city transit center is now. I recall another auto repair shop or two. I think Excelsior Credit Union (a Black oriented financial institution) was scheduled for relocation; however, it

was closed by state financial institution regulators before relocation. There were residences remaining as well that required relocation. I do not recall any business having to close due to relocation requirements during my supervision, although during the entire run of the redevelopment project, I have no doubt that there would have been. I do not know what happened with Holsum Bakery—it was vacated before my supervision, maybe before the City took over redevelopment.

7. Do you feel that the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks had an impact (positive or negative) on the surrounding residential communities **AFTER** the project was complete? If so, please explain.

Personally, I think the trench is ugly. It is too wide and takes up too much land in downtown. We suggested it be narrower but City Public Works, NCDOT and NSRR, ruled the design. I was told that the City power structure, employees, elected officials, and most importantly, business leaders were deeply concerned about safety of the at-grade crossings. If you look back into city archives, you will see applications for HUD and/or NCDOT funding (c.1970?) that show pictures of train-vehicle hits. The trench project wiped out at least a third of downtown, including many historic structures. I sometimes wonder if the city would have been better off preserving the built environment north of the tracks and just improving and/or adding grade separations at the former RR alignment. This would have required far less money and disruption. Although I am not an engineer, it appears that the slope of the trench has proved faulty, experiencing cave-ins, numerous holes, cracks and base subsidence, as well as weeds and saplings growing in it. Covering the trench with plazas and if feasible, buildings, would be a truly remarkable improvement to downtown.

Community Impacts could include Aesthetic values, community cohesion, access to public facilities and services, employment effects, tax and property value change, impacts on public health, displacement of people or businesses, community, regional growth, and historic preservation.

8. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad ditch could have for the residential communities to the north of NC 7 (Long Avenue)?

Any improvements to downtown, especially covering the trench, would be of tremendous benefit to ALL residential neighborhoods in the city-center. Possibly, it could provide some additional surface area for vertical development. It could help enhance property values in nearby residential areas. It could provide for added open space through plazas, which is something need for downtown's growing residential community. Covering the trench could also promote and provide greater connectivity

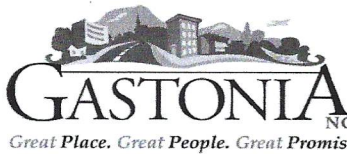
between the Highland neighborhood, downtown, York-Chester and the FUSE/Loray Village area.

9. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad trench could have on businesses in the Central Business District (Downtown area)

Provide more amenity space for public activities (e.g., festivals and markets), gathering space, and open spaces for residences. If possible, it should also be evaluated for some vertical development. All of this would help enhance downtown as an enhanced and vital business area.

10. If the railroad trench were to be capped, what are your ideas for redevelopment?
Plazas, landscaped open space, gathering space for community events, public installation art. And if feasible, vertical development, while leaving abundant open space. If this corridor is used for high-speed rail, then it should be evaluated for a potential multi-modal center.

11. Do you have any additional comments? No



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Name: *Clara Rudisill*
 Email: *rudisill.cra@gmail.com*

1. Did you live in Gastonia during the construction of the railroad ditch project?

Yes

2. Were you directly involved in the project (i.e. City staff, land or business owner who was displaced/relocated, etc.)? If yes, please explain.

No

3. Please describe any public engagement before, during, or after the construction project that you recall or may have participated in?

I don't recall any public engagement. Typically, these types of projects were planned without the Black community's involvement.

4. How would you describe the residential communities to the north of the rail corridor **PRIOR** to the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks?

There ~~was~~ would have been a heavily populated residential community with businesses along the Page Ave - N York St area known as "The Square." This included churches and a recreational facility.

5. How would you describe the impacts on the residential communities surrounding the project **DURING** construction?

If this construction occurred during the 70s-80s-90s the residential communities would have been impacted by limiting their access to the Main St businesses and the main corridor (Franklin Blvd).

6. Do you recall specific businesses that had to be relocated? Any businesses that were

forced to close because relocating was not possible?

Yes, there were several that closed because relocation was suggested without any support from the city.

7. Do you feel that the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks had an impact (positive or negative) on the surrounding residential communities *AFTER* the project was complete? If so, please explain.

Community Impacts could include Aesthetic values, community cohesion, access to public facilities and services, employment effects, tax and property value change, impacts on public health, displacement of people or businesses, community, regional growth, and historic preservation.

After the completion of the project, the community felt compelled to cross the railroad tracks to seek public transportation to jobs, for shopping at the mall, and access to public health and governmental services.

8. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad ditch could have for the residential communities to the north of NC 7 (Long Avenue)?

I feel that capping the railroad could have a positive impact if it can provide shelter from the weather, if it offers goods/services similar to what was offered in the past such as a newsstand, hot + cold beverages, sandwich/pastries, dry cleaning, restaurant dining.

9. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad trench could have on businesses in the Central Business District (Downtown area)?

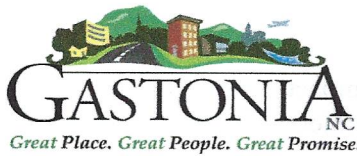
I feel that capping the railroad might incentivize the community and increase foot traffic to the CBD.

10. If the railroad trench were to be capped, what are your ideas for redevelopment?

As stated, it could provide shelter and provide historical content by the installation of art pieces that represent and tell the (story) of the Highland Community and the ways that it became self-sufficient (story) as a result of the prohibitions due to race (being African American).

11. Do you have any additional comments?

I feel that this is an important opportunity to include the historic preservation of the Highland Community. Diversity and inclusiveness begin to tell the complete history of Gastonia and Gaston County. Visitors to our city and the current/future generations can learn about people, places, and events that ~~have~~ made contributions ^{notable} and called Gastonia NC, their home!



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Name: Charles M Odom
Email: cmodom0420@att.net

1. Did you live in Gastonia during the construction of the railroad ditch project? *Yes*

2. Were you directly involved in the project (i.e. City staff, land or business owner who was displaced/relocated, etc.)? If yes, please explain.

3. Please describe any public engagement before, during, or after the construction project that you recall or may have participated in? *Can recall any that I know of.*

4. How would you describe the residential communities to the north of the rail corridor **PRIOR** to the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks? *Great community full of pride and respect. This community has been slow in growth. Very marginalized community.*

5. How would you describe the impacts on the residential communities surrounding the project **DURING** construction? *I feel this community probably was impacted, I could not say in what way. Just sure we did what was needed.*

6. Do you recall specific businesses that had to be relocated? Any businesses that were

forced to close because relocating was not possible?

7. Do you feel that the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks had an impact (positive or negative) on the surrounding residential communities *AFTER* the project was complete? If so, please explain.

Community Impacts could include Aesthetic values, community cohesion, access to public facilities and services, employment effects, tax and property value change, impacts on public health, displacement of people or businesses, community, regional growth, and historic preservation.

The railroad has always stood as a racial divide for the community to the north. I don't think lowering the track has changed that positively or negatively. Redevelopment gave more access to Public facilities and services, such as the Court House Jail Annex, Social Services. At the same time it came at a great cost to the north

8. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad ditch could have for the residential communities to the north of NC 7 (Long Avenue)?

I think it possibly could add connectivity, inclusion, and a well of welcoming, to the downtown community that the north community has never experienced.

9. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad trench could have on businesses in the Central Business District (Downtown area)?

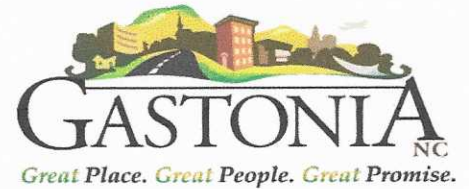
I feel the initial capping may have some negative impact doing construction. I think the end result would be a more positive and vibrant downtown. Bigger than anything we have seen!

10. If the railroad trench were to be capped, what are your ideas for redevelopment?

I would love to see more retail, housing units, parking decks, flower garden, Art Park, Amphitheater.

11. Do you have any additional comments?

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Name: ERWIN B. COSTNER
Email: ebcostner@aol.com

1. Did you live in Gastonia during the construction of the railroad ditch project?

YES

2. Were you directly involved in the project (i.e. City staff, land or business owner who was displaced/relocated, etc.)? If yes, please explain.

FAMILY BUSINESS DISPLACED

3. Please describe any public engagement before, during, or after the construction project that you recall or may have participated in?

NONE

4. How would you describe the residential communities to the north of the rail corridor **PRIOR** to the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks?

VIBRANT LIVING COMMUNITY

5. How would you describe the impacts on the residential communities surrounding the project **DURING** construction?

NEGATIVE

6. Do you recall specific businesses that had to be relocated? Any businesses that were forced to close because relocating was not possible?

OUR FAMILY BUSINESS DISPLACED (RELOCATED)

7. Do you feel that the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks had an impact (positive or negative) on the surrounding residential communities **AFTER** the project was complete? If so, please explain.

Community Impacts could include Aesthetic values, community cohesion, access to public facilities and services, employment effects, tax and property value change, impacts on public health, displacement of people or businesses, community, regional growth, and historic preservation.

NEGATIVE — PEOPLE HAD TO MOVE

8. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad ditch could have for the residential communities to the north of NC 7 (Long Avenue)?

WOULD BRING MORE PEOPLE TO THE AREA

9. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad trench could have on businesses in the Central Business District (Downtown area)?

MORE PEOPLE

10. If the railroad trench were to be capped, what are your ideas for redevelopment?

MORE BUSINESS + RESIDENTIAL

11. Do you have any additional comments?

YES BUT TOO MANY TO MENTION!

Please share this with your family, friends, and neighbors!
Completed questionnaires can be submitted to:

Randi Gates, Principal Transportation Planner
City of Gastonia
P.O. Box 1748
Gastonia, NC 28053
randig@cityofgastonia.com

Deadline to submit: Friday, September 30, 2022

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Name: *Ronald Phillip S*

Email: *ronaldphillips46@gmail.com*

1. Did you live in Gastonia during the construction of the railroad ditch project?

No

2. Were you directly involved in the project (i.e. City staff, land or business owner who was displaced/relocated, etc.)? If yes, please explain.

No

3. Please describe any public engagement before, during, or after the construction project that you recall or may have participated in?

NA

4. How would you describe the residential communities to the north of the rail corridor **PRIOR** to the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks?

Fairly vibrant

5. How would you describe the impacts on the residential communities surrounding the project **DURING** construction?

Disconnected communities.

6. Do you recall specific businesses that had to be relocated? Any businesses that were forced to close because relocating was not possible?

Unknown

7. Do you feel that the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks had an impact (positive or negative) on the surrounding residential communities **AFTER** the project was complete? If so, please explain.

Community Impacts could include Aesthetic values, community cohesion, access to public facilities and services, employment effects, tax and property value change, impacts on public health, displacement of people or businesses, community, regional growth, and historic preservation.

Can't provide an informed opinion or give specific instances

8. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad ditch could have for the residential communities to the north of NC 7 (Long Avenue)?

City services can be more streamlined.
Citizens can walk to events & locations more easily

9. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad trench could have on businesses in the Central Business District (Downtown area)?

Improve parking and increase ability for emergency response vehicles to move through central city

10. If the railroad trench were to be capped, what are your ideas for redevelopment?

Multi story housing projects, small business developments, and more green space in central city

11. Do you have any additional comments?

N/A

Please share this with your family, friends, and neighbors!

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City of Gastonia

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Gastonia, NC 28053

randig@cityofgastonia.com

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Name: Ethel Glenn

Email: emglenn125@gmail.com

1. Did you live in Gastonia during the construction of the railroad ditch project?

Yes

2. Were you directly involved in the project (i.e. City staff, land or business owner who was displaced/relocated, etc.)? If yes, please explain.

No, wasn't aware that the public was asked for involvement.

3. Please describe any public engagement before, during, or after the construction project that you recall or may have participated in?

I remember that if you didn't receive the Gazette, you were pretty much left out of knowing what was going on in Gastonia or even to know how to become involved.

4. How would you describe the residential communities to the north of the rail corridor **PRIOR** to the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks?

I think it was considered as the other side of the TRACKS.

5. How would you describe the impacts on the residential communities surrounding the project **DURING** construction?

Lots of traffic redirection, plenty of dust.

6. Do you recall specific businesses that had to be relocated? Any businesses that were forced to close because relocating was not possible?

Yes, the area of Page Street and North York Street, Walnut Avenue.

7. Do you feel that the project to relocate and lower the railroad tracks had an impact (positive or negative) on the surrounding residential communities **AFTER** the project was complete? If so, please explain.

Community Impacts could include Aesthetic values, community cohesion, access to public facilities and services, employment effects, tax and property value change, impacts on public health, displacement of people or businesses, community, regional growth, and historic preservation.

Positive to a certain degree, but the closing of businesses and purchasing of land in Ward 4 was the NEGATIVE

8. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad ditch could have for the residential communities to the north of NC 7 (Long Avenue)?

I'm not sure how it impacted the residential communities.

9. What impacts do you feel that capping the railroad trench could have on businesses in the Central Business District (Downtown area)?

It used to be thriving, but downtown became deserted.

10. If the railroad trench were to be capped, what are your ideas for redevelopment?

I don't understand the question. Capped how???

11. Do you have any additional comments?

I would love to see sidewalks in my community-FLOYD Lane. It is a redeveloped neighborhood, missing SIDEWALKS.

Please share this with your family, friends, and neighbors!

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