



TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

# Wharton's West End Corridor: A Roadmap Forward

**WHARTON, TEXAS**

SPONSORED BY:

GULF COAST MEDICAL FOUNDATION

THE MARY LOUISE DOBSON FOUNDATION

WHARTON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

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**Urban Land** **Houston**  
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ULI's mission is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. ULI Houston carries out the ULI mission locally by sharing best practices, building consensus, and advancing solutions through educational programs and community outreach initiatives.

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The objective of ULI Houston's Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) program is to provide expert, multidisciplinary, and objective advice on land use and real estate issues facing public agencies and nonprofit organizations in the region. Drawing from its extensive membership base, ULI Houston conducts two-day panels offering objective and responsible advice to local decision-makers on a wide variety of land use and real estate issues, ranging from site-specific projects to public policy questions. The TAP program is intentionally flexible to provide a customized approach to specific land use and real estate issues. Learn more at <https://houston.uli.org/uli-in-action/advisory-services/>.

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Cover: Just Do It Now, a nonprofit organization providing after-school activities and other community support, occupies a former elementary school building in the West End. Source: ULI Houston

# Table of Contents

ULI HOUSTON PANEL	2
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
BACKGROUND & SCOPE	7
STUDY AREA	9
FINDINGS	14
RECOMMENDATIONS	21
CONCLUSION	24
PANELISTS' BIOGRAPHIES	25

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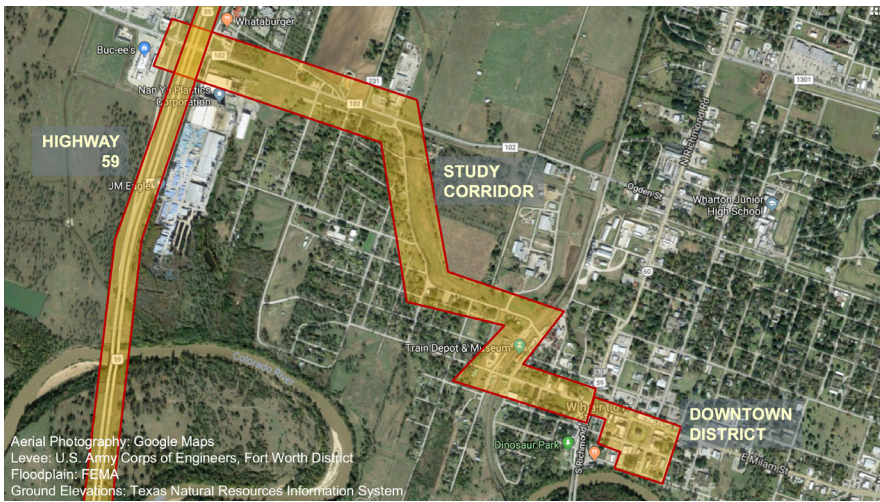
# Executive Summary

Located 50 miles southwest of Houston along the Colorado River and sitting in the midst of miles of bayou country, Wharton, Texas, has had more than its fair share of flooding. Specifically, the land nestled in a horseshoe of the river, an area that has developed into the “West End” neighborhood, floods and floods regularly. Speak with any West End resident about the neighborhood and the topic of flooding will arise, often accompanied by commentary about the family moving out for a time, staying with friends or other family, leaving for extended periods, or trying to return home. The flooding resulting from Hurricane Harvey in 2017 was a tipping-point for many. Nearly half of the approximately 400 homes in the West End were destroyed, damaged beyond repair, or sit vacant, awaiting significant repair. Yet the residents remain resilient – and this resilient community, an important part of the larger Wharton community, needs help.

At the request of the Gulf Coast Medical Foundation, the Mary Louise Dobson Foundation, and the Wharton Economic Development Corporation (collectively, the Sponsor), ULI Houston was asked to conduct a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) to study the Spanish Camp corridor (the Corridor), and deliver back to the Sponsor a set of recommendations for the revitalization of the study area.

Through careful study of briefing materials provided by the Sponsor, tours of the Corridor, the adjacent West End neighborhood, and surroundings, and in-depth discussions with City leaders and community stakeholders (residents, business and property owners, nonprofit directors, and faith leaders), the Panel arrived at a set of findings that may help guide the City in its redevelopment and investment endeavors. The findings specifically addressed:

- The anticipated reduced risk of flooding in the Corridor and West End neighborhood when the much-anticipated levee is constructed by the US Army Corps of Engineers;
- Steps that can be taken to meet the critical need for quality affordable housing and alternative housing types in the West End and surrounding neighborhoods;



Aerial image outlining the study corridor along FM 102 and Spanish Camp Road, connecting US 59 and downtown Wharton. Source: Google Earth with Panel notations.

- The need for placemaking along the Corridor, welcoming residents and visitors to Wharton, directing them to downtown, and encouraging them to linger along the Corridor and explore the neighborhood and anticipated recreation areas along the levee;
- A need to build community cohesion through intentional community development activities and expanded recreation opportunities in and around the study area; and
- A host of economic development opportunities along the Corridor, which can provide sought after convenience shopping, restaurant/take-out, and personal service options currently lacking in the neighborhood while also reviving vacant commercial space and supporting the strong entrepreneurial population in Wharton.

With the findings in hand, the Panel set forth the following recommendations designed to set Wharton on a path toward a healthy and practical revitalization of the West End neighborhood and Spanish Camp corridor.

**Invest in the West End.** The City, Wharton Economic Development Corporation and other stakeholders (collectively, Civic Stakeholders) are encouraged to concentrate its funding pursuits in support of development in and revival of the West End.

**Address Housing in the West End.** With approximately one-half of the neighborhood’s housing stock gone or beyond repair, the Civic Stakeholders should support renovations, build new housing on infill lots, support the development of multi-family and/or senior housing, and help residents address title and deed issues.

**Improve Infrastructure.** As one stalwart resident suggested, “Make it nice.” The streets, sidewalks, and street lighting require attention in the West End, and Spanish Camp Road will require infrastructure and placemaking improvements if it is to serve as the new entrance to Wharton.

**Inclusive Collaboration.** Intentional, inclusive collaboration and communication takes work, but Wharton is up to the task. With a strong network of nonprofit organizations, the Civic Stakeholders are encouraged to embrace and enhance the work of its nonprofit organizations to further assist and support its most vulnerable residents.

**Implementation Strategy.** Finally, the Civic Stakeholders are encouraged to explore available tools, such as the establishment of a Redevelopment Authority and Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone, and, if viable, begin the process immediately to gain access to the necessary development authority and a potential incremental funding source to assist these efforts. A taskforce to help see the work through, led by a paid community leader and champion, who is willing to commit to the work long-term, will help insure that the initiatives undertaken are successful.

TAP Panelists interview community residents who share their passion for Wharton and hopes for community improvement.  
Source: ULI Houston.





# Background & Scope

There is tremendous leadership in the City of Wharton that can be found in elected positions, staff leadership, philanthropic leadership, and resident leaders. By harnessing the passion community members feel for Wharton and identifying concrete and practical approaches to redevelopment and economic development, the City is positioned to not only recover from the effects of frequent flooding, but also begin to attract and retain former and potential new residents and business owners to this Texas town.

In turning to ULI Houston for assistance, the TAP Sponsors – the Gulf Coast Medical Foundation, the Mary Louise Dobson Foundation, and the Wharton Economic Development Corporation – identified the following key questions as critical to the redevelopment and growth of the Spanish Camp corridor and West End neighborhood:

1. Leveraging the Wharton West End Initiative's ongoing work and other efforts, what does the panel recommend as a balanced approach to accommodate residential, retail, institutional, and other uses within the targeted redevelopment area?
2. What potential barriers exist to achieving this balanced approach to development? How might these plans overcome such barriers?
3. What incentives exist that can catalyze successful development? What will it take to make sure this development is in alignment with those plans?
4. What additional funding sources and partnerships exist that can be levered to ensure these plans are realized?
5. Are there relevant examples or best practices (either regionally or nationally) that provide opportunities for guidance or lessons learned?

The Sponsors also provided the Panel with guidance as to their desired outcomes following the TAP, including:

- Greater consensus and alignment of stakeholders moving forward together to achieve desired improvements.

- An action plan to give leaders clear priorities to focus activity of consultants, partners, and other stakeholders.
- A platform for productive dialogue with public officials and private investors with a shared interest in effective utilization of resources and quality redevelopment of a flood-ravaged neighborhood.

The ULI Houston TAP, comprised of professionals with the expertise needed to answer the above questions, set out to explore the study area, understand the residential, commercial and financial environment, and apply their professional and market knowledge to help guide the Sponsor in actions to address development and redevelopment in the study area.



TAP Panelists in discussion of the Sponsors' questions and findings from stakeholder interviews. Source: ULI Houston.

# Study Area



The study area, outlined here in yellow, focuses on the Spanish Camp corridor leading from Interstate 59 into downtown Wharton. Source: Google Earth with Panel notations.

The West End neighborhood and the Spanish Camp corridor, located in the southwest section of Wharton, Texas, are notable in geography – close to the Colorado River to the south – and with ground elevations below the NFIP’s (National Flood Insurance Program) one-percent annual chance flood level. The West End is also notable in its rich community history – residents feel incredibly strong ties to the neighborhood and many live in homes that have been occupied by family members for generations.

Through the TAP process, particularly the stakeholder interviews, the Panel uncovered several challenges facing the West End and greater Wharton community, which should be considered as the City and residents further tackle redevelopment work. Similarly, the Panel also identified a host of assets in and around the West End and opportunities for the growth and renewal within the neighborhood and in Wharton more broadly.



A number of homes in the West End are vacant, awaiting repair following Hurricane Harvey. Source: ULI Houston.



Some homes have been raised temporarily, awaiting final repairs or foundation work until a levee is constructed south of the neighborhood along the Colorado River. Source: ULI Houston.



Ford Street, looking south from Spanish Camp Road, remains unpaved. Source: ULI Houston.

## CHALLENGES

Wharton is a city facing a series of challenges. Some of these challenges may require policy changes, others may require legal assistance, while still others may be addressed relatively easily. Each of the following challenges, however, require attention if the City is to grow and thrive.

Housing in Wharton is a particular issue. There is not enough housing to meet current demand, and a number of the houses that residents call home exist in a state that is generally considered substandard. Multi-family housing options are rare in the City, and there is demand for good quality, accessible housing for seniors.

For those who are ready to renovate their homes or build new ones, there is an issue of timing. With the prospect of a levee in the near future, new construction or renovations could proceed under the assumption that certain building guidelines will be in place when the land is protected by the levee. Should major flooding occur before levee completion, however, these investments and improvements could be damaged or destroyed. Because of this uncertainty, many are choosing to wait. That waiting game leaves homes in a poor state of repair and lots continue to sit vacant, awaiting construction – both of which combine to create a sense of desolation or abandonment when moving through the neighborhood and add to negative perceptions some Wharton residents have of the West End.

There are also residents in the West End who live in houses that have been home to their parents and their parents before them. In many instances, this transfer of ownership was conducted informally such that record title is unclear. Generations now occupy homes that belong to them, but they cannot provide the necessary documentation to prove ownership. This lack of clear title and deed creates roadblocks when seeking assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency following a flooding event or when seeking a loan to make other necessary improvements. Homeownership, the kind that can be leveraged in an upwardly-mobile community, is often the foundation for building generational wealth. Again, without the ability to legally prove home ownership, residents of the West End neighborhood are not able to build income in a manner that supports and improves their current situations, not to mention beginning to provide for future generations.

Timing may also be an issue for families who relocated after Hurricane Harvey – a number of Wharton residents left town, moving away when flooding from the hurricane forced them from their home. While the move may have begun as temporary, some soon found work in the new community and children were enrolled in the new community's school, further binding them to the new town. The declining population in Wharton is having a direct effect on the Wharton Independent School District. Declining enrollments lead to reduced state funding, which often leads to lower teacher and administrative salaries, thereby

making attracting and retaining high-quality teaching and administrative staff difficult. Those who have the resources to move in search of better educational opportunities for their children soon do so, leaving the Wharton Independent School District struggling to maintain enrollment.

Within the study area, the Spanish Camp Road corridor has been identified as a potential new 'front entrance' to Wharton from FM 102, embracing the fact that many use Spanish Camp as a 'cut-through' to downtown Wharton. Should the City wish to turn Spanish Camp into a true corridor, improvements will need to be considered, including traffic calming devices, alternative mobility options – sidewalks and bike lanes – and placemaking improvements to encourage businesses to locate along the Corridor, provide residents with greater incentive to use the Corridor, and help visitors recognize that they have arrived in Wharton.

Finally, it is worth noting that the City's communication with residents is a critical factor in City business and community relations. Additional efforts could be made to communicate more deeply and frequently with residents, particularly residents in the West End. Actively bringing residents into the conversation and a part of the solution will go a long way toward strengthening trust within the community.

**Corridor:** A corridor encompasses single or multiple transportation routes or facilities (such as thoroughfares, public transit, railroads, highways, bikeways, etc.), the adjacent land uses, and the connecting network of streets, and alignment of the roadway.<sup>1</sup>



Spanish Camp Road is a small, two-lane county road in need of significant upgrades if it is to become the new welcoming entrance to Wharton. Source: ULI Houston.

## ASSETS & OPPORTUNITIES

The City of Wharton has assets that can be leveraged when considering plans to renovate and develop land in the West End and support the economic activities of the City.

Within the West End proper, the City owns a number of pieces of property. These parcels are primarily zoned for single-family residential homes, but there also exists larger tracts that may be well-suited for multi-family housing options. These lots, particularly the City-owned single-family infill lots, present an immediate development opportunity and could begin to address the demand for housing in Wharton.

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Transportation Engineers.



The City of Wharton is home to residents who have pride in their town and who would like to contribute to its economic vitality. Source: ULI Houston.



Nonprofit organizations like Just Do It Now are committed to supporting and empowering Wharton's more vulnerable populations. Source: ULI Houston.

In addition to the housing demand, there is also demand for additional retail, particularly along Spanish Camp Road. Many of the businesses that once operated in the Corridor closed after Hurricane Harvey and have yet to return. Residents were faithful patrons of those now shuttered businesses and would like to once again see services – light shopping or convenience items, a barbershop, salon, or Bar-B-Que restaurant – return to the neighborhood. Several stakeholders indicated that there is a strong and enterprising business environment in Wharton and in the West End specifically, and these entrepreneurs, many currently operating out of their respective homes, could begin to fill commercial space as it becomes available.

Nonprofit and faith-based organizations have a strong presence in the Wharton and are an asset to the community. Just Do It Now is located in the heart of the West End neighborhood and provides much-needed after-school programming and support services. Churches in Wharton are strong anchors for the community, drawing former residents and extended families back to worship, facilitating support services (e.g. Share food pantry), and providing community leadership.

In the northeast corner of the study area, there is a 60-acre ranch that sits on higher ground, above the one-percent annual chance flood level. If the owner was interested in selling the land, the City would have the opportunity to open this largely greenfield site to residential and commercial development.

Harris Park, a large public park and walking track, sits at the southwest corner of the neighborhood. Located between the river and Just Do It Now, the park provides residents with a range of spaces to exercise and play as well as covered seating areas for those who would rather rest and relax. The City has a good opportunity to add to and connect its public spaces by leveraging current assets such as this.

The City also has a number of tools in its economic and community development toolbox, which serve as tremendous assets for the City. The work completed to-date on the Downtown Wharton Assessment Report, developed by the Texas Downtown Association, provides a solid roadmap for economic development in downtown and adjoining neighborhoods. The report's recommendations, such as establishing a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ), addressing permitting issues, supporting a business incubator, etc., are appropriate and should provide an effective platform for improving the downtown business and cultural environment. This is not a plan that should sit on the shelf – the City should make every effort to implement the report's recommendations with consideration as to how to incorporate the Corridor and neighborhood into those plans, e.g. extending the TIRZ into and through the West End. Similarly, local entities have pursued an American Planning Association grant to proactively address the recreational and connectivity opportunities that will be made available through the construction of the levee along the Colorado River.

Leveraging grant opportunities such as this could go a long way toward jump-starting recreational improvements for the City.

The levee, a flood mitigation project that will reduce flood risk to low-lying areas in Wharton, has finally received full funding from the US Army Corps of Engineers. The City has been pursuing such a levee for eighteen years and, during that time, set aside funds to serve as a potential match for federal funding. Following Hurricane Harvey, the \$13.9 billion allocated to fund flood mitigation projects nationwide resulted in an \$73.29 million appropriation for the Wharton component of the USACE's Lower Colorado River Basin Flood Damage Reduction Project. This will provide Wharton with levees, sumps, and channels, to be constructed in four phases. With the project fully-funded by the Corps, the City can shift the saved potential matching funds to other critical projects, such as those recommended in this report.

In addition to the business and financial assets of the Wharton community, the strength and resilience of the residents and their passion for their community is also a notable City asset. There is a rich culture and history in Wharton, evidenced by and celebrated during the annual Juneteenth Festival and other community gatherings. The small-town cohesion that the community enjoys can serve the City and the residents well. The personal passion Wharton residents feel for the community is also evident in the variety of the nonprofit organizations and religious institutions throughout the City. These nonprofit organizations readily step into the gap left between a family's capacity and the City's municipal resources. Food banks, after school learning opportunities, and substance abuse resources, led and staffed by Wharton residents, work hard to help community members get back on their feet, heal, and remain strong.

# Findings

Following a careful study of the progress made to-date, the challenges and opportunities facing the study area, and interviewing a significant number of stakeholders, five areas of focus came into sharp relief for the Panel. These areas need to be addressed and can serve as a starting point from which the community can continue to heal, grow, and thrive.

## FLOODING

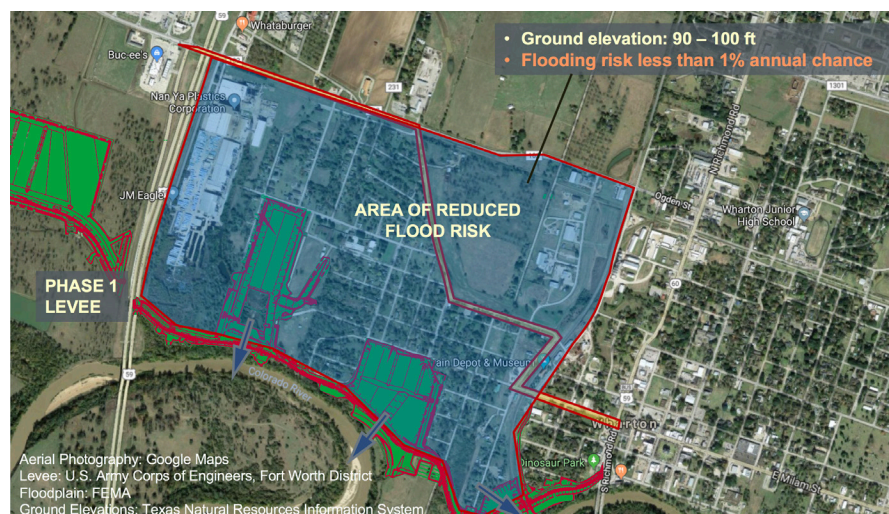
The impact of flooding in the West End neighborhood cannot be overstated. Today, much of the West End sits at a mere 90-100 feet above sea level. According to Federal Energy Management Agency National Flood Insurance rate maps, there is a one-percent annual chance of flood waters reaching elevations of 103-106 feet above sea level in this area. This means that much of the land in the West End neighborhood and most of the homes face a high risk of flooding every single year.

Since 2000, Wharton has been pursuing funding for a system of levees, channels and sumps, in different parts of the City to reduce flood risk. In July 2018, the project was fully funded. This will reduce the annual risk of flooding in the West End and other portions of the City to less-than one-percent.

*"It's the same tragedy in this community over and over."*

– Wharton resident

The construction of the levee along the southern edge of the study area will reduce the risk of flooding to less than one-percent annually in the blue-shaded West End neighborhood. The green shading represents the three sump areas. Source: Google Earth with Panel notations.





## HOUSING

Housing is a critical issue for Wharton and its residents. New housing is needed to replace homes that have been destroyed by floods, a significant number of homes are in need of repair, and incorporating different housing types, including multi-family housing would be a welcome addition to Wharton's landscape.

*"There is a housing shortage – if we had any new housing, there would be plenty of people who would like to move in."*

– Wharton resident

A significant number of Wharton residents currently may not qualify for federal aid due to a lack of clear title on the home in which they reside. Clearing title for residents remains a core issue, which, if resolved, would empower and enable residents to renovate privately-owned homes. The City could assist in this process by providing legal aid, case workers, and/or enlisting volunteers and title companies to help residents address title issues.

The City can also play a role in boosting the supply of new housing in Wharton. As the City owns a number of infill lots in the West End, it is encouraged to support the building of new, affordable housing on those lots as soon as practical. Much of the necessary infrastructure – water, sewer, electric – should already be in place and ready to connect to any new homes the City builds.

There is also a demand for additional housing options in Wharton beyond the typical single-family home. For seniors wishing to live more simply, without the maintenance required by a single-family home, multifamily senior housing could be an option. For potential senior housing developers, tax credit programs designed to assist with the development of this housing type remain some of the most accessible funding sources in the state.

Should the City wish to pursue FEMA grants to support the construction of additional housing in Wharton, the Panel has indicated a willingness to assist at the appropriate time.

## PLACEMAKING

"Make it nice." This was a direct quote from one of the resident stakeholders during the TAP interviews. Flooding has had an impact on the ability of residents to repair and maintain privately-owned homes, but the issue is actually much larger. The public infrastructure in the West End, particularly along the Corridor, is in need of repair and would benefit considerably from placemaking improvements. Placemaking is an effort to capitalize on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, with the intention of creating public spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well being.

<sup>2</sup> Hardy, Juanita. "Growing Value through Creative Placemaking." Urban Land, October 11, 2016.



Sample right-sized, elevated, and affordable housing that could serve as a model for new infill housing in the West End. Source: Truly Home.



Sample senior housing. Source: Insite Architecture, Inc.

## Placemaking:

Combining elements of the built environment in a compelling way that attracts people.<sup>2</sup>



Attractive wayfinding signage can help provide a sense of place in addition to helping residents and visitors navigate the area. Source: ULI Houston.

For the Corridor, elements of placemaking could include such improvements as:

- Installing sidewalks or multi-use trails parallel with the roadway;
- Improving the hardscape in and along the roadway and paying attention to opportunities to install landscaping along the Corridor to create a more inviting experience for those using the Corridor; and
- Installing lighting, wayfinding, and signage along the Corridor could greatly improve the ability of residents to actively and safely use the Corridor and allow visitors to navigate the West End more effectively.

Given the rich cultural heritage of the West End, the City would be wise to incorporate key elements singular to the West End in its placemaking improvements, thereby lifting up the neighborhood's heritage and educating other residents and visitors about the history of the area. It is time to recognize and celebrate the history of and pride in the neighborhood.

Along the Corridor, there are a few key intersections or nodes to which the City should pay particular attention.

1. The entrance to Wharton at FM 102. This intersection welcomes visitors to Wharton, exiting off US 59. While there is an attractive stone sign on the north side of the intersection, there may be an opportunity for a more visible or impactful entrance monument. (Located on the north side of FM 102, the monument is closer to those leaving town and is not in the natural view path of those entering town.)
2. Traveling east on FM 102, the intersection FM 102 and Spanish Camp Road presents the next opportunity for placemaking. If the City wishes to

Placemaking nodes are marked by blue circles and note key intersections. Source: Google Earth with Panel notations.



## Building Healthy Places

In the 2015 ULI publication, *Building Healthy Places Toolkit: Strategies for Enhancing Health in the Built Environment*,<sup>3</sup> report authors outline the key role that the built environment plays in combating risk factors for chronic disease. Further, the design of the built environment can work to 'enhance health and enhance and preserve value by meeting the public's growing desire for health-promoting places.' In order to assist developers in building the types of places that meet this demand and help enhance health, the report identifies 21 evidence-based recommendations for promoting health at the building or project scale.

1. Incorporate a mix of land uses
2. Design well-connected street networks at the human scale
3. Provide sidewalks and enticing, pedestrian-oriented streetscapes
4. Provide infrastructure to support biking
5. Design visible, enticing stairs to encourage everyday use
6. Install stair prompts and signage
7. Provide high-quality spaces for multigenerational play and recreation
8. Build play spaces for children
9. Accommodate a grocery store
10. Host a farmers market
11. Promote healthy food retail
12. Support on-site gardening and farming
13. Enhance access to drinking water
14. Ban smoking
15. Use materials and products that support healthy indoor air quality
16. Facilitate proper ventilation and airflow
17. Maximize indoor lighting quality
18. Minimize noise pollution
19. Increase access to nature
20. Facilitate social engagement
21. Adopt pet-friendly policies

encourage residents and visitors to use Spanish Camp as a more direct route to downtown Wharton, improvements and signage are needed at the intersection to draw traffic onto Spanish Camp Road.

3. On Spanish Camp Road, there are two opportunities for additional placemaking nodes at intersections that would provide direct access to the future recreation spaces (see Building Community Cohesion, page 18) created by the levee and sump configuration at (a) Martin Luther King Boulevard and (b) and Hughes Street. Each intersection provides direct access to future recreation spaces at sump green spaces and, as such, are deserving of the same placemaking attention as other key intersections along the Corridor.
4. At the intersection of Spanish Camp Road and Sunset, there is another opportunity for placemaking as the Corridor takes a turn to the south along Sunset, passing by the beautifully restored train depot and museum.
5. Lastly, one short block south, as the Corridor turns east onto Milam Street toward downtown, there is a compelling opportunity to address this intersection as well. This node, the train station, and node #4 would combine to create a really wonderful experience for residents, visitors, and, particularly, for pedestrians.

<sup>3</sup> <http://uli.org/wp-content/uploads/ULI-Documents/Building-Healthy-Places-Toolkit.pdf>.



Intersection of FM 102 and Spanish Camp Road. Source: ULI Houston.



Intersection of Spanish Camp Road and Hughes Street. Source: ULI Houston.



Old Fourth Ward Park, Atlanta, GA. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/laceybordeaux/>



Green stormwater infrastructure along Caney Creek can simultaneously address stormwater runoff and provide the community with recreation opportunities. Source: Google Earth with Panel notations.



Building recreational trails into the levee system will provide residents with additional venues to get out and explore and enjoy. Source: ULI Houston.

While residents of Wharton and certainly those in the West End are knowledgeable about the neighborhood’s layout, service opportunities (Just do It Now), and recreation spots (Harris Park), those visiting Wharton or passing through on Spanish Camp Road would benefit from assistance in discovering these amenities. Signage and wayfinding devices along the Corridor and inside the neighborhood will assist residents and visitors with navigating and discovering these neighborhood gems.

Placemaking may also come into play in the design of stormwater management infrastructure. A significant number of communities across the U.S. face similar challenges in stormwater management. In meeting this challenge, there is an opportunity to leverage the infrastructure investments in a manner that turns a levee into a trail and a sump into a park. In the 2018 ULI publication, *Ten Principles for Building Resilience*,<sup>4</sup> report authors discuss the opportunity to ‘maximize co-benefits’ of resilient infrastructure projects: risk reduction initiatives and infrastructure can also include elements that enhance quality of life and economic development potential. For an example of a best practice, turning stormwater management into an amenity and incorporating placemaking, Wharton leadership could turn to the Old Fourth Ward Park in East Atlanta for inspiration. This East Atlanta Park adeptly serves two critical functions for the community – providing significant retention and management of stormwater and providing the community with much-needed and well-loved gathering space for formal and informal events alike.

## BUILDING COMMUNITY COHESION

Given the nature and configuration of the levee project, the City has a unique opportunity to capitalize on several initiatives around which to build community connections and cohesion.

Throughout the stakeholder interviews, Wharton residents repeated a desire for more recreation facilities and opportunities for ‘something to do.’ Building trails and walkways along the levee and connecting those pathways to the rest of the City can help further connect the community, literally and figuratively, and provide residents with additional opportunities to get outside, interact with one another, connect to and access other recreation around the City, and enjoy exercise. The retention areas in the two sump locations within the West End also provide a resilient, dual-purpose proposition – serving as critical drainage fields but also serving as large gathering spaces for outdoor concerts, festivals, and activities. This dual-purpose design addresses a number of the ten principles in the *Ten Principles for Building Resilience* report, namely promoting equity, leveraging community assets, designing with natural systems, and maximizing co-benefits. The trails and recreational spaces further support the well-being of community residents and encourage former residents to return to the neighborhood.

<sup>4</sup> [https://americas.uli.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/125/ULI-Documents/10P\\_BuildingResilience.pdf](https://americas.uli.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/125/ULI-Documents/10P_BuildingResilience.pdf).

These additional recreational opportunities support the community's goal of having more activities available to West End and Wharton residents. This increased activity can also help support Wharton's economic development efforts. As Wharton improves the quality of life for its residents, not only do the current residents benefit, but it also becomes more attractive to potential residents and new businesses.

Recreational facilities, athletic programming, and spaces for events and entertainment can collectively begin to fill the activity gap in Wharton. While it may be difficult to attract a movie theater operator to open a facility in Wharton, the sump locations, by their very nature wide open and green, may present the perfect setting for a "Screen on the Green" option.

Along Spanish Camp Road, there is an opportunity to incorporate green stormwater infrastructure parallel to the road and along Caney Creek. Green stormwater infrastructure can address stormwater mitigation in a manner that is efficient, effective, and can be co-located with recreational facilities such as hiking and biking trails. Infrastructure improvements of this nature also employ resilience principles detailed in the *Ten Principles* report, specifically designing with natural systems and maximizing co-benefits. *Harvesting the Value of Water*,<sup>5</sup> a 2017 ULI publication, further defines green infrastructure, includes case studies of green stormwater management, and provides insights into the stormwater policy landscape. Utilizing green stormwater infrastructure along Caney Creek could achieve multi-objective benefits to Wharton and the West End such as enhanced recreation along the greenway and more effective and sustainable stormwater management for the Corridor.

Community improvements of this nature will benefit not only the West End and the study corridor but the larger Wharton community as a whole in terms of enhancing residents' quality of life, improving stormwater management, and providing a strong foundation for increased economic development. It is important to note, however, that these facilities will require ongoing maintenance, operational support, and programming. While the City will play a key role, other quasi-public agencies and community groups could be tapped or encouraged to help identify further recreational opportunities and maintenance partnerships into the future.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Nearly all of the businesses in the West End have closed. Residents – adults and children alike – can be seen crossing FM 102 to reach a store. These crossings frequently take place at points which are efficient yet do not currently include a stop light or pedestrian crossing. During the stakeholder interviews, residents expressed a strong desire to shop, buy lunch, or get a haircut within the neighborhood or along the Corridor. None of these opportunities exist in the West End today.

<sup>5</sup> <https://americas.uli.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/125/ULI-Documents/HarvestingtheValueofWater.pdf>.



Trails along the levee can also be used by residents to walk to and from destinations. Source: Houston Public Media.



Movie screens can be set up in wide open park spaces, transforming empty grassy spaces into community gathering venues.



The shuttered West End Grocery (top) could be renovated and turned into a small convenience grocer once again (bottom). Source: ULI Houston; Waterman Steel Real Estate Advisors.

By focusing first on reusing existing commercial structures, the City could support additional commercial and economic development in the West End and provide entrepreneurs and small business owners with much-needed space in which to grow their business operations affordably.

- Wharton’s grocery needs are largely met by HEB and Walmart, yet with some assistance from the City, Chamber of Commerce, or a local community organization, a small grocer could make use of the vacant West End Grocery or one of the other vacant commercial buildings along Spanish Camp and provide simple convenience items or locally grown produce to the neighborhood.
- Many residents expressed a desire for another restaurant in Wharton, and a Bar-B-Que restaurant would fit nicely in another of the small commercial spaces along the Corridor.
- There is also a need for small business space and business incubator spaces that could be leased affordably and allow Wharton’s entrepreneurs to grow their businesses locally.

There are tools available to help the City begin to address these economic development and community development initiatives, most notably a Redevelopment Authority and Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone. If viable for this area, a Redevelopment Authority for the West End neighborhood could focus its efforts on just this area. The City should also explore the possibility of creating a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone or extending the TIRZ proposed by the Downtown Wharton Assessment Report to include the West End in order to assist with the financing of the initiatives presented by the Panel.

# Recommendations

The revitalization of the West End neighborhood and Spanish Camp corridor is no small task. Yet, at this point in time, with a strong and committed municipal leadership, dedicated philanthropic organizations, concerned residents, and a fully-funded flood risk reduction project on the horizon, Wharton is poised to step into this challenge fully, meeting the needs of the community where they are and collectively setting Wharton on a path of growth and success. To that end, the Panel recommends that the Civic Stakeholders focus on the following five recommendations.

## **INVEST IN THE WEST END**

The West End can no longer stand alone. The resources needed to build and repair housing within the neighborhood are beyond the capacity of the remaining residents. The Civic Stakeholders are encouraged to leverage now available flood risk reduction project matching funds to pursue and serve as match funding for even more funding from state and federal sources to support the renovation and construction of homes and/or other redevelopment efforts in the West End. This important and valuable combination of funds and the value of land in the West End used for housing should be captured for match purposes and discussed with potential state and federal grantors. This strong and clear commitment of public funding may also catalyze additional private investment by community leaders and/or philanthropic/foundation funders. This is a long-term investment in and commitment to rebuilding this historic and resilient neighborhood, but it is an investment that is critical to the West End and supportive of the greater Wharton community.

## **ADDRESS HOUSING IN THE WEST END**

With approximately one-half of the neighborhood's housing stock either in need of considerable repair or missing altogether (torn down and awaiting rebuilding), the Civic Stakeholders are encouraged to step in quickly and employ a two-step process for supporting the housing needs in the West End. In the first step, to be taken immediately, the City should employ tools to support the stabilization and renovation by homeowners of the existing



Investments in public amenities such as the train depot, its lighting, and sidewalks can serve as touchstones for additional development and investment in the West End. Source: ULI Houston.



Harris Park provides recreational opportunities for Wharton and West End residents. Build on this investment by seeking input from the community on new or different park amenities. Source: ULI Houston.

homes that the City deems eligible for repair. This may also include elevation improvements to individual homes. Once the levees are in place, the Civic Stakeholders are encouraged to take the second step to address the shortage of housing and affordable housing in Wharton. Given the City's ownership of a number of infill lots in the West End, the Panel recommends the Civic Stakeholders build infill housing on those municipally-owned lots, again moving on this work as quickly as practical once the levee is complete. In the process of bringing new housing to Wharton, the City is also encouraged to think beyond just single-family homes and support the development of a mix of housing, including multi-family and senior housing. While this work may best be targeted for a time after the levee is built, planning work need not wait. Lastly, the City can leverage state funding opportunities, via various tax credit programs, to assist in funding these housing initiatives.

## IMPROVE INFRASTRUCTURE

As one stalwart resident suggested, "Make it nice." The streets of the West End neighborhood need attention. Much of the neighborhood does not have sidewalks, which means children must cross lawns or walk in the street to/from Harris Park or Just Do It Now. While some lighting has been installed in the neighborhood, particularly in Harris Park, the rest of the neighborhood and Spanish Camp Road remains dark or only partially lit. Spanish Camp Road, too, requires attention if it is to become a more welcoming entrance to downtown Wharton. Sidewalks, streetscaping, lighting, and traffic calming devices would be welcome additions to the Corridor, encouraging safe and efficient passage by automobiles, pedestrians, and bicyclists. In the process of designing these improvements, the Panel suggests referencing the *Ten Principles for Building Health Places Toolkit* once again for guidance and best practices. These improvements not only enhance the day-to-day experience of Wharton and West End residents, but also signal to the community the City's commitment to the neighborhood and, again, may also serve to catalyze private investment in the West End.

## INCLUSIVE COLLABORATION

Wharton is a tightly-knit community of approximately 9,000 residents, and it was clear through the course of the stakeholder interviews that Wharton is viewed through a variety of different lenses by its residents. Through improved communication between and among residents and the City and intentional, thoughtful, and inclusive collaboration, these varying Wharton experiences may be more fully understood and valued.

Opportunities exist to build better points of connection and communication among the City's leaders, residents, and other stakeholders. By way of example, municipal communication tools, such as the City's service request process, may be in need of some updating to move from a paper/print-out process to



something more accessible to a broader population, such as a phone app or text-request option. Through its 311 program, Houston employs an app to encourage residents to report potholes using a Google map via the app. The City is encouraged to make sure all voices are heard and that everyone has an opportunity to understand what is taking place in their community.

Effective, inclusive collaboration is not easy, yet through a number of channels, the City can strengthen its relationship with residents and help make sure all view points are heard and ideas are respected. The community's strong network of nonprofit organizations, led and staffed by residents committed to the community and its wellbeing, may be a good place to start on the path toward more inclusive collaboration. The City may wish to further embrace and enhance the work of the nonprofit organizations in Wharton that step into the gap and help care for and communicate with community members.

## IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

Finally, these recommendations and initiatives discussed herein require resources. The City should explore the possibility of establishing a new or extending an existing Redevelopment Authority and/or Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone to gain access to funding sources and governance structures (e.g. providing mechanisms for buying and holding land as needed) that will assist with the redevelopment effort. Human resources are also needed. The Panel recommends the formation of a taskforce – smaller than the West End Initiative board and not more than seven individuals – to guide the implementation of these recommendations. Leadership resources are also needed. A champion, a full-time paid community leader, is needed to see this long-term work through. These strategies will help insure that the initiatives the City undertakes to launch economic development efforts along the Spanish Camp Road corridor and build/rebuild housing in the West End neighborhood are and remain successful.



The Wharton County courthouse is as a shining example of the beauty of Wharton's past. The West End can be the shining example of Wharton's future. Source: ULI Houston.

# Conclusion

The leadership of Wharton, Texas, is on the right path. With a number of initiatives currently underway and a fully-funded levee project set to break ground, the City is poised to rebound solidly from the effects of Hurricane Harvey in 2017. For this rebound to be effective, in order for it to benefit Wharton holistically, the City needs to take extra care with the West End neighborhood.

Investment is needed in the West End. With the support of and assistance from the City, the neighborhood can invest in itself – residents can renovate or rebuild homes, entrepreneurs can launch businesses in new commercial space, and nonprofit organizations, led and staffed by Wharton residents, can continue to pour themselves into the people, helping them to further heal, grow, and thrive.

Housing stands out as a critical need for Wharton. Housing within the West End, in particular, has reached a tipping point. Focus should turn immediately to building new affordable housing on infill lots, supporting renovation work on existing structures, and exploring multi-family options.

A rebounding neighborhood will also support the growth and development of Spanish Camp Road as a community corridor. Bringing attention to the Corridor via infrastructure improvements and placemaking will support the City's economic development goals of providing a more direct path to downtown and reviving the vacant commercial spaces that once thrived along Spanish Camp Road.

## **NEXT STEPS, NEAR-TERM**

- Explore the financing tools available to the City such as a Redevelopment Authority and Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone.
- Form a taskforce to lead the implementation of this report's recommendations, and hire a full-time champion to guide the work.
- Support the stabilization and renovation of existing homes in the West End.
- Leverage existing funds as match for state and federal grants for housing.

- Seek partners to help residents clear title on property.
- Implement a smart phone app for communication between City departments and residents.
- Strengthen connections and communications with residents, community organizations, and nonprofits to foster greater and more inclusive collaboration.
- Reopen the West End Grocery, in partnership with local business groups or other local partners, to provide convenience items to the West End.
- Reuse existing commercial structures to support additional commercial and economic development in the West End.
- ‘Make it nice.’ Install sidewalks, streetscaping, lighting, signage, and traffic calming devices along Spanish Camp Road, and specifically begin placemaking improvements to key nodes along Spanish Camp Road.
- Begin planning needed to attract multi-family and/or senior housing developers to Wharton and the West End.
- Begin planning for and designing co-beneficial uses for the stormwater management infrastructure that will be installed with the levee project, e.g. walking and biking trails along the levee and recreation in the sump areas.
- Explore community partnerships to identify further recreational opportunities, programming of public spaces, and maintenance partnerships in the future.

### **NEXT STEPS, LONG-TERM (AFTER LEVEE COMPLETION)**

- Work with development partners to build new housing and affordable housing, on the City-owned infill lots in the West End.
- Work with development partners to build new, affordable senior housing.
- Install sidewalks, streetscaping, and lighting in the interior streets of West End neighborhood south of Spanish Camp Road.
- Work with nonprofit and/or education partners to build an early childhood education center.

In all of these efforts, intentional and inclusive collaboration is required. Setting a new path for the neighborhood should be a collaborative endeavor, led by the community, supported by the City, and intended for all.

# Panelists Biographies



Pictured left to right: David Kim, Executive Director, ULI Houston; TAP Panel: Michael Bloom, Stan Wall, Eta Paransky, Steve Spillette, Andre Brumfield, Diane Schenke, Lance Gillam

## Diane Schenke, TAP Chair

Retired, Most Recently President, Greater East End Management District

Diane is the recently retired President of the Greater East End Management District, serving in that role from June 2009-June 2017. She is also a long time East End resident and advocate, the former President and Executive Director of The Park People, the Gulf Coast Program Manager for The Nature Conservancy and the Executive Director of The Grand Parkway Association. Before working for governmental and nonprofit entities, Diane worked as an environmental lawyer for law firms and corporations. Diane brought all of these perspectives to her position as President of the Greater East End Management District. During Diane's eight years of service, the GEEMD was awarded more than \$32 million in grant funding to support capital improvement projects throughout the community. Those projects include the award-winning Navigation Esplanade as well as pedestrian-friendly improvements to complement the East End METRO Rail and surrounding developments. These projects were grounded in strong community input on the vision for this area through the Livable Centers process. Diane also led efforts by other management districts and community development corporations to focus attention on redeveloping the near downtown neighborhoods, all grounded in a community visioning and planning process. These underserved neighborhoods could provide newly developed commercial and residential uses for all income levels. Diane was instrumental in organizing a major ULI study of the East End.

## Andre Brumfield, TAP Co-Chair

Urban Strategies & Design Leader, Principal, Gensler

Andre is an Urban Strategies & Design Leader in Gensler's Chicago office. He is focused on and committed to revitalizing and repositioning urban environments through urban design, master planning and architecture. Andre's broad career experience includes: redevelopment in emerging urban districts; neighborhood and community revitalization; high-density, urban-infill; city-wide master planning; corporate campuses; and industrial centers. He has extensive experience in mixed-income housing and has crafted visionary, yet realistic revitalization plans that have been implemented in economically challenged urban areas. A true urban strategist, Andre has worked with multiple public agencies, private sector clients and non-profit organizations to develop master plans that shape the future of neighborhoods and cities. He is an active member of the Urban Land Institute, working with the National League of Cities' Rose Center for Public Leadership in Land Use, and as the Assistant Chair of the Urban Land Institute Urban Revitalization Council (Blue Flight).

## Michael F. Bloom P.E.

Department Manager, Sustainability Practice, R.G. Miller Engineers

Michael directs the Sustainability Practice for R. G. Miller Engineers, Inc., based in Houston, Texas. He plans and designs natural drainage systems that increase operating income, reduce detention requirements, increase developable land, and provide an anchor for natural amenities, such as trail systems, that improve health outcomes and social connectedness. He recently served as an expert contributor to and reviewer of the recently released Urban Land Institute (ULI) report *Harvesting the Value of Water: Stormwater, Green Infrastructure, and Real Estate* (May 2017). Michael provides cost-effective compliance assistance services to clients subject to Clean Water Act regulations addressing both wetland loss and pollution. Michael plans and designs stormwater management and floodplain management systems, rainwater harvesting systems, water reuse systems, and water conservation programs. He develops and implements industrial and municipal stormwater pollution management programs. Michael is the current chair of the Houston Chapter of the Environment & Water Resources Institute of the American Society of Civil Engineers. Michael currently serves on the Public Policy Committee of the ULI Houston District Council and is a member of ULI's National Community Development Council (Black Flight). He serves as an appointed member of the Houston-Galveston Area Council's Bacteria Implementation Group, a stakeholder group working to improve bayou health in the region. Michael is a member of the Steering Committee of the Houston Land and Water Sustainability Forum, which focuses on the use of natural drainage systems in land development. Michael is the author of [riparianhouston.com](http://riparianhouston.com), a blog with various articles on drainage, land development, and sustainability. Michael is a Registered Professional Engineer in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Virginia. He is an Envision Sustainability

Professional, a Certified Floodplain Manager, and a Board Certified Environmental Engineer. Michael holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering from Syracuse University (1989) and a Master of Science degree in Environmental Engineering from Drexel University (1994).

## Lance Gilliam

Partner, Waterman Steele Real Estate Advisors

Lance has spent most of his career focused on retail user transactions, including tenant representation and project development. He has represented national, regional and local restaurateurs and retailers throughout a broad market area including Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and most of the southeastern and western United States. He has shared responsibility for leasing numerous significant retail projects in Houston, Texas. Successes include Town & Country Village, one of the country's first lifestyle shopping centers, Washington Heights, a transformative urban infill redevelopment, and Copperwood Village, The Shops at Bella Terra, The Shops at Riverstone and Silverlake Village-all community shopping centers closely associated with master planned communities. Having shared responsibility for the opening of more than seventy grocery stores in the Houston metropolitan area, Lance has advised the City of Houston as it has created and implemented successful economic development programs to incentive grocers to construct stores in so-called food deserts where lower-income families often times have limited access to fresh foods.

## Eta Paransky

Retired, Most Recently Assistant Director, Multifamily Division, Housing and Community Development, City of Houston

Eta Paransky recently retired from the City of Houston as Assistant Director of the Housing and Community Development Department, responsible for all multifamily housing activities. During her tenure, she oversaw the city's investment of \$236 million of loans and grants in 44 completed or under-construction multifamily communities yielding 9,000 new or rehabbed units with a total investment of \$960 million. Prior to working in the public sector, Eta worked for Century and Flagship. Today, Eta runs her consulting firm, Eta Paransky LLC. She attended Barnard College and earned Master of Business Administration from Harvard University.

## Steve Spillette

President, CDS Community Development Strategies, Houston

Steve Spillette is an Urban Development Strategist with diverse experience in real estate and urban planning. A native Houstonian, Steve joined the San Francisco office of the national real estate consulting firm Economics Research Associates after completing his undergraduate degree at Stanford. He assisted in performing a variety of market studies and financial pro-forma analyses for both private and public clients related to single family and multifamily residential, retail,

office, industrial, hotel, meeting facilities, and golf, as well as significant public sector studies related to major investments and strategic initiatives. He focused on transportation and land use issues in both academic and professional work while attending the Community and Regional Planning program at the University of California at Berkeley. Upon his return to Houston, Mr. Spillette joined the Uptown Houston Improvement District as Director of Planning and Development. He conducted the District's economic research pertaining to office, retail, hotel, and residential markets plus public tax revenue generation, packaging his analysis in District marketing and public information documents. He also was responsible for creating and managing the District's annual operating budget and monitoring District property values for revenue forecasting purposes. He was instrumental in creating the planning documents leading to the creation of the Uptown Houston Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone. Steve earned a Bachelor of Science, Quantitative Economics and Applied Earth Sciences from Stanford University, a Master of City and Regional Planning from University of California Berkeley, 1995 and a Master of Business Administration from Texas A&M.

## Stan Wall

Partner, HR&A Advisors

Stan Wall joined HR&A as a Partner in the Washington D.C. office in August 2015 after holding several senior positions in the mid-Atlantic region. In his previous posts, Stan worked across the entire real estate project lifecycle including strategy, planning, finance, development, and construction. Prior to joining HR&A, Stan was the Director of Real Estate and Station Planning at the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), the second busiest transit system in the United States. In this role, he reinvigorated the agency's transit oriented development (TOD) program by helping them leverage their transit infrastructure to support housing and economic development. In the past three years, Stan helped to secure Board approval to pursue 16 new TOD projects. Stan is also owner and founder of Wall Development Group, a Washington, D.C. based development firm focused on sustainable development, urban infill, and community-oriented projects. With Wall Development, Stan led a multi-disciplinary team to advise the District of Columbia on a development strategy for the Poplar Point Redevelopment project – a 110-acre site directly across the Anacostia River from the Nationals stadium and the Capitol Riverfront area. Previously Stan worked with Arup, an international firm of designers, planners, engineers, consultants and technical specialists with a focus on innovative projects in Washington D.C. Stan also worked for a number of years at Jones Lang LaSalle (JLL) in Washington D.C. as a Vice President in the firm's public institutions practice. Stan is a registered Professional Engineer and began his career in Lend Lease's construction management group, where he was an on-site project engineer focusing on healthcare projects in the Washington-Baltimore region. Stan received a Master of Business Administration in Finance and Real Estate from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and a Bachelor of Arts in Architectural Engineering from Pennsylvania State University.



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