



Louisiana

# SANKOFA AND THE LOWER NINTH WARD

## A Healthier Community for Generations to Come



Technical Assistance Panel Report | MARCH 23–24, 2023  
New Orleans, Louisiana

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ON THE COVER: The St. Claude commercial corridor. (ULI)



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The Urban Land Institute is a global, member-driven organization comprising more than 45,000 real estate and urban development professionals dedicated to advancing the Institute's mission of providing leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide.

ULI's interdisciplinary membership represents all aspects of the industry, including developers, property owners, investors, architects, urban planners, public officials, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, and academics. Established in 1936, the Institute has a presence in the Americas, Europe, and the Asia Pacific region, with members in 80 countries.

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## About Sankofa Community Development Corporation

Founded in July of 2008, the Sankofa Community Development Corporation works to build healthier communities for generations to come and envisions a world where health and well-being are accessible to all. Sankofa is building toward a New Orleans Ninth Ward that is a wholly self-sustaining, viable community that honors its cultural legacies with intergenerational continuity and resources that support everyone's right to a healthy quality of life. The organization works under the following guiding values: community as an agent of transformation; equity of access to resources and healthy outcomes; joy in programming, interactions with others, and inherent in healthy lifestyles; empowerment of individuals to enable self-determination; accountability among Sankofa staff and to all those in the community; and knowledge of best practices, both through industry research and tapping into deep community knowledge.

## About ULI Louisiana

ULI Louisiana, a District Council of the Urban Land Institute, has 213 members statewide. ULI is a nonprofit research and education organization established in 1936 with more than 30,000 international members. ULI's mission is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and to create and sustain thriving communities worldwide. ULI shares best practices through both practical professional development education programs and ULI's research and publications. The organization sets the standard for high quality information on urban planning, real estate development, growth and land use.

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## About the Urban Resilience Program

ULI's Urban Resilience Program provides ULI members, the public, and communities across the United States with information on how to be more resilient in the face of climate change and other environmental vulnerabilities. The program seeks to provide technical assistance, advance knowledge, and catalyze the adoption of transformative practices for real estate and land use policy, building from the knowledge of ULI members.

## About the Resilient Land Use Cohort

Preparing communities for the impacts of climate change is a key aspect of ULI's mission to shape the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide. ULI's Urban Resilience program is proud to host the Resilient Land Use Cohort (RLUC), a technical assistance, learning, and network building opportunity for US district councils.

Each Council participating in the Resilient Land Use Cohort hosts a Technical Assistance or Advisory Services Panel or workshop focused on enhancing climate resilience through planning, zoning, land use, and development strategy, as well as addressing affordable housing, community development, and infrastructure planning.

RLUC has brought together ULI member leaders and community stakeholders to identify strategies to be more resilient in the face of climate change and other vulnerabilities, including floods, extreme storms, drought, wildfire, and extreme heat, as well as the related social, environmental, and economic impacts.

RLUC's goal is to inspire implementable action towards climate adaptation and resilience in cities across the U.S., and to share emerging and best practices in climate resilient land use and related learnings to their communities and the broader ULI membership.

## ULI Advisory Services: District Council Programs

The goal of the ULI Advisory Services program is to bring the finest expertise in the real estate field to bear on complex land use planning and development projects, programs, and policies. Drawing from its local membership base, ULI Louisiana conducts two-day TAPs 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. In fulfillment of ULI's mission, this TAP report is intended to provide objective advice that will promote the responsible use of land to enhance the environment.

An additional local offering is the project analysis forum, which offers a shorter format for district councils to employ local member expertise to address regional land use challenges. Panelists are land use professionals uniquely positioned to address the specific challenges at hand, and provide in-depth, project-specific, and pragmatic recommendations. The intimate, conversational format encourages creative thinking and problem solving between the panel and the sponsor.

Learn more at [louisiana.uli.org](https://louisiana.uli.org).

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Rashida Ferdinand, Executive Director, Sankofa Community Development Corporation.



Housing conditions in the Lower Ninth Ward vary wildly from neatly maintained, as seen in this home along Tricou Street, to needing significant repair.

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The Fresh Stop Market, a commercial endeavor by Sankofa Community Development Corporation, is under construction and will soon provide the neighborhood with proximate, if somewhat limited, grocery access.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The people of the Lower Ninth Ward are strongly rooted in their community. They are resilient, proud of their community, and eager to continue to rebuild the neighborhood into a community that honors its past while looking toward the future. Sankofa Community Development Corporation (Sankofa CDC or the CDC), actively supporting community members' health and wellbeing in the neighborhood since 2008, is looking to the future, too, with an eye toward expanding its services to better support community development, climate resilience, and economic vitality across the Lower Ninth Ward.

Sankofa CDC, in partnership with the Urban Land Institute Louisiana District Council (ULI Louisiana), sought expert guidance on options for a path forward for the community that would support its continued revitalization. With a focus on equitable, resilient, and environmental-justice oriented outcomes, the CDC sought to identify opportunities to reduce vacancy and blight, catalyze development in key corridors, and incorporate resilience throughout the Lower Ninth Ward (LNW). With support from ULI's national Resilient Land Use Cohort and funding through the ULI Foundation from JPMorgan Chase, ULI Louisiana convened a technical assistance panel (TAP) to study the challenges and opportunities at hand. The TAP panel, comprised of ULI members with expertise in the areas of development, planning, finance, economic development, and climate resilience, met with community and institutional stakeholders, toured the area, and ultimately delivered a set of recommendations the CDC can put into action as it pursues its goals for the Lower Ninth Ward.

The work underway in the neighborhood and the plans and funding on the horizon for the region led the TAP panel to identify four primary areas of focus for Sankofa's work: quality-of-life, housing, commercial corridors, and celebrating and amplifying the area's ecological resources.

## Quality of Life

So much of what community stakeholders wish to see in the Lower Ninth Ward centers around basic quality-of-life matters that remain unaddressed. Vacancy and blight are scattered across the neighborhood, including litter, areas

that are prone to illegal dumping, and properties that are becoming dangerous to neighbors. Emergency services and efficient response from police and fire departments are also a challenge, with response times regularly measured in hours, not minutes.

While some of these issues are outside the control of the CDC, Sankofa leadership can influence those who are in charge of these quality-of-life matters by **setting a standing meeting with the City of New Orleans** (the city) to create space for productive and timely conversations around these public safety concerns.

Safety issues also extend to Florida Avenue. Bordered by the Sankofa Wetland Park on the north and a smattering of mostly residential buildings on the south, **Florida Avenue should be made a Complete Street**, prioritizing safety for all modes of transportation with an emphasis on pedestrians and bicyclists.

The **public perception** of the quality of life in the Lower Ninth Ward is hampered by an online reputation that still centers on the devastation from Hurricane Katrina. A professional public relations and messaging campaign can provide positive stories from the neighborhood today and begin to turn the reputational tide.

## Housing

As one stakeholder noted, the Lower Ninth Ward means "family." Sankofa CDC can play a pivotal role in supporting neighbors, both new and in place, in their homeownership journey.

Sankofa can lead **community retention planning** efforts designed to engage with community members who already call the LNW home, particularly vulnerable populations, to establish anti-displacement strategies and tools.

The CDC can impact single-family residential development by **identifying concentrations of publicly owned land and acquiring and assembling** these parcels for redevelopment by trusted partners.

The Lower Ninth Ward has a history of single-family homeownership, and affordability is key. By **passing land use policies** to limit large concentrations of rental units and encouraging owner-occupied and scattered-site doubles as well as senior housing, residents can continue to enjoy the neighborhood's predominately single-family landscape well into the future.

Not every lot will return to residential use, and **embracing alternatives such as edible garden use and open space** is encouraged. From a stormwater management and ecological standpoint, the preservation of some of these open parcels will also support the climate resilience of the LNW.

Residents seeking to return to the LNW may need financial support to restore their home. Sankofa can support these residents by **sharing information about housing finance programs** at the local and state levels.

## Commercial Corridors

The saying "retail follows rooftops" applies here, too, and retail establishments need proximate housing to be viable. Initial focus should be at the intersections of St. Claude at the bridge and St. Claude and Fats Domino Avenue. This work takes time and patience—and will be years (likely up to ten years) in the making.

The CDC is encouraged to help St. Claude Main Street **conduct a commercial/retail survey** in the area, which should result in a business inventory and could support a future leasing plan. The survey can also identify economic drivers for area businesses, and the CDC can help spread information about available incentives.

**Zoning along St. Claude may need to be updated** to support the economic goals of the corridor. An overlay district, differentiating commercial land types, can also

help focus recruitment efforts and help sustain existing businesses.

The CDC should **convene area resources**, namely realtors and commercial brokers, to spark interest in the neighborhood's commercial corridors. Capacity building, of existing businesses and through a business incubator, can help support the health of corridor businesses, and a commercial community land trust may also be worth exploring as a tool for spurring commercial development.

**New gateway signage, branding, and corridor infrastructure** can help welcome residents and visitors to the Lower Ninth Ward and support commerce in the area.

## Ecosystem Restoration & Resilience

The neighborhood's willingness to embrace climate and energy resilience is inspiring. Residents understand the need for resilience measures and are embracing the natural beauty and benefits that their unique ecosystem brings. The actual flood risk in the LNW is minimal and generally confined to the northern edge of the neighborhood. To the north, the Sankofa Wetland Park and Nature Trail provides both recreation and stormwater management for the community; it has also become a world-renowned ecopark. **Continued support and expansion of the park is strongly encouraged.**

The community is embracing solar installations for power generation as needed. **Community solar** and creating small micro-grids in the neighborhood would add additional capacity and help the community maintain power during periods of high demand load, such as during heat waves. Community solar could also provide some revenue generation if excess power is sent back to the larger grid.

## Partnerships and Next Steps

The CDC has carefully earned its reputation as a trusted partner to the community, and partners will be key in the work outlined in this report. Building on this foundation, the CDC can expand its services as it finds capacity, but it is also encouraged to seek other partners with expertise in discrete areas. Sankofa CDC does not need to do everything, but as a leader in the community, it should play an active role in curating and inviting other organizations to help support the neighborhood.

# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Established in 2008 with a focus on comprehensive community health, Sankofa Community Development Corporation (CDC) in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward is a force for good in the community, working tirelessly to improve the health and wellbeing of the neighborhood's residents. Today, recognizing the intersections between community development and economic development with resident health and wellbeing, Sankofa CDC is expanding its work to also support residents in these more development-focused pursuits. The CDC seeks to positively impact community health and wellbeing by addressing the community's vacancy, blight, trust and public safety issues, and challenges around securing political interest and investment. Through an opportunity to partner with ULI Louisiana on a technical assistance panel, the CDC is exploring how it can best marshal its resources to tackle these important built-environment challenges.

With a focus on community and economic development issues like blight and vacancy, and with an eye toward climate and community resilience, ULI Louisiana convened a panel of experts to help the CDC identify specific steps it can take to lead or help advance work in the Lower Ninth

Ward. The TAP, supported by ULI's Resilient Land Use Cohort, convened a panel of experts in the fields of finance, development, planning, environmental resilience, and economic development to identify how the CDC can further support neighborhood residents' resilience, attract new



The Lower Ninth Ward, outlined in orange on the map, makes up a significant piece of New Orleans' geography and is bordered on the east by St. Bernard Parish.

and support existing businesses, identify key partners in the work, and plan for future equitable development in the Lower Ninth Ward.

The TAP, held over the course of two days, featured a tour of the area, interviews with community leaders, developers, and related organizations, and extensive deliberations by the panelists over what they heard, learned, and contributed from their personal and professional expertise.

The result of this process was a set of recommendations that the CDC is encouraged to socialize further across the community, refining and tailoring the recommendations to meet more specific community needs, and ultimately putting into place systems and processes to help the CDC even more effectively support the community in the LNW.



BRANDIN WALKER, SANKOFA CDC

Panelists toured the Lower Ninth Ward with members of Sankofa CDC's leadership team.

### Questions for the Panel

1. What are feasible development goals for the Lower Ninth Ward that will produce equitable, resilient, and environmental justice-oriented outcomes?

What are the opportunities to expand development and reduce vacancy in the LNW?

What are specific catalyst projects for the following corridors: the Lower Ninth Ward Main Street (St. Claude Avenue); and Florida Avenue?

How can LNW sites be marketed nationally, so that we can find developers who can create high-quality development, based on current market conditions, and within a reasonable timeframe?

2. How can local businesses leverage new development to strengthen the district (*e.g.*, residential construction, condo conversions, commercial, and mixed-use)?
3. What are top-priority projects, programs, and policies that should be included in a resilience plan for the LNW?
4. Would a land trust or another community-based ownership structure help realize equitable community development? Sankofa CDC would like to ensure land is protected and afforded to Lower Ninth Ward residents that have experienced land loss and marginalized and vulnerable populations that may have challenges with accessing wealth and land.
5. Who are important partners that Sankofa CDC should seek to engage or expand engagement with to fulfill the recommendations?

# ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the flooding caused by the levee breaches has left the Lower Ninth Ward in a position where entire residential blocks have been reduced to just a few homes each. Vacant parcels, some privately owned and many others now owned by the public sector, mixed with the occasional occupied home create what one community leader called a “Jack-o-lantern smile” across the community—a streetscape where vacant parcels are as frequent as homes. While some may see these vacant parcels as a challenge to overcome, others in the neighborhood are enjoying this new green space across the community, and, as the neighborhood continues to invest in green infrastructure improvements for flood resilience, the vacant parcels can instead be viewed as assets.

In light of this new normal for the Lower Ninth Ward, understanding how and where development should happen is a challenge. Homeowners with roots in the LNW have returned and wish to see their community thrive. Other residents in the area, while not yet homeowners, are finding viable long-term rental opportunities and are helping to support the community’s vibrancy. Yet other rentals, short-term or those managed by absentee landlords, are creating further challenges for the neighborhood in the form of transient neighbors, poorly maintained properties, and late-night disturbances.

Blight in the Lower Ninth is also a problem. Illegal dumping is a frequent occurrence, including barrels of toxic materials and entire vehicles, and the neighbors need municipal authorities to aggressively use code enforcement to address blight and remove the unwanted and dangerous materials.

There are also issues with public safety. Poor response times from emergency services are an important issue, with stakeholders noting three- and four-hour wait times for police or ambulatory services. While there is crime in the neighborhood, stakeholders noted that it is generally confined to a two-block area. Instead of relying on police assistance, however, homeowners are using their private video-enabled doorbells to help track and identify criminal behavior. The perceptions of crime and devastation are just as impactful. Online searches of “Lower Ninth Ward” returns results full of images of the neighborhood immediately after Hurricane Katrina, adding to perceptions of the neighborhood as poorly maintained, crime-ridden, and unworthy of public or private investment.

Recent progress in the Lower Ninth Ward, however, led by the CDC, is bringing development and new hope to the neighborhood. The dedicated work of Sankofa CDC is bringing a Fresh Stop Market and small commercial enterprise—in the form of an office incubator—to St. Claude Avenue. The Louisiana Main Street organization is also working with the Lower Ninth Ward to help stimulate



This map visually depicts the scope of vacancy across the Lower Ninth Ward.

investment and economic development in the area and specifically along St. Claude Avenue. A parcel recently acquired by the CDC will soon house the offices of the Lower Ninth Ward Main Street organization.

Along the northern edge of the neighborhood, between Florida Avenue and the railroad tracks and bayou beyond, the Sankofa Wetland Park has transformed 40 acres of deserted land into an ecological destination and recreation area. The wetland park offers neighbors and visitors opportunities to learn more about Louisiana's native lands and the importance of the wetland habitats, all while enjoying passive and active recreation along the meandering paths. The CDC has plans to expand the park further west along Florida Avenue, toward the canal, but is stymied by the challenge of removing acres of rubble, trash, and polluted dirt from the land.

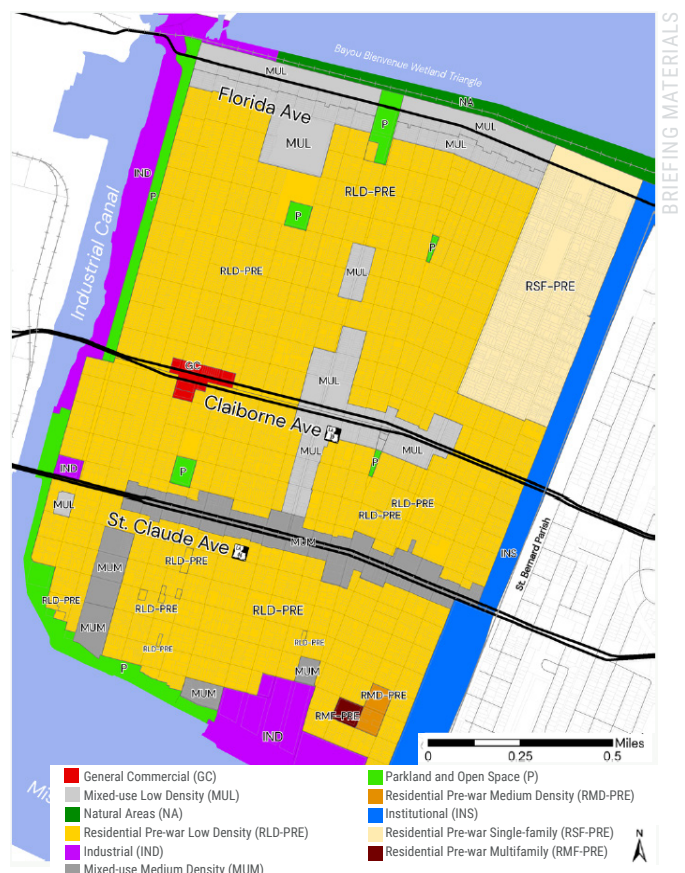
Single-family homes and duplexes (a.k.a. doubles in the LNW) can be found across the neighborhood.

These housing types have created a foundation for homeownership across generations, with new residents embarking on their homeownership journey with their first single-family home or with a duplex that allows them to live on one side while renting and earning rental income from the other side to help offset the cost of the whole building. This long-standing single or double residential environment has created a community culture that has little interest in more dense structures like multi-family apartment buildings or condominiums. At the same time, there is an interest in providing opportunities for senior neighbors to age in place or at least remain in the neighborhood. Today, without senior or assisted living housing options, seniors must leave their lifelong neighborhood to find more supportive housing elsewhere.

Finally, community members in the Lower Ninth Ward are struggling with fatigue and trust. Some fear that if they invest in the area and make it wonderful once again, outsiders will come to take it away. Others worry that future



Current land uses across the Lower Ninth Ward with commercial corridors noted with the broad orange arrows.



The neighborhood's future land use plan with yellow representing residential uses.

decisions during flooding events will involve releasing water at LNW levees to lower pressures closer to the central business district. Yet others are simply fatigued by the strain of being the subject of intense outside planning efforts over the past 18 years. Politicians find the Lower Ninth Ward when election season looms but soon disappear once elected to office. Land speculators dip into the neighborhood, only to hold land, unimproved and often

untouched, for years while the community struggles to make progress.

There is hope, however. Neighborhood residents are committed to their community, Sankofa CDC is committed to the Lower Ninth Ward, and everyone seems to agree that climate resilience is important to the future health and vitality of the Lower Ninth Ward.

## What We Heard

- Trust is a challenge. Decisions around the levees are in question. There is planning fatigue and issues with transparency.
- History/roots/family are bringing people back.
- The world-renowned wetland park promotes ecotourism in the neighborhood.
- There are quality-of-life goals such as crime prevention, flood protection, blight and code enforcement, and trash removal.
- There is a strong homeownership culture of single family homes and doubles and residents do not want dense rental, absentee landlords, or land speculators.
- Affordable housing options and options for seniors staying in the neighborhood are needed.
- Community input and control in decision making is required.
- Retail for St. Claude should be “right-sized.” The community would like a grocery, banking, pharmacy, restaurants, dry cleaner. Smaller-scale retail could work on Florida Avenue.
- Potential development pressures from St. Bernard Parish and Upper 9<sup>th</sup> Ward may impact the LNW.
- There is a clear need for elected officials’ support at all levels.
- Residents must rely on personal transportation as there is limited bus service in the area.
- Workforce development is needed.
- Broader perceptions are impacting the LNW—the residents realize they need to drive the messaging.
- The community is looking to Sankofa to lead engagement and related work. Coalitions are important, particularly with the LNW faith leaders.
- Green/open space, green infrastructure, and renewable energy is welcome.
- This isn’t hard to do, but it IS hard to do without resources.



Stakeholder interviews with community, faith, and institutional leaders helped inform the panel’s understanding of the current challenges and opportunities in the Lower Ninth Ward.

BRANDIN WALKER, SANKOFA CDC

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The CDC's goals of supporting the health and wellbeing of the neighborhood and addressing blight, vacancy, and equitable development informed the panel's recommendations, which were divided into four primary categories: quality of life, housing, commercial corridors, and leveraging the ecological attributes of this unique corner of Louisiana. The following recommendations, crafted by the panel, are not exhaustive nor are the recommendations directed to the CDC alone. As Sankofa continues its important work in the Lower Ninth Ward, organizational capacity building and expanding key partnerships will serve the neighborhood and the CDC well.

### Quality of Life—Getting Back to “the Basics”

So much of what is needed and wanted in the Lower Ninth Ward is quite straightforward—neighbors simply want to have their quality-of-life needs met. From trash-free streets to blight removal, functional sidewalks to effective police response, residents simply want to live in a clean and safe neighborhood.

To begin to address these quality-of-life concerns, the panel recommended the following actions:

- **Standing meeting with the city.** Sankofa CDC should convene a standing meeting with city departments to coordinate more effective deployment of municipal services and the operationalization of the plans the CDC and the city set forth.
- **Enforcement.** So many quality-of-life concerns should be addressed at the municipal level and not managed by a CDC. The CDC can, however, strongly advocate for increased code, blight, and sanitation enforcement. It can also support the neighborhood with quality-of-life supporting activities like graffiti removal, policing illegal dumping, and maintaining and monitoring a registry of rental properties in the neighborhood.
- **Public safety updates.** Some of the public safety items center around blight and public perception, yet there is also an issue with criminal activity in the

neighborhood, including dangerous speeding along residential streets and drug activity in discrete areas. Sankofa CDC should invite the New Orleans Police Department to provide regular public safety updates at community meetings.

- **Florida Avenue as a Complete Street.** Florida Avenue is an important community thoroughfare through the Lower Ninth Ward. While perhaps not the bustling commercial corridor that St. Claude is expected to become, Florida Avenue is worthy of significant attention, namely with improvements to encourage walking, biking, and additional investment. This “complete streets” approach to infrastructure will support the community's safe use of the street while prioritizing a variety of transportation modes and safety for all.
- **Public relations and messaging campaign.** Outside of the neighborhood, the story of the Lower Ninth Ward is largely stuck in 2005. The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the associated national media attention created a flood of stories and images depicting the devastation that live on online today. A Google search of “Lower Ninth Ward” returns countless images of the neighborhood at its most vulnerable point. Through a concerted professional public relations and media campaign, the neighborhood can begin to populate the web with stories about the Lower Ninth Ward today. Human interest stories—stories of rebuilding and



reconnecting with home—resonate with people and a Humans of New York-style campaign, spread across multiple media channels, can begin to correct public misconceptions about the Lower Ninth Ward.

It bears repeating that safety is about more than just crime prevention. Crime prevention is critical, yet safety is also found in neighborhoods that are free of abandoned cars, neighborhoods that are safe from future flood events, in neighborhood blocks with open space that is maintained, and in buildings that are in good repair and not dangerous to residents or pedestrians.

## Complete Streets

**From Smart Growth America:** “Complete Streets are streets for everyone. They are designed and operated to prioritize safety, comfort, and access to destinations for all people who use the street, especially people who have experienced systemic underinvestment or whose needs have not been met through a traditional transportation approach, including older adults, people living with disabilities, people who cannot afford or do not have access to a car, and Black, Native, and Hispanic or Latino/a/x communities. Complete Streets make it easy to cross the street, walk to shops, jobs, and schools, bicycle to work, and move actively with assistive devices. They allow buses to run on time and make it safe for people to walk or move actively to and from train stations.

“Creating Complete Streets means transportation agencies must change their approach to community roads. By adopting a Complete Streets policy, communities direct their transportation planners and engineers to routinely design and operate the entire right of way to prioritize safer slower speeds for all people who use the road, over high speeds for motor vehicles. This means that every transportation project will make the street network better and safer for people walking, biking, driving, riding transit, and moving actively with assistive devices—making your town a better place to live.”

[www.SmartGrowthAmerica.org](http://www.SmartGrowthAmerica.org)

## Housing

As one stakeholder noted, the Lower Ninth Ward means “family.” There are generations of families that have called the Lower Ninth home and who wish to return. Many are returning to family homes, repairing and rebuilding structures that hold their family memories within. Others are moving into the neighborhood for the first time, seeking a starter home in which to begin their own rental or homeownership journey. With this interest in housing throughout the neighborhood, Sankofa CDC can play a pivotal role in supporting neighbors, both new and in place, in their homeownership journey.

## Community Retention Planning

Community retention work engages with community members who already call the LNW home. Focused on any new development in the area, whether new building construction or wetland expansion, the goal of community retention planning is to help neighbors continue to see themselves in this new or revised version of the Lower Ninth Ward. Without this key step, community members can quickly feel left out and may seek to obstruct or speak out in opposition to new development.

- **Identify vulnerable populations.** Starting with the most vulnerable residents (both homeowners and renters) and business owners, the CDC should work to identify all of the ways in which these community members may fall victim to gentrification-driven displacement, including increasing property values and property taxes.
- **Establish anti-displacement strategies and tools.** For homeowners, tools like tax abatement, homestead exemptions, and senior housing exemptions are already available, yet homeowners may need some assistance navigating the available options and pursuing and securing the tools. At the community level, federal programs like the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and the HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME) can be used to finance housing rehabilitation grants

or loans for the benefit of low- and moderate-income homeowners. At the state level, the Louisiana Fortify Homes program can provide funding for roof repairs and upgrades that can help homes better withstand hurricane-force winds, thereby preserving housing stock and reducing post-disaster repair costs for homeowners. There are similar tools for business owners, both those relocating to the LNW and for those already operating in the area, often in home-based businesses, outside of the commercial corridors. The CDC and Lower Ninth Ward Main Street can begin working with business owners to understand their goals, their market, and their financial position to help identify small business

assistance tools that can help them grow and reach their business goals. This work with business owners should prioritize business retention and minimize displacement, and CDBG funds can assist here as well, often providing facade improvement programs that can help businesses maintain or improve their structures and street presence.

- **Provide constant community communication.** The CDC has carefully built trust across the community. Hard-earned, that trust should continue to be nurtured and strengthened through constant communication with community members.

### Atlanta’s Westside Resident Retention Strategy

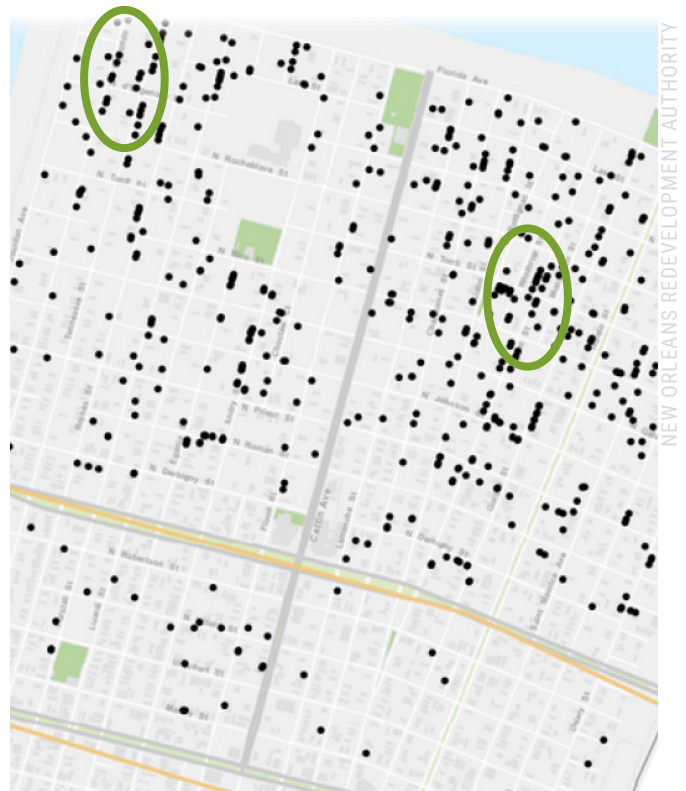
In the face of development pressures anticipated with a \$1.2 billion renovation of the Falcons stadium, Atlanta’s Westside community came together to outline a resident retention plan that addressed the needs of homeowners, renters, and business owners. The goals included increasing assistance with information addressing safety concerns in the neighborhood and addressing blighted and vacant properties. With regard to housing displacement specifically, the plan works to support renters’ transition to homeownership, seeks to increase the supply of affordable housing, and provides legal aid and other programs to support homeowners’ rehabilitation activities.



[Westside Future Fund Resident Retention Strategy](#)

### Strategic Land Assembly

As Sankofa CDC considers how it can further address blight remediation in the community while promoting homeownership opportunities, it is helpful to identify where and how a community development corporation can support single-family residential development at scale.



The black dots represent Lower Ninth Ward properties owned by public entities, and the green circles identify concentrations of this ownership, which might create interesting opportunities for site assembly and redevelopment.

1. **Start with publicly-owned land.** With a large geography and a significant number of vacant parcels and buildings owned by a variety of entities within its footprint, the CDC is encouraged to first consider publicly-owned parcels, likely owned by the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA), for potential acquisition.
2. **Identify areas of concentration.** Within the landscape of publicly-owned parcels, the CDC should then identify areas of concentration where a large number of NORA parcels may be found on a single or contiguous blocks or around nodes of particular interest (major intersections, proximity to amenities such as the Sankofa Wetland Park, etc.). With the sites identified, the CDC could then begin to focus [code enforcement](#) actions on the properties within and immediately surrounding those nodes of interest. Throughout site evaluation, potential redevelopment and building considerations should be balanced with a parcels' potential to contribute to the ecosystem of the neighborhood by remaining or becoming open space, a community garden, or other open space asset.
3. **Pursue acquisition and redevelopment.** The following actions should take place concurrently to address the two key steps of acquisition and funding for property control and redevelopment:
  - **Utilize and advocate for acquisition programs.** The acquisition work needed to meaningfully impact the neighborhood will benefit from a multi-pronged approach where the CDC is working in partnership with other entities.
    - » Programs like [Lot Next Door](#) provide individual homeowners with a path toward purchasing and improving a parcel or parcels adjacent to their home at fair market value and with a \$10,000 credit towards certain improvements.
    - » The Louisiana [Homestead Exemption](#) program was established to encourage homeowners to acquire a home and occupy the structure personally. This advances individual homeownership and generational



TAP PANEL



BRIEFING MATERIALS



TAP PANEL

Diverse housing across the Lower Ninth Ward provides a variety of homeownership opportunities.

wealth-building opportunities and helps deter further speculation in the neighborhood.

- » There may also be instances where the CDC may wish to, alone or together with partners, pursue and fund the outright purchase of a parcel and hold it for future development.
- **Identify and advocate for acquisition and redevelopment funding.** Pre-acquisition work and property purchases require funding. The panel identified several potential funding sources for further exploration.
  - » [American Rescue Plan Act](#) (ARPA)
  - » [Neighborhood Housing Improvement Fund](#) (NHIF)
  - » [Community Development Block Grant](#) (CDBG) [HOME](#) funding
  - » [New Markets Tax Credits](#)
- **Pilot a single-family demonstration project.** The CDC is encouraged to leverage the guidance from [Living with Water](#) to launch a pilot residential program with Jericho Road Episcopal Housing.

## Support for Homeownership

The Lower Ninth Ward has a history of single-family homeownership and the residents today wish to see that trend continue. Given the current landscape of vacant parcels and elevated construction costs (correlated with the pandemic and damage from the 2020 and 2021 hurricane seasons), the CDC is encouraged to promote a multi-pronged housing approach that incorporates the following options for individuals pursuing homeownership:

- **Maintain affordability.** Affordability of homeownership is important to residents as they move back to the neighborhood and as new families seek to call the Lower Ninth Ward home, many of whom are purchasing a home for the first time. Maintaining the affordability of single-family homes in the neighborhood is important as are tools to help residents remain in place when property values and associated taxes rise. Local Housing Solutions has a [digital library of housing policy strategies](#) that

provides information on how to maintain housing affordability.

- **Pursue rental opportunities with care.** While rental properties provide residents with an affordable housing option and, for many, a first step on the path toward eventual homeownership, current residents do not wish to see multifamily rental buildings or concentrations of single-family rental units in the neighborhood. There are, however, a few interesting opportunities for rental housing that the CDC could promote and even pursue that would continue to support the culture of the neighborhood:
  - » **Owner-occupied doubles.** Homeowners who are able to afford a double in the neighborhood can live in one unit while renting the second unit, which helps pay the mortgage on the entire property. The associated, and often affordable, rental unit can be an entry point for those just entering the housing market and is easily monitored by the building owner who has a vested interest in its upkeep.
  - » **Senior housing.** Senior housing, even multi-unit buildings or accessible doubles, would be welcome in the LNW and provide senior residents with a viable next step when their single-family home is no longer practical or safe for them.
  - » **Dispersed doubles.** Fully rental double units are a possibility in the Lower Ninth Ward, often providing affordable housing opportunities to a variety of residents. The CDC can identify these housing opportunities across the neighborhood, and avoid creating a cluster of the rentals in any one area, to facilitate further rental opportunities and allow the rented doubles to blend seamlessly into the surrounding neighborhood of generally owner-occupied homes.
- **Promote lease-to-purchase options.** Given that many residents would prefer to own their home rather than pay rent to a landlord, lease-to-purchase options could provide new residents with a viable on-ramp to homeownership while providing an opportunity to

build equity in the home while doing so. This is a good option when the lease term is limited to three to five years and not extended to match the term of a 15- or 30-year mortgage. Additionally, Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) could be used in a similar fashion to help fund a property purchase. Using LIHTCs would extend the term of the lease to 12 years and a stipulation would be needed to ensure that the renter remains the person who purchases the home in Year 13.

- **Identify funding for returning property owners.** For those property owners who are still planning to return to their property to rebuild, the CDC could lead the development of a fund or program to assist former residents in their rebuilding efforts. These residents have roots in the Lower Ninth Ward but may be facing some fairly significant challenges in financing the reconstruction.

## Alternative Uses for Vacant Lots

As the CDC contemplates measures to stimulate development and support homeownership and residency across the neighborhood, CDC leadership and residents alike recognize the likelihood that not all vacant lots will,

TAP PANEL



The CDC maintains a greenhouse on parcels it acquired and nurtures plants for installation around the neighborhood.

or even should, be filled by new housing.

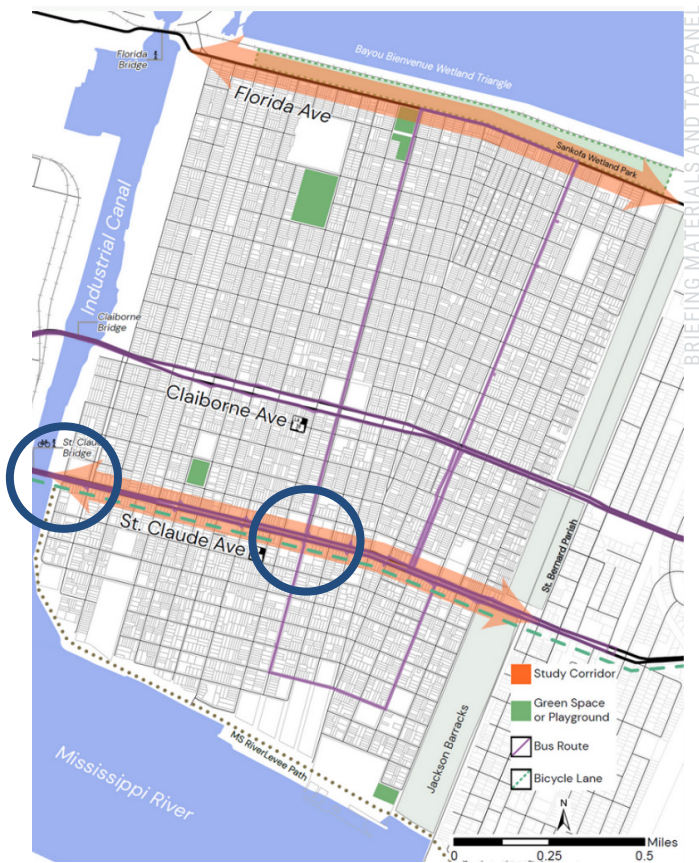
Some parcels would work well as open space or agricultural land. Homeowners next to vacant parcels can use the Lot Next Door and similar programs to acquire ownership of the vacant parcel and ensure that it remains open space. Similarly, other lots may provide opportunities for urban agriculture or other revenue-generating enterprises that will help boost the neighborhood economy and support wealth generation by current residents.

In other instances, well-maintained green/open space that assists with stormwater management and supports the natural ecosystem could be as welcome as another home. Identifying and cataloging these optional uses and locations will be helpful as the CDC considers potential parcel acquisition and assembly activities. Examples of resilient parks and open space projects can be found [here](#).

## Commercial Corridors

Housing development will be slow without nearby retail, and retail establishments need proximate housing to be viable. One rarely finds success without the other. Given the potential for commercial enterprises along St. Claude Avenue in particular, the panel recommends focusing initial efforts at two main intersections: St. Claude at the bridge and St. Claude at Fats Domino Avenue. Florida Avenue could be a secondary commercial corridor, yet with the wetland park on one side and single-family homes dotting the other side, the panel recommends focusing commercial activity first on St. Claude and then perhaps exploring less-intense retail, such as a restaurant or cafe, for Florida Avenue.

The commercial revitalization of St. Claude will take a systematic approach to researching and cataloging assets and other economic drivers, adjusting land uses to support intended activities, partnering with related and interested entities, and creating signage or branding for the corridor. Much of this work should be done in concert and partnership with the Lower Ninth Ward Main Street organization, which will benefit from a partnership with a strong CDC like Sankofa.



The intersections of St. Claude at the bridge and again at Fats Domino Avenue, noted in the dark blue circles, are good nodes around which to focus initial commercial recruitment and retention efforts.

### Economic Drivers

Sankofa CDC should help the Main Street organization with the following economic drivers for the corridor.

- **Conduct a commercial/retail survey.** A survey of Lower Ninth Ward residents’ shopping preferences and needs will help identify the types of retailers the community would like to see and support in the neighborhood.
- **Create a business inventory.** Similarly, an inventory of existing businesses along St. Claude, which should also include an inventory of available commercial space along the corridor, should be created and sorted by business type. Additionally, a survey of neighborhood residents regarding existing home-based business enterprises would also be helpful—as the economic development work in the LNW progresses, business support can include nurturing and growing home-based businesses into more formal commercial operations that would be well-

sued for the St. Claude corridor. A survey of this nature will require care and trust between the CDC and the residents as some may worry that disclosing their home-based enterprise may run them afoul of zoning regulations.

- **Formulate a leasing plan.** Based on the information gathered from the survey and business inventory, the CDC and Main Street organization should create a phased marketing and leasing plan for St. Claude, again focusing first on the intersections at the bridge and at Fats Domino Avenue.
- **Identify economic drivers and tools.** Market drivers, both within the Lower Ninth Ward and in the immediate surrounding neighborhoods, should be identified and shared with potential commercial tenants. Similarly, the CDC and Main Street should research and identify the potential economic tools, including Tax Increment Financing (TIF) and Economic Development Districts (EDDs), that could be deployed in the area to support commercial growth along the corridor.

### Land Uses

In some instances, the land uses currently in place along St. Claude may need to be updated to support the economic goals of the corridor.

- **Review and update zoning.** The CDC is encouraged to review the current zoning along the St. Claude corridor and work with the authority having jurisdiction to update the regulations where needed to ensure that the land use regulations support commercial revitalization goals.
- **Create an overlay district.** There is also an interesting opportunity to leverage an Arts and Cultural Overlay district on top of the current land use regulations. This type of overlay zoning can help encourage uses that celebrate the local culture through food, music, and art-related enterprises.
- **Differentiate between commercial corridors.** The land uses and environment along Florida Avenue are quite different from those of St. Claude Avenue. When

marketing both corridors, it will be helpful to clearly differentiate the land uses along each and brand them separately while staying true to the cohesive neighborhood identity.

- **Support residential development to sustain businesses.** “Retail follows rooftops.” This commercial real estate development axiom makes the case for the CDC to support additional residential development and related efforts as a part of its economic development strategy. Increases in the neighborhood population will help sustain current and future businesses along the LNW’s corridors.

## Resources for Commercial Support

Neither Sankofa CDC nor the Lower Ninth Ward Main Street should enter into this work alone.

- **Convene realtors and commercial brokers.** Area realtors possess a wealth of knowledge and market insights. By convening ongoing meetings with commercial realtors in particular, the CDC will be able to tap into those resources while also laying the groundwork for marketing the corridor opportunities to this network of brokers.
- **Build Sankofa’s economic development capacity.** By working with and leveraging the existing economic development agencies working in and around the area, Sankofa CDC leadership can “learn on the job” and strengthen the CDC’s economic development capacity to help support the commercial corridors.
- **Leverage the New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) by serving on a Community Development Entity (CDE) Advisory Board and/or forming a CDE.** By securing a position for Sankofa CDC on one or more CDE Advisory Boards with a Louisiana service area, the CDC will be in a stronger position to learn of funding opportunities as they arise, potentially leveraging those tax credit dollars to the benefit of neighborhood development.
- **Support existing businesses’ capacity building.** The businesses currently in place along St. Claude Avenue should receive just as much care and attention as potential new business pursuits. These existing

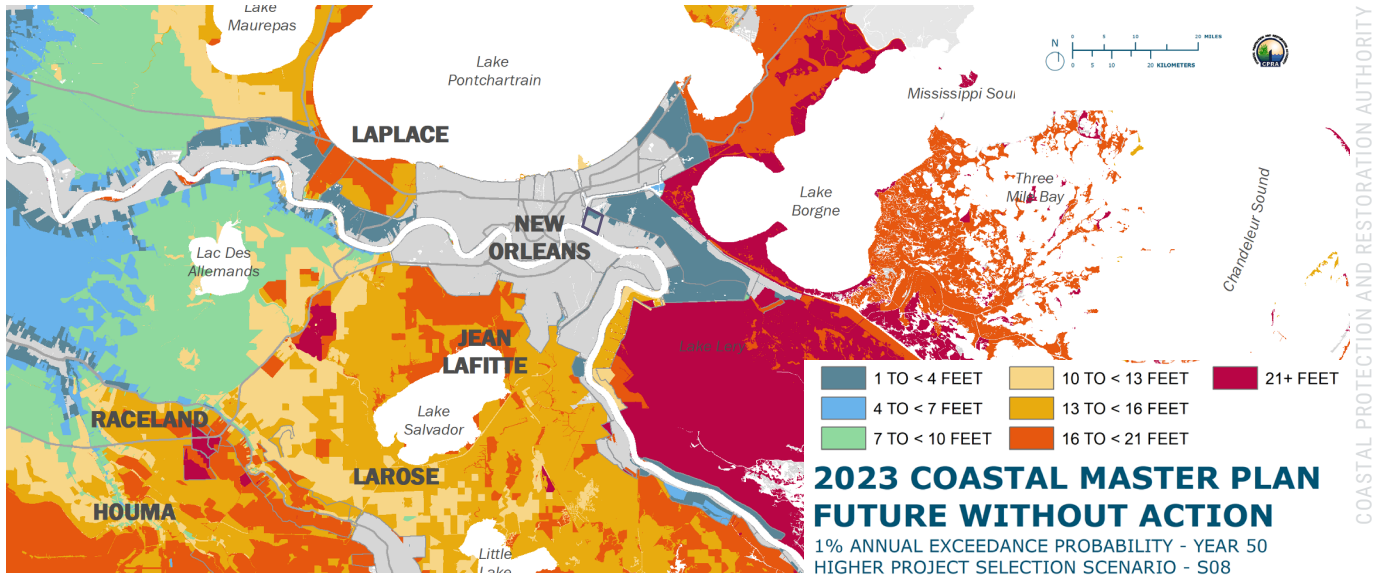
businesses may benefit from additional resources to help build capacity within their enterprises to support and even expand operations and benefit from new market opportunities.

- **Create a business incubator.** If the business inventory identifies a population of home-based businesses potentially on the cusp of needing larger or more formal space, the CDC and/or its partners could create a small business incubator or accelerator to help those businesses grow into their next stage of development.
- **Leverage nonprofit status for land donations.** As a nonprofit entity, Sankofa CDC is in the unique position of being able to accept donations of land and property, which can assist with land assembly and development pursuits.
- **Explore a commercial community land trust.** While many may be familiar with a residential community land trust, wherein an entity like a CDC retains ownership of the land while housing units are built and sold separately from land ownership, commercial land trusts are less frequently used but may be effective for Sankofa CDC in its efforts to support commercial development. The land trust model can be complex and the funding required for commercial enterprises may need to include tax credit tools like NMTC to fund gaps, yet it is worth exploring with a trusted advisor.

## Signage and Branding

Although there is a small sign along St. Claude noting the entrance to the “Historic Lower Ninth Ward,” much more could be done to help position the neighborhood as a location of choice.

- **Feature business opportunities.** By installing decorative temporary signage to showcase available leasing opportunities, focusing initially on St. Claude Avenue, the CDC can help generate interest in LNW business opportunities while also creating visual branding for the corridor and neighborhood beyond.
- **Install gateway and corridor infrastructure.** Initiating gateway beautification projects, such as pedestrian



This map shows anticipated flood levels in 50 years if no action is taken.

lighting, public art, and plantings, can help change market perceptions of the area as under-invested in and support the visual branding that is also recommended for the historic and culturally-rich Lower Ninth Ward.

This is long-term, methodical work that does not happen overnight. This type of economic development and capacity-building work for the commercial corridors will take time, and, with careful planning and attention, can begin to yield results for St. Claude Avenue in the coming three to five years. Florida Avenue will take a bit more time to gain new commercial uses, but could potentially see commercial activity within ten years.

## Ecosystem Restoration & Resilience

Contrary to the public narrative, the risk of storm surge and riverine flooding in the Lower Ninth Ward is minimal thanks to the Greater New Orleans Hurricane and Storm Damage Risk Reduction System of levees. FEMA-mapped flood risk is generally confined to areas along the northern edge of the neighborhood where the Sankofa Wetland Park now sits. The resulting FEMA Zone X designation has positive implications for the insurability of structures in the neighborhood, which should eliminate or reduce at least one barrier to reconstruction in the Lower Ninth Ward.

The placement of the wetland park and its embrace

of the local wetlands environment is a testament to thoughtful and careful ecological planning and has made it into a destination for researchers worldwide. Previously, the community had been disconnected from the Central Wetlands by hurricane protection floodwalls, and many longed for a connection back to the wetlands for recreational access and restoration of the bayou. By embracing the region’s wetlands and understanding the unique ecosystem of the area, the neighborhood can use the teachings from the park to inspire additional green infrastructure installations.

### Sankofa Wetland Park and Nature Trail

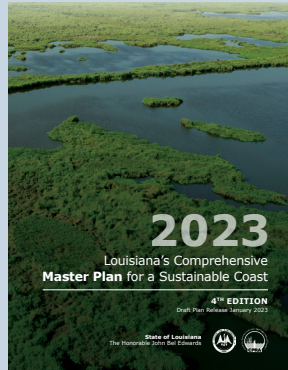
At the northern edge of the Lower Ninth Ward, Sankofa CDC transformed a derelict, trash- and debris-ridden site into place of regional pride. The 40-acre wetland park provides abundant passive and active recreation opportunities and information for those who wish to learn more about the nature, value, and functions of a wetland area. The park represents a very visible and beautiful example of green infrastructure positioned as an amenity and one that can inspire additional green infrastructure installations by individual homeowners and others.

The park has become a destination for ecotourism. The park draws visitors from across the U.S. and the globe to see and experience the beauty and understand the climate resilience benefits this park provides to the Lower Ninth



## Central Wetland Unit: Design Phase

### Expanding Partnerships for Neighborhood-scale Ecosystem Restoration



On a regional level, there is work underway on the 29,140-acre semi-impounded wetlands in Orleans and St. Bernard parishes. The closure of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet has led to a general revival of the area, which was previously too inundated with saltwater for cypress and tupelo swamp restoration. The removal of the saltwater barriers has also added sediment and marsh to the area, helping to restore its natural ecological balance.

Activities in the region include:

- Hydrological restoration of 15,898 acres of marsh with gaps in canal spoil banks;
- Creation of eight acres of marsh or ridge habitat;
- Planting of thousands of native plants by volunteers engaged through local non-governmental organizations; and
- Charrette-style public meetings with residents for location and composition of hydrological restoration features such as marsh/ridge features and vegetative plantings.

Location of specific features:

- A small platform was created on the Orleans Parish side of the wetlands to increase elevation to allow for planting of native marsh or swamp vegetation.
- Spoil bank gapping in St. Bernard was installed to alleviate impoundments and increase freshwater input from the Violet siphon.

For more information and to read the entire plan, visit [Coastal.LA.gov](https://Coastal.LA.gov).



A recent social media post showcases the beauty of the Sankofa Wetland Park.

Ward and communities beyond. The park is a powerful counter-narrative to public perceptions of the area as abandoned and derelict, instead beautifully proclaiming *we are resilient*.

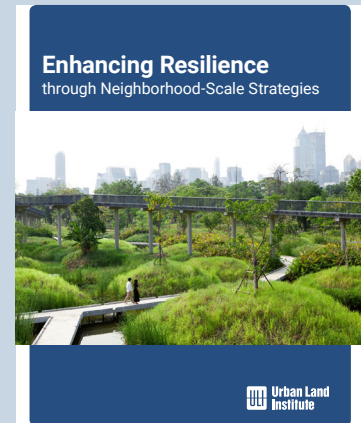
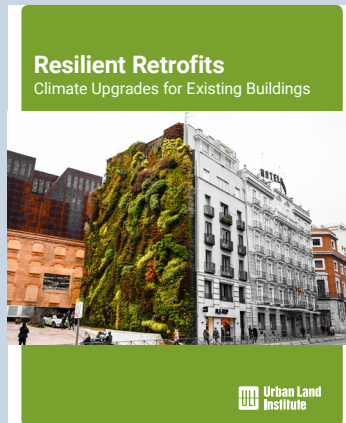
## Energy Resilience

The Lower Ninth Ward is embracing climate and energy resilience in a way that should inspire other communities. Community members in the LNW understand the need for resilience measures and are open to additional measures beyond those in place today.

**Pursue community solar.** Sankofa CDC is encouraged to explore the idea of community solar for the Lower Ninth Ward. The U.S. Department of Energy defines community solar as “any solar project or purchasing program, within a geographic area, in which the benefits of a solar project flow to multiple customers such as individuals, businesses, nonprofits, and other groups.” The benefits to residents in the LNW could include access to power during prolonged utility outages, reduced ongoing energy costs, and a reduction of blight by converting vacant/overgrown lots into parcels for solar installations. Taken a step further, community solar could provide residents with a community ownership model that could be used to fund

## Resilience Resources

As Sankofa and the broader community consider additional climate resilience strategies for the built environment, these recent ULI publications can provide guidance. Both reports are products of the Resilient Land Use Cohort and point to resources relating to policy, design, and financing for resilience measures at the building level as well as on a neighborhood scale.



other development and resilience strategies across the neighborhood.

A recent \$221,000 grant from FEMA to the city, through a Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant, will soon fund installation of a solar-powered emergency backup system for the Sanchez Multi-Service Center, which will provide residents with a power source for charging cell phones and more when the power is lost. The effort, in partnership with the National Renewable Energy Lab, also provides funding for a feasibility study and planning and design activities for future expansion of neighborhood-wide solar into a microgrid system.

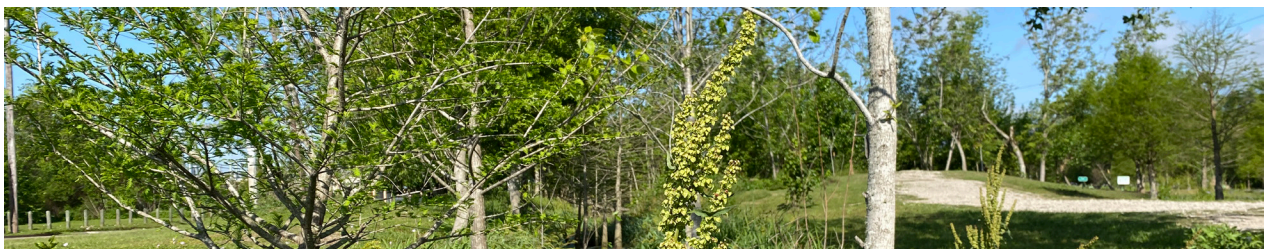
## Integrating Nature throughout the Neighborhood

Not limited to just the Sankofa Wetland Park, the local ecosystem should be the connective fabric across the Lower Ninth Ward. Planting native trees in the public realm and encouraging residents to do likewise on their private property can assist the broader neighborhood with air quality improvement, extreme heat mitigation, flood

resilience, and blight reduction. Utilizing vacant parcels for stormwater management, as mentioned earlier, can be an important element in neighborhood resilience, helping divert heavy rains from the over-taxed sewer systems back into the plants and soil.

Neighborhood-wide infrastructure, such as lighting and landscaping, can also play an important role in supporting a healthy and resilient environment. Attractive, pedestrian-scale lighting can encourage residents to walk instead of drive and encourage exploration of the neighborhood and commercial corridors on foot. Native landscaping installations and signage noting the plant species can educate the community as it adds visual interest, additional stormwater management, and a softening of the typically hardened concrete barriers along roadways.

Finally, Florida Avenue, flanked to the north by the Wetland Park and to the south by intermittent homes, deserves particular attention. This corridor is designed to serve the neighborhood and not serve as a high-speed thoroughfare. As such, Florida Avenue should become a complete street to further encourage walking, biking, and investment in the area.



TAP PANEL

Native plants in the Sankofa Wetland Park thrive in this environment and help educate visitors about the benefits and beauty of native ecosystems.

# NEXT STEPS

As Sankofa CDC contemplates the activities before it, both those in its current work plan and those outlined in this report, it will be helpful to begin building or strengthening key partnerships today with an eye toward the future. This work will take time, and not everything should be tackled by the CDC or by the CDC alone. Trusted partners, patience, and continued ongoing community conversation and engagement will support the CDC's work and ultimately benefit the Lower Ninth Ward, supporting the community's rebuilding, not into what it once was, but instead what neighbors envision for it today and into the future.

## Immediately

### 3-12 months

- Support and clarify Sankofa's role, embracing its reputation as a trust-builder
- Instigate a convening of key public agencies regarding plan implementation
- Identify strategic partnerships for work outside Sankofa's capacity (e.g., land assembly)
- Socialize plans with partnering institutions and stakeholders
- Consider pop-up activation opportunities to gauge and build interest in new ideas

## Short-term

### first 3 years

- Inventory vacant residential parcels and existing commercial businesses in partnership with Lower Ninth Ward Main Street
- Instigate professional marketing campaign to shift public perceptions of the neighborhood
- Provide regular updates to the city's Quality of Life Committee
- Continue expansion of the Wetlands Park
- Join Innovative Commerce Serving Communities (ICSC) to pursue and secure commitments for anchor retail
- Review all zoning and consider an Arts and Culture Overlay District in partnership with the appropriate jurisdiction
- Pilot a single-family [Living with Water](#) residential program with Jericho Road Episcopal Housing
- Advocate for funding for infrastructure improvements and economic development (EDD, TIF, CDBG, HOME, NMTC, NHIF)

## Long-term

### next 4-10 years

- Work on strategic land assembly through a partnering organization
- Continue to implement and track community (homeowners, renters, small business owners) retention strategies (e.g., tax abatement, tax freeze, Homestead exemptions)
- Pursue and promote local value capture and continued reinvestment in the neighborhood
- Identify supportive service partners for commercial start-ups and entrepreneurship
- Continue residential and commercial expansion based on pilot results
- Build and expand energy resilience and green infrastructure across the neighborhood

# PANELIST BIOGRAPHIES



BRANDIN WALKER, SANKOFA CDC



**Davon Barbour**  
**Panel Chair**  
**Downtown Development District**

Prior to joining the DDD, Davon served as the Vice President of Advocacy & Economic Development for The Hollywood Partnership,

which manages the Hollywood Entertainment District and is home of the world-famous Walk of Fame. Prior to that role, he led the Community & Economic Development Division of the Los Angeles County Development Authority where he oversaw the county's redevelopment initiatives, revolving loan portfolio, construction administration, and the nation's largest urban county district Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. He played a lead role in developing and administering more than \$150M in COVID-19 economic recovery programs. In his role as Senior Vice President of Economic Development for the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, Davon led the organization to win an Award of Excellence in economic development from the International Downtown Association (IDA) for its TechConnect business attraction program. Davon considers his proudest professional achievement to date, the development of a master

plan and urban renewal legislation for an ambitious \$2 billion mixed-use redevelopment project that includes up to two million square feet of life sciences and technology space, new mixed-income housing, park space and local employment opportunities to revitalize neighborhoods that encompass the world-renowned Johns Hopkins Hospital in his hometown of Baltimore, MD. Davon has both created and administered retail attraction and retention programs for multiple cities. His strategic recommendations led to the creation of The Commissary in Downtown Rochester, New York. The social entrepreneurship facility is the first kitchen incubator and only shared kitchen permitted in the region with the mission of creating and cultivating local homegrown new food business concepts. As Director of the City of Hollywood's Community & Economic Development Department, he led the city to win three (3) consecutive annual awards from the National Community Development Association. Davon has served in numerous volunteer leadership roles throughout his career. He is extensively engaged in the Innovative Commerce Serving Communities (ICSC) where he is the Western Division P3 Public Chair, past Eastern Division P3 Public Sector Chair, and a former faculty member of its University of Shopping Centers. Davon is also a past Vice Chair and Membership Committee Chair of IDA. He has served on advisory panels and/or authored works for ICSC,

IDA, and the Urban Land Institute. Davon is a former part-time professional West African dancer/instructor and arts advocate. When not working, he enjoys dancing, foreign films, vinyl record collecting and speaking French.



**Richelle Allen**  
**Adjunct Assistant Professor**  
**Sustainable Real Estate**  
**Development**  
**Tulane University**

Over a twelve-year period, Richelle led development efforts on multiple large-scale hospitality, market-rate multifamily, mixed-use, and affordable housing transactions in Louisiana and throughout the U.S. Beginning her career at HRI just two years after Hurricane Katrina made landfall near New Orleans, Richelle worked her way up from an entry level Financial Analyst position to serve as Vice President of Development. Over a twelve-year period, she led development efforts on multiple large-scale hospitality, market-rate multifamily, mixed-use, and affordable housing transactions in Louisiana and throughout the U.S., including such notables as Hibernia Tower (New Orleans), The Mayflower (Dallas), Homewood Suites (New Orleans), and a dual-branded Hyatt Place / Hyatt House (Indianapolis). After taking a four year hiatus to work at Stonehenge Capital, a national firm specializing in federal and state tax credit syndication, she returned to HRI Hospitality in May 2023 with an even deeper understanding of institutional quality real estate development, capital markets, and project finance. Always passionate about making a difference, Richelle has participated in numerous Capital Hill advocacy efforts and has engaged in various capacities for local and national organizations including the Urban Land Institute, the Historic Tax Credit Coalition, the Affordable Housing Tax Credit Coalition, the Louisiana Workforce Housing Coalition, the Louisiana Historic Tax Credit Coalition, Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans, and as a steering committee member of Smart Growth America's LOCUS, an alliance for promoting sustainable development in walkable communities throughout the United States. She twice attended Tulane University, earning a Master of Finance degree in 2007 and a Bachelor of Science in Management, with a dual concentration in Finance and Business Management, in 2006.



**Nicole M. Barnes**  
**Executive Director**  
**Jericho Road Episcopal**  
**Housing Initiative**

Native New Orleanian, Nicole Barnes joined the Jericho Road team as Executive Director in March 2012. Ms.

Barnes has dedicated over twenty-five years working in affordable housing and community development and small business development. Before joining Jericho Road, she served as Local Area Director of the Builders of Hope (BOH) New Orleans office where she oversaw organizational operations. Prior to BOH, she served at the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) for seventeen years. During her tenure at HANO, she held various senior leadership roles, including Vice President of Homeownership Programs, Deputy Director of Client Services, Director of HOPE VI Community Supportive Services Program (CSS), Executive Director of the HANO Resident Loan Corporation, and Program Director of Economic Development and Training Programs for Tulane/Xavier National Center for the Urban Community Division of Public Housing. Nicole also serves as Vice Chair for the Board of Governors for the Greater New Orleans Housing Alliance (GNOHA) and as an executive committee of the Board of the Louisiana Association of Affordable Housing Providers (LAAHP). Ms. Barnes has recently been appointed to the Federal Home Loan Bank of Dallas Advisory Council to serve as one of two representatives from the State of Louisiana. She holds a B.A. degree in Political Science from Xavier University of Louisiana and a Master of Public Administration from Southern University of Baton Rouge. She has both a passion for serving low-income families and a great understanding of the myriad of housing issues that working families encounter. Her extensive experience in both the governmental and non-profit sectors, provides for a unique perspective and understanding of complex housing policy. She is widely recognized for her passionate advocacy and dedication to addressing the systemic inequities that have stymied asset and generational wealth building in communities of color.



**Damon Burns**  
**President & CEO**  
**Finance New Orleans**

Damon Burns is a New Orleans native and public finance professional with more than 10 years of experience in entrepreneurship, investment banking, corporate banking and economic development. He is currently the President & CEO of Finance New Orleans. Finance New Orleans is a housing and economic development finance agency that has financed over \$600 million of affordable housing and economic development projects in New Orleans. Prior to joining Finance New Orleans, he founded Munivestor, a financial data and technology company focused on the municipal bond industry using \$200K in private investor capital. Munivestor was selected to participate in some of the nation's premier startup programs including Techstars' Risingstars Bootcamp, Morgan Stanley's FinTech Investor Showcase and PowerMoves NOLA. Other technology experience includes being an Investment Committee member of the New Orleans Startup Fund, which provides early stage capital to New Orleans based companies with high-growth potential. Burns earned a Marketing degree from Texas Southern University and an MBA with a finance concentration from the University of New Orleans. He also earned a professional certificate in Urban Redevelopment from the University of Pennsylvania.



**Paul Cramer**  
**Planning Administrator (retired)**  
**City of New Orleans Planning**  
**Office**

Paul Cramer is a recently-retired Planning Administrator with the New Orleans City Planning Commission. He was the senior-most staff member, having served nearly 25 years. He managed many major projects including the City Charter-mandated New Orleans Master Plan, the overhaul of the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance, as well as studies covering a broad array of topics including the Tree Preservation, University Area Parking, Outdoor Live Entertainment, Hazardous Sites Inventory Environmental, and 3 Short Term Rental studies. He graduated from the University of New Orleans with a Master's Degree in Urban & Regional Planning and from Virginia Tech with a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science. He has also experienced the travails of being a neighborhood association leader.



**Michael Merideth**  
**CEO**  
**VPG Enterprise**

Michael is CEO of VPG Enterprise, a vertically integrated firm that seeks to provide real estate and construction services that enrich clients' lives.

Headquartered in New Orleans, LA, the firm is a leader in Government and Municipal Contracting, Multi-Family Real Estate Development, Residential and Commercial Construction, and Property and Asset Management. The company was started by Michael Merideth (Chief Executive Officer) and Andre Lewis (Chief Operating Officer), both Tuskegee University alumni who graduated at the top of their class with engineering degrees. VPG, however, was established because of the founders' passion for real estate development and construction. Since the company's inception in 2010 the company has grown to over \$27,000,000 in assets with projects ranging from luxury condo rehabs in Manhattan, NY, to Victorian Mansion rehabs in the historic French Quarter.



**Rodney Milton**  
**Executive Director**  
**ULI Colorado**

Raised in Denver, Rodney Milton is the new Executive Director of Urban Land Institute (ULI) Colorado. Rodney holds two master's degrees from Florida

State University and a B.S. in History from Florida A & M University. He served the City of Atlanta for nearly a decade advancing innovative approaches to place-keeping and place-making and cultivated strong relationships with the development community through thoughtful policy and strategic decision making. Rodney recently moved back to the Denver area to join the City of Aurora as its Manager of Community Development. There he was charged with the stewardship of federal funds and the implementation of the City's recently adopted Housing Strategy. He led a team that responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by deploying roughly \$15 million in emergency assistance to stabilize Aurora residents. Throughout his career, Rodney has been a public servant and is excited to serve the members of ULI Colorado as they shape the future of the built environment.



**Marcia Armant St. Martin**  
**Executive Director (retired)**  
**Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans**

Marcia Armant St. Martin is a results-oriented professional with over 42

years of experience in public sector administration. She retired from the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans in February, 2014. She worked for the Water Board, a utility responsible for drinking water, waste water and storm water for over 22 years. She served as the Executive Director for 10 years and the Deputy Director for 12 years. The utility also operates and maintains a small power generation plant and power distribution network. Marcia's lifetime in government service has been exemplified by dedication to duty, creative management, high performance and great attention to the needs of citizens and staff. She has over 22 years of experience working in the water profession. Following the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina she guided the Sewerage and Water Board through the most extensive and massive reconstruction and restoration of a water utility in U.S. history. Prior to her retirement she was a member of the American Water Works Association, the Water Environment Federation, the National Association of Clean Water Agencies, the Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies, the U.S. Water Alliance, the Board of Trustees of the Louisiana Asset Management Pool, Inc. (LAMP), the EPA Climate Ready Water Utility Working Group, Treasurer of Water For People (WFP) USA and Canada, a trustee for the Water Research Foundation, and a member of EPA National Drinking Water Advisory Council. Her work and leadership have been recognized by the Bureau of Governmental Research of New Orleans, The Young Leadership Council of New Orleans, The US Army Corps of Engineers and numerous other civic and national associations. She has presented over 100 papers at national and international water forums. She is active in her community of New Orleans. She serves on the Board of the Pontchartrain Conservancy, and the Development Board of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family. Marcia is a graduate of Xavier University of Louisiana.



**Charles Sutcliffe**  
**Chief Resilience Officer**  
**Governor's Office of Coastal Activities**

Charles Sutcliffe is in his twelfth year in the Governor's Office. He began with a strict policy focus related to

the implementation and funding of the Coastal Master Plan and now seeks to encourage adaptation to coastal and climate change across other departments within state government in order to build resilience. He coordinates closely with other state agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other partners as the State of Louisiana broadens its approach to managing the many impacts of environmental change and positions itself to capitalize on new opportunities to enhance communities and quality of life, strengthen the economy, and restore the environment. Charles is also part of a small team in the Governor's Office supporting the Climate Initiatives Task Force which delivered Louisiana's first Climate Action Plan in February of 2022. The plan details strategies and actions for how Louisiana can reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Mr. Sutcliffe has a Master of Arts (M.A.) in Humanities and Social Thought from New York University, a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in History and a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) in Animal Sciences from Louisiana State University. Before coming to the Governor's Office he worked as a science teacher in Baton Rouge and Pittsburgh; with the Allegheny County Department of Human Services; and with Louisiana State University's Economics & Policy Research Group.



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