

Exploring Mixed-Use Development Opportunities

Initiative Summary Statement:

Create vibrant, sustainable, and resilient communities by promoting and advancing mixed-use development in desired areas throughout the region.

Initiative Description:

Objective: Strategically allocate recovery efforts and resources to support mixed-use developments that increase attainable housing, support business growth and job creation, and reduce commuter congestion. Mixed-use zoning is characterized by integrating multiple land uses onto a single property lot and/or neighborhood so that residents and visitors can live/stay, shop, and work in one place. Mixed-use developments can take a variety of forms and be categorized as one of three types: vertical mixed-use, horizontal mixed-use, and mixed-use walkable. All these mixed-use types are characterized by the high degree of integration between the physical and functional elements of the infrastructure. Downtowns are examples of larger scale mixed-use concepts, and many suburbs have developed similar mixed-use, town-square concepts; transit-oriented development is another characteristic of many mixed-use spaces. These types of developments also commonly integrate the built environment (e.g., buildings and infrastructure) with natural elements like pollinating gardens or resilient green infrastructure like bioswales.

Advancing mixed-use throughout the region will likely involve policy action to streamline development processes and collaboration to ensure that mixed-use developments are place-appropriate and responsive to post-disaster community needs. Actions may include consolidating development review and permitting processes and creating a forum to collaboratively access technical assistance and local knowledge sharing. Jurisdictions, the development community, and a local employer may be able to pilot a streamlined mechanism that supports a mixed-use workforce housing development aligned with the needs of employees as a productive test case that can be used to troubleshoot problems before wider application. Additionally, there are components of the Senate Bill 102: Live Local Act that may assist in these efforts such as “by-right” expedited development of affordable housing projects in mixed-use zone districts.

Need: The region will need to reduce existing barriers to developing mixed-use spaces and collaborate to fully realize the potential of mixed-use neighborhoods. While there is significant interest across public and private sectors in its potential benefits, housing developers have identified that the current process to develop mixed-use in certain areas

of the County can be complex, costly, and overall burdensome. Additionally, developers have identified that financial, labor, and supply chain difficulties for new development are still a factor resultant from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pre-lan, mixed-use was also not a common existing development type within the County. Technical assistance and/or education about mixed-use may be needed to familiarize local investors, planners, builders, developers, and regulators with the associated processes (existing and potentially updated) and to overcome the challenges associated with this type of land use. Parking and transit challenges are common barriers mixed-use and higher density development consider implementing strategies for compact communities. It may be useful to include an organization like the Florida Housing Coalition that can offer guidance and examples of successful mixed-use developments within the state. In the post-disaster environment, there may be requirements from U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Sally Mae, and/or other funding entities that may influence the new and/or rebuilt developments.

Regional Approach: As part of holistic recovery and rebuilding efforts, regional stakeholders can collaborate to identify areas that have the potential for and would benefit from mixed-use, determine policy changes that are needed to enable development, and share lessons learned. Mixed-use developments are spaces where the goals of multiple recovery Initiatives relating to economic vitality, resident wellbeing, and infrastructure improvements can be realized. Locating these types of projects near transportation hubs, for example, can spread the benefits throughout the County by providing access to and from other destinations while reducing traffic and air pollution. Nationally, development trends suggest zones that allow for commercial property and residential housing in the same space are the most powerful incentive to development.

Particularly relevant to the post disaster environment, mixed-use projects can repurpose existing buildings or infrastructure that sustained damage or whose original function is now obsolete. Revitalization projects can stimulate a neighborhood and create a new destination area for both residents and visitors. By providing these types of vibrant, amenity-rich residential communities, Lee County and its municipalities may be able to maintain and/or create a competitive edge over other surrounding areas that already have mixed-use or have with fewer and/or less desirable housing options.

Recovery planning stakeholders from multiple jurisdictions and sectors also voiced interest in new and rebuilt mixed-use areas attainable for the different populations, including employees in critical but not top paid sectors of the workforce such as teachers, first responders, and municipal employees. Stakeholders identified the need for attainable workforce housing especially near employment centers like the North Fort Myers

Downtown Waterfront area and Page Park as well as on the barrier islands, where there are site specific industries like shrimping, agriculture, and hospitality that need their workers to live locally. The Cultural Resource Branch also specifically identified a need to establish or expand live/work artist units throughout the region in places like Matlacha and Fort Myers.

Mixed use developments that incorporate wrap-arounds services (i.e., “supportive housing”) can help alleviate societal challenges that are the focus of other Initiatives. Supportive housing integrated into mixed-use areas with access to daily amenities (e.g., pharmacies, grocery stores) and medical care, for example, can be desirable places to live for residents who want to independently “age in place” or who may be experiencing physical or mental health illnesses.

Mixed-use developments are inherently cross-sector, involving expertise from local planning, transportation, and economic development officials as well as financing and development teams and residents. Input from these stakeholders will be instrumental in identifying existing constraints and time-consuming procedures currently hampering mixed-use development. A diverse stakeholder group, coupled with expert Technical Assistance, can also support the success of developments by helping to determine appropriate locations and parameters for mixed-use within the region.

Impact: Mixed-use developments are one solution that can help the Lee County region rebuild from Hurricane Ian while advancing multiple recovery goals. Mixed-use areas are typically economically vibrant, well-activated and connected neighborhoods that offer more walkability (resident health benefits, increased foot traffic for businesses) and reduced commuting times, which contributes to sustainability. They can be designed to reflect the local character of the community with distinct place-making characteristics that are attractive to visitors and residents of all ages. Mixed-use developments provide the region with an opportunity to continue to be an attractive, thriving part of Southwest Florida, that retains its workforce and is a magnet for visitors.

Key Considerations:

- Existing zoning codes may need to be amended, and form-based code may need to be contemplated.
- Mixed-income developments can have multi-faceted benefits such as:
 - Financial feasibility for developers because they can offset lower returns on affordable units with market-rate units;
 - Prevention of displacement;
 - Community revitalization;

- Economic mobility options for residents; and
- Better access to schools.
- Mixed-use developments can integrate greenways, recreational parks, and other open spaces to provide desirable amenities and support a flourishing local outdoor environment.

Co-Sponsoring Branches:

Housing, Infrastructure, Planning and Capacity, Economic Recovery, and Cultural Resources

Stakeholders:

- County planning department
- Municipal planning departments
- State and Local Housing Coalitions
- Housing Authorities
- Neighborhood organizations
- Construction and Real Estate Associations
- Professional organizations involved in planning, construction, and development

Potential Funding Sources:

- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development
- United States Department of Veterans Affairs
- United States Department of Agriculture
- United States Department of Health and Human Services
- United States Small Business Administration
- Florida Housing Finance Corporation
- Florida Department of Commerce