



North Florida

CLAY COUNTY GATEWAY TO CLAY



Technical Assistance Panel Report | August 23 & 24, 2023
Orange Park, Florida

About the Urban Land Institute (ULI)

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) is a nonprofit education and research institute supported by its members. Its mission is to shape the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide. Established in 1936, ULI has more than 48,000 members worldwide representing all aspects of land use and development disciplines. The North Florida District Council was formed in 2005 and has nearly 600 members serving 34 counties, including the cities of Jacksonville, St. Augustine, Gainesville, Tallahassee, Panama City and Pensacola.

What are Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)?

The Technical Assistance Panel program is an advisory service available to a community, nonprofit, public entity or private enterprise that is facing real estate or land-use issues. Typically, a two-day session, the TAP program brings together a cross-section of experts who do not have a vested interest in the project to examine the issues from multiple angles and produce recommendations and implementation strategies based on market conditions, sound information, community realities, and best practices.

The District Council assembles a panel of ULI members chosen for their knowledge of the issues facing the client. The interdisciplinary team may include land planners, architects, market and financial analysts, developers, engineers, appraisers, attorneys and/or brokers who are well qualified to provide unbiased, pragmatic advice on complex real estate and land-use issues.

To ensure objectivity, panel members cannot be involved in matters pending before the client, currently work for the client or solicit work from the client during the six months following the TAP program. In addition, they are not compensated for their time, but they are reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses, such as overnight lodging and transportation to attend the TAP.

How Does the Program Work?

TAP members are briefed on the issues facing the client and receive detailed information relevant to the assignment including project history, detailed maps of the study area, relevant demographics and other relevant data necessary for an understanding of the task at hand. During the two-day program, TAP members tour the study area, interview stakeholders (business owners, city council members, etc.), and work collaboratively to produce preliminary findings and recommendations which are presented at the end of Day 2 to the client. A complete report follows within about eight weeks with detailed recommendations.

ULI Advisory Services identify creative, practical solutions for complex land use and development challenges.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- List of Participants 4
- TAP Scope & Panel Process 5
- Executive Summary 7
- Background 8
- Analysis 14
- Recommendations 22
- About the Panel 25

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TAP SCOPE OF WORK & PANEL PROCESS

TAP SCOPE

The Gateway to Clay (GTC) engaged the ULI North Florida District Council to convene a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) to study county-owned property between U.S. Highway 17 and Blanding Boulevard on Wells Road in Clay County. This study area currently houses the Orange Park Mall, hotels, restaurants, and medical facilities, with many parking lots, small businesses and neighborhoods.

The TAP was asked to recommend the following:

1. A long-term vision and development program for the study area that would promote economic growth for both commercial and residential, revitalization, sound development practices, and livability to eat, work and play; and
2. Highest and best uses for the study area, including identifying a range of uses that would be compatible with existing, committed and planned uses and public facilities within the Wells Road area as a destination district with coordination of the Orange Park Mall; and
3. Strategies for public facilities to promote mobility to, from and within the study area, as well as any resulting adjustments to current land use, transportation, traffic patterns, smart street technology, and recreational and open-space plans.

PANEL PROCESS

The ULI North Florida District Council assembled a group of accomplished ULI members who have expertise in real estate development, growth management, land planning, and site development, making for an intensive two-day workshop to address the challenges facing the Wells Road area.

Prior to convening, TAP members received information on the Gateway to Clay initiative, including the county's 2040 Comprehensive Plan, transit and transit studies, tourism and other pertinent data.

Orientation on Day 1 included an introductory presentation by Clay County representatives and Craig Phillips, Chick-fil-A franchisee. The representatives from Clay County included Michael Cella, Commissioner, Clay County Board of County Commissioners; Howard Wanamaker, Clay County Manager; Troy Nagle, Assistant County Manager; Beth Carson, Chief Planner, Economic and Development Services; Kellie Henry, Economic Development Coordinator, Economic and Development Services; and Gabrielle Gunn, Director of Community and Social Services.

Panelists toured the TAP study area and conducted individual interviews with various stakeholders to hear their assessments of the community and attendant issues. Interviewees included Michael Cella, Clay County Commissioner; Howard Wanamaker, County Manager; Jamie Shelton, President, bestbet Orange Park, Inc.; Travis Cumming, former member of the Florida House of Representatives and Senior Vice President, The Bailey Group; Kellie Henry, Economic and Development Services Coordinator; Jon Cantrell, President, Clay County Chamber of Commerce, and Randy Bowman, General Manager, Orange Park Mall, Washington Prime Group, Inc.

At the end of Day 2, the ULI panel shared their observations and recommendations with Clay County representatives and stakeholders.

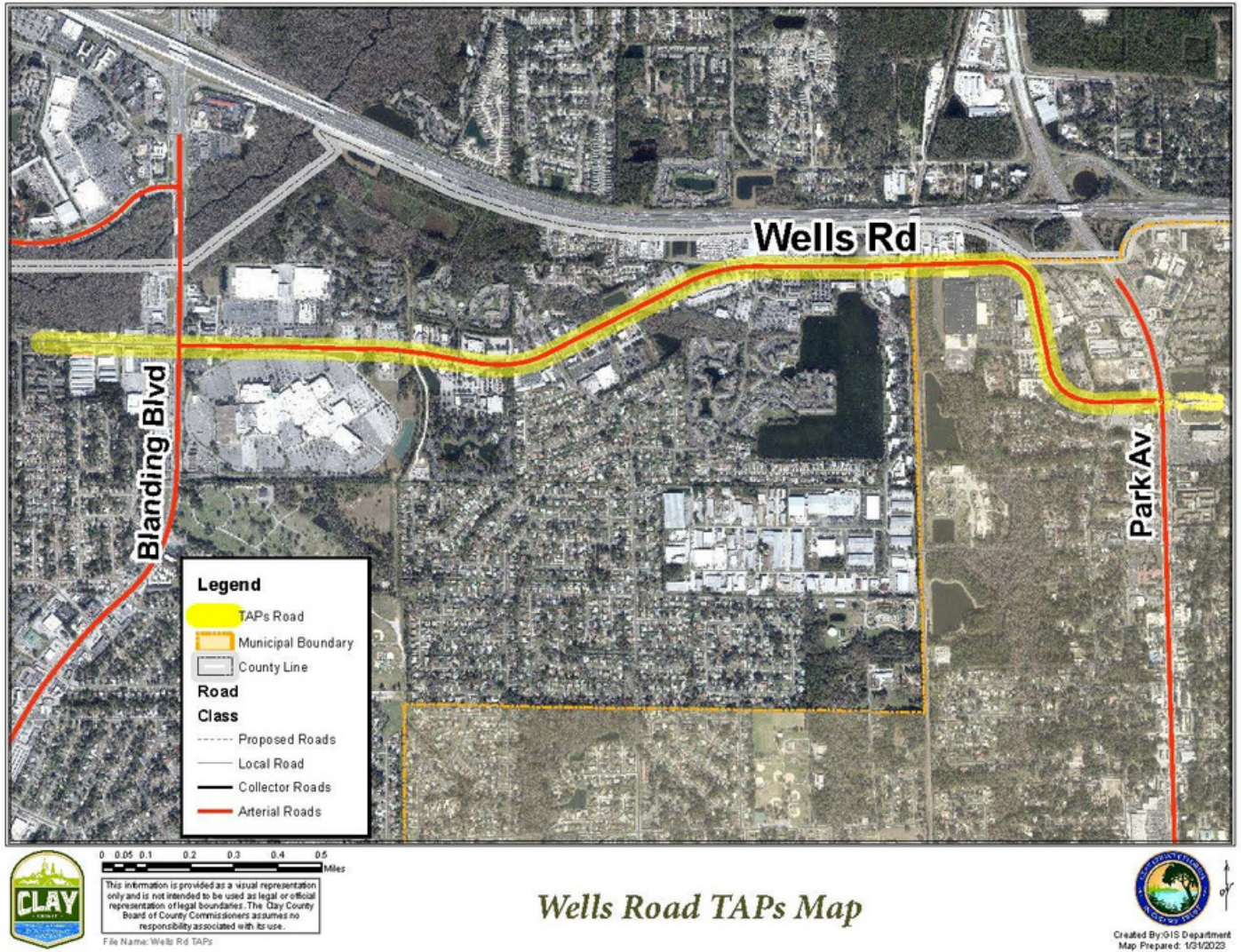


IMAGE: Wells Road Map



PHOTOS: TAP panelists performing a SWOT analysis and touring Wells Road

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Clay County's Gateway to Clay initiative was created in 2021 to revitalize the Wells Road corridor with a goal to improve residents' quality of life, increase business opportunities and refresh the road's overall look. The county envisions the corridor as a live, work, play environment that includes retail and commercial businesses, entertainment, high-end restaurants, parks and green space.

To champion the Gateway to Clay initiative, Urban Land Institute's Technical Assistance Panel recommended the establishment of a strong Wells Road merchants association. It can serve as an organizing and communications tool among the corridor's businesses and help drive change. In addition, the Gateway to Clay initiative must ensure that all stakeholders are represented on their committee.

Orange Park Mall at Blanding Boulevard and bestbet at U.S. Highway 17 are destinations. The panel recommends leveraging and enhancing these entities by supporting mixed-use development at the mall and a higher-end hotel/restaurant at bestbet to complement its proposed new poker room facility. Such redevelopment can spur further economic revitalization in surrounding areas.

Adjacent to bestbet on River Road is a vacant 3-acre property that panelists see as ideal for a park. In addition, bestbet management appears amenable to providing a portion of its land adjacent to the vacant lot for such a park. Other potential park locations include a vacant lot on Wells Road near Debarray Avenue and property at the west end of Wells Road.

While several new businesses and hotels have recently located in the corridor, panelists noted a lack of visual consistency in design standards and the need for refurbishing many of the older buildings and strip malls. They also observed missing sections of sidewalks and crosswalks and a need for bike lanes, lighting and landscaping. Panelists suggest taking a holistic approach to revitalization, developing consistent design standards, and implementing a Complete Streets approach to enhance pedestrian and bicycle mobility and safety. This effort will require code enforcement and strong collaboration between county and municipal jurisdictions.

Among possible funding opportunities is the creation of a Community Redevelopment Area using the Regional Activity Center boundary that the county had previously developed but never implemented. Funding can also come from federal and state grants, the county's existing impact fees, partnerships with private entities, the Town of Orange Park, Clay Electric and the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT). To encourage economic development, panelists suggest providing incentives for infill and redevelopment.

Other panel recommendations include development of a proactive communications and marketing plan and two long-term projects: (1) conversion to underground utilities to widen sidewalks and strengthen storm resiliency and (2) construction of a connector between Argyle Forest Boulevard in Jacksonville and Wells Road to improve southbound traffic flow. While these long-term options are not under county jurisdiction, county representatives can lobby for these improvements, and the county can work with Clay Electric on seeking federal funding for utility conversion.

BACKGROUND

Wells Road is located south of and parallel to Interstate 295 and the Duval County/Jacksonville line. A major east-west Clay County connector, the road is anchored by the Orange Park Mall in the west at Blanding Boulevard (an unincorporated part of Clay County) and bestbet in the east at U.S. Highway 17 in the incorporated Town of Orange Park. The CSX railroad line parallels the Town of Orange Park’s western boundary, dividing Wells Road between the two jurisdictions.

The county has designated Wells Road as the Gateway to Clay in recognition of the fact that many people travel through the corridor when entering Clay County from Jacksonville. The goal of the Gateway to Clay initiative is to “Improve the safety, security, and operability of the Wells Road corridor [in order] to improve the quality of life for residents, increase business opportunities, and refresh the overall look....” As part of a branding effort, the county erected a “Welcome to Clay” sign at the site of the Orange Park Mall on Wells Road at Blanding to distinguish itself from the Town of Orange Park and the City of Jacksonville.



Development along Wells Road’s two- to three-mile stretch is relatively dense with hotels, fast food restaurants, medical facilities, a Rowe’s IGA supermarket, and a variety of small- to medium-size businesses. Several housing complexes lie off the road.



PHOTOS: Businesses along Wells Road including a strip mall, medical facility, and RV center

County officials note that many people who live in the area spend their money elsewhere. The county would like to see the Wells Road corridor redeveloped as an edge city—a live, work, play environment with a concentration of businesses, shopping, entertainment, high-end restaurants, parks and green space to keep people engaged in the area. Challenges include traffic issues, homelessness, vacant businesses, median maintenance and a lack of public parks.

Clay County has plans to turn Wells Road into a “smart” road with autonomous vehicles moving people through the corridor. They also are working with Smart North Florida, Inc., to increase public safety and improve traffic conditions. The Smart Corridor project integrates data collection, cameras, call boxes and connection to the Clay County Sheriff’s Office Real Time Crime Center.

Recently, several new establishments have located on Wells Road. The Borland Groover Clinic renovated an existing building, creating a 29,000-square-foot, \$14.6 million state-of-the-art ambulatory surgery center and medical office. WoodSpring Suites, an economy extended stay hotel that is part of the Choice Hotels family, opened in January 2023. Another hotel is planned behind the WAWA on U.S. 17 off Wells. Additionally, Lincoln Memorial University (LMU) recently purchased two adjacent buildings off Wells Road on Plaza Circle and Crossing Boulevard. The property includes a total of 130,000 square feet on approximately 12 acres. The LMU-College of Veterinary Medicine Orange Park will be one of the programs based at the institution’s newest learning site. LMU’s main campus in Harrogate, Tenn., is home to the Richard A. Gillespie College of Veterinary Medicine. Currently, the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine is the only veterinary college in Florida.



PHOTO: Borland Groover Clinic

Orange Park Mall

The Orange Park Mall is a major destination. It has a prime location off I-295, a population of more than 438,000 within 10 miles, and draws visitors from neighboring counties. Some 3,000 people work at the regional shopping center.

In 2018, occupancy was only 78 percent and the retailers were predominantly mom and pop shops. Today, the mall boasts 180 tenants and a 98 percent occupancy rate. Occupancy had been at 100 percent for six months prior to the start of the covid pandemic.

The mall continues to exceed sales expectations. According to mall management, shopping frequency patterns have changed post-covid from weekend trips only to two or three trips a week. Traffic hovers at 37,000 a day and 50,000 on weekends. In addition, the shopping center’s grounds host carnivals, car shows, the annual Freedom Festival and other special events that draw thousands of visitors.



PHOTO: Orange Park Mall entrance

Despite its success, the mall's image is overshadowed by the vacant 18-acre Sears property that faces Blanding Boulevard. Sears Holdings Corp. filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2018. Through Transform Dove Holdco LLC, Sears Chairman Eddie Lampert purchased the property for \$7.7 million in 2019 and closed the 186,331-square-foot store and free-standing 33,486-square-foot auto building a year later.

Like the Sears property, Dillard's and Belk each own their buildings and land. As a result, they must agree to any shopping center redevelopment plan along with mall owner Washington Prime Group, Inc., a private real estate investment trust (REIT).

Several plans have been brought to the table. An open-air amphitheater-style performance space faced public opposition. Sears has proposed a redevelopment plan that would eliminate entry from its building to the mall, which mall ownership opposes. Recent negotiations to purchase the property for an 8,500-seat arena for \$8.5 million fell apart when the parties were unable to agree upon a price. Sears sought \$12.5 million. Currently, the site is listed for lease, and it appears there is interest from retailers and others for redevelopment.

The mall also suffers from a public perception of crime, despite the fact that crime at the mall and on Wells Road is low. The perception persists due to publicity from past incidents that occurred during large special events and/or by teen gatherings causing disturbances, some of which were exaggerated by social media.

Several initiatives have helped to reduce incidents and crime. They include the implementation of a county event ordinance in the unincorporated areas of Clay. The ordinance outlines key safety measures event sponsors must take, including appropriate law enforcement/security personnel, based on the scale and type of event. To intercept any planned teen flash mobs, the Clay County Sheriff's Office monitors social media. In addition, the mall administration has set a zero-tolerance policy for certain conduct in the mall in order to prevent problems from occurring.

Traffic issues in and around the mall abound. According to 2022 Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) counts, the annual average daily traffic for Blanding is 78,000 and 22,500 for Wells Road. Drivers experience heavy congestion at the intersection during peak hours.



PHOTO: Abandoned Sears property



IMAGE: Sears property that is vacant and available for lease is shown in red

There are no sidewalks on either side of Wells Road from the eastern entrance to the mall to Blanding Boulevard. Several Chick-fil-A employees have been hit by cars when crossing Wells. There is no lighting at night.

The FDOT has proposed access management changes to the intersection of Blanding Boulevard and Wells Road. The changes include a hybrid type of design that combines a partial displaced left-turn (PDLT) on the east leg and a partial median U-turn (MUT) on the north leg. In addition, a median opening into the mall across from Taco Bell will be closed. The new configuration is expected to relieve congestion, enhance safety and improve the flow of traffic.

Traffic at the mall is not the only area of concern. Wells Road at Crossing Boulevard is a hotspot due to the curved geometry of the road, which limits drivers' visibility of the traffic lights. Wells Road at Debarry Avenue had the highest crash frequency followed by Wells Road at U.S. 17, according to a 2018 Town of Orange Park Traffic Circulation Study. Work commenced in October 2022 on an FDOT I-295/U.S. 17 interchange project that is expected to relieve congestion and improve safety on U.S. 17. It is expected to be completed in late 2024.

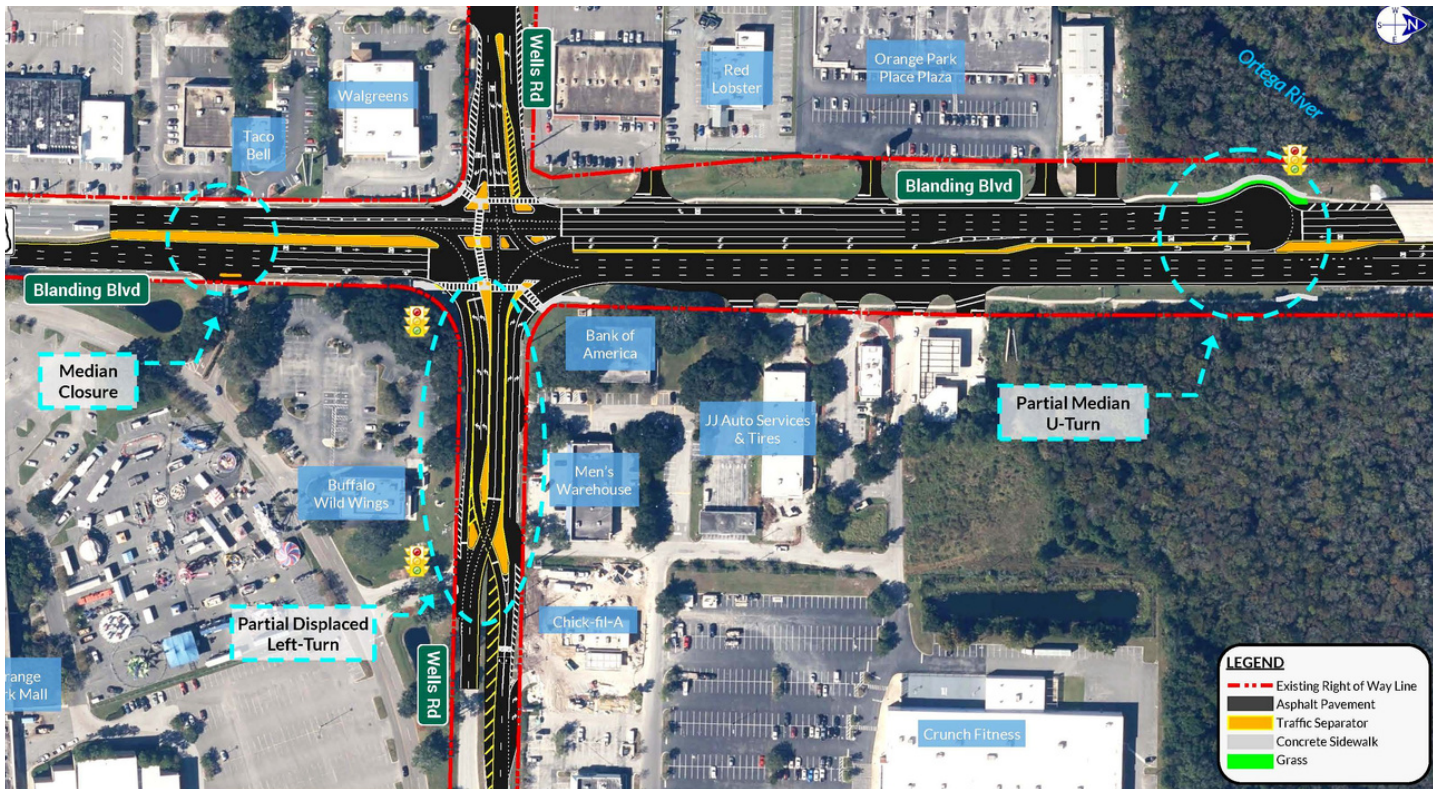


IMAGE: FDOT proposed improvements to the Blanding Boulevard/Wells Road intersection



I-295 at U.S. 17 Interchange Improvements

This project consists of milling and resurfacing, reconstruction, base work, shoulder treatment, drainage improvements, curb and gutters, traffic signals, lighting, highway signing, guardrail, sidewalks, gravity wall, concrete slope pavement, ITS and other incidental construction on I-295 at U.S. 17 (State Road 15) from south of Wells Road to Collins Road in Duval County. It includes the following improvements:

- Widening U.S. 17 from north of the southbound I-295 exit ramp to Collins Road
- Installing new signals at the intersections of U.S. 17 and Wells Road, U.S. 17 and Old Orange Park Road, U.S. 17 and Eldridge Avenue and U.S. 17 and the southbound I-295 exit ramps
- Constructing new walls to accommodate sidewalks on U.S. 17 under the I-295 bridge
- Constructing a 10-foot sidewalk on the north side of Eldridge Avenue
- Widening Eldridge Avenue and constructing a 6-foot sidewalk on the south side of the roadway and a 10-foot sidewalk/bike path on the north side of the roadway
- Realigning the southbound I-295 exit ramps to include three right turn lanes and two left turn lanes
- Realigning the northbound I-295 exit ramps to include three right turn lanes and three left turn lanes
- Adding an additional lane to the southbound I-295 entrance ramp
- Milling and resurfacing existing roadway throughout the project limits

bestbet

Bestbet Orange Park is a gaming operation that attracts players from all over Northeast Florida. In addition to offering poker and other card games, bestbet includes simulcast wagering on thoroughbred and harness racing and Jai Alai. The Orange Park site is one of three bestbet locations, including one in Jacksonville and the newest in St. Augustine, which opened in August 2022.

The approximately 15-acre Orange Park property extends from U.S. 17 to River Road and is covered by three different zoning codes—Commercial, Intensive (CI); Residential, General (RG-1); and Residential, Single-Family Estate (RS-1). An adjacent 3-acre site along River Road is for sale for \$1.7 million.

The bestbet property includes a greyhound racing track that was closed in December 2020 as a result of Florida’s constitutional Amendment 13, which passed in 2018. The amendment prohibits the racing of greyhounds and other dogs at gaming or pari-mutuel facilities in the state after December 31, 2020. A vacant portion of the property is used for overflow parking when needed.

PHOTO: Orange Park bestbet



PHOTO: St. Augustine bestbet

Bestbet President Jamie Shelton is interested in redeveloping the site as a destination compatible with his gaming operation. As such, he strongly opposes construction of multifamily housing at the site, which he deems inappropriate near the poker room.

Shelton would like to replace the current 100,000-square foot building with one similar to the St. Augustine bestbet facility but smaller—32,000 square feet vs. 40,673 square feet. He sees the property’s highest and best use as a hotel with river views and a high-end restaurant, such as Ruth’s Chris Steak House.

Any redevelopment will require rezoning and a stormwater retention pond. Shelton indicated that the parcel by River Road could be provided to the county/municipality for a park.

“We want to be accepted as part of the community and as part of its improvement.”

- Jamie Shelton, President, bestbet

ANALYSIS

WHAT WE HEARD



Wells Road is an established corridor with a wide mix of uses. While there is some new development, many of the older buildings and strip malls are in need of refurbishing. Additionally, the corridor is not conducive to pedestrian or bike mobility. Sections of sidewalks, crosswalks and bike lanes are missing. While some trees have been planted in the road’s median, much more landscaping along the corridor is needed.

While overarching observations and recommendations can be made, they are not necessarily applicable to the road in its entirety. Therefore, the panel conducted a SWOT analysis of each of four sections of Wells Road based on distinct characteristics:

- River Road to U.S. 17 (bestbet property),
- U.S. 17 to the CSX railroad tracks (Orange Park boundary),
- CSX railroad tracks to Orange Park Mall/Blanding Boulevard, and
- Blanding Boulevard to Hilltop Restaurant (Wells Road end).



PHOTO: TAP panelists hearing from Clay County representatives and Chick-Fil-A franchisee Craig Phillips

River Road to U.S. 17

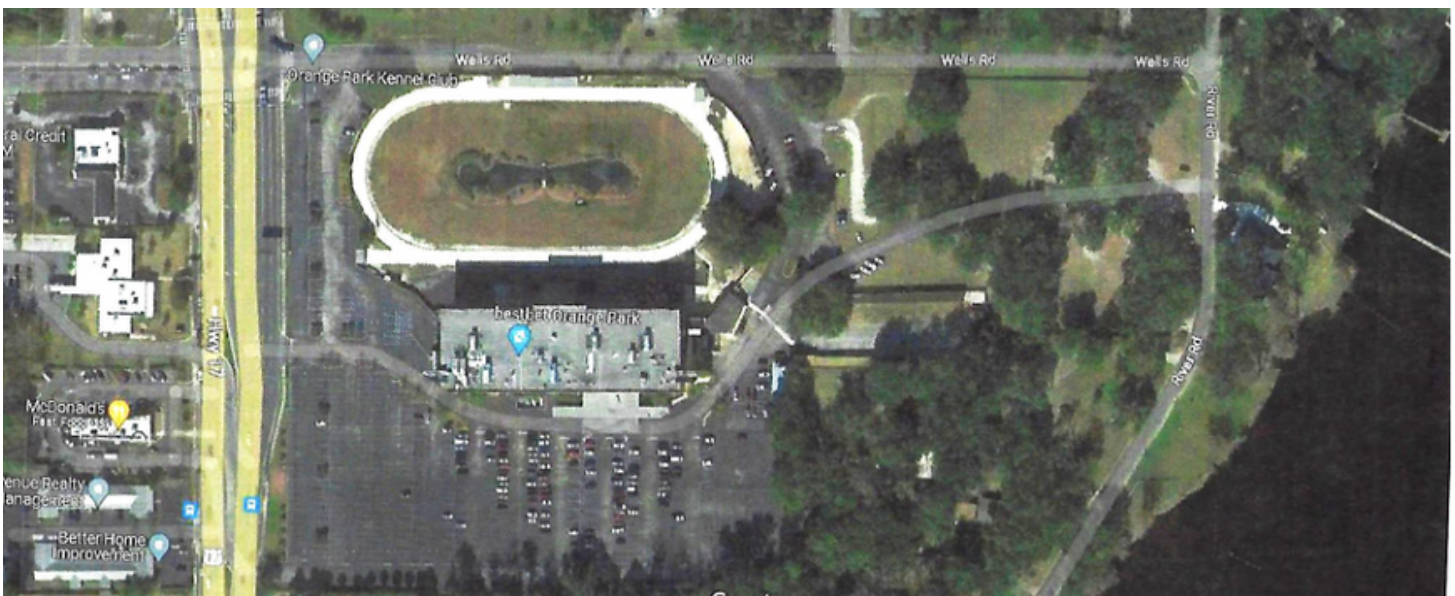
Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Location Opportunity to attract premier tenants Destination	Zoning permitted uses Underutilized Traffic patterns	Hotel Park Landowner cooperation Higher-end tenants Vacant corner parcel Blank canvas	River Road residents Lack of community cooperation

The bestbet property offers an opportunity to transform what is a blank canvas into a desirable destination. The property's owner appears to be eager to work with the county and the municipality to create a tasteful attraction.

Visitors to bestbet have easy access to and from I-295. There are two- or three-star hotels nearby on Wells Road. However, river views make the bestbet property a prime location for a higher-end hotel with a conference center/event space, a fine-dining option like Ruth's Chris Steak House, or a rooftop restaurant and bar.

The river location also provides an opportunity to turn a portion of the property into a recreational area, particularly in conjunction with the adjacent three-acre River Road lot that is for sale.

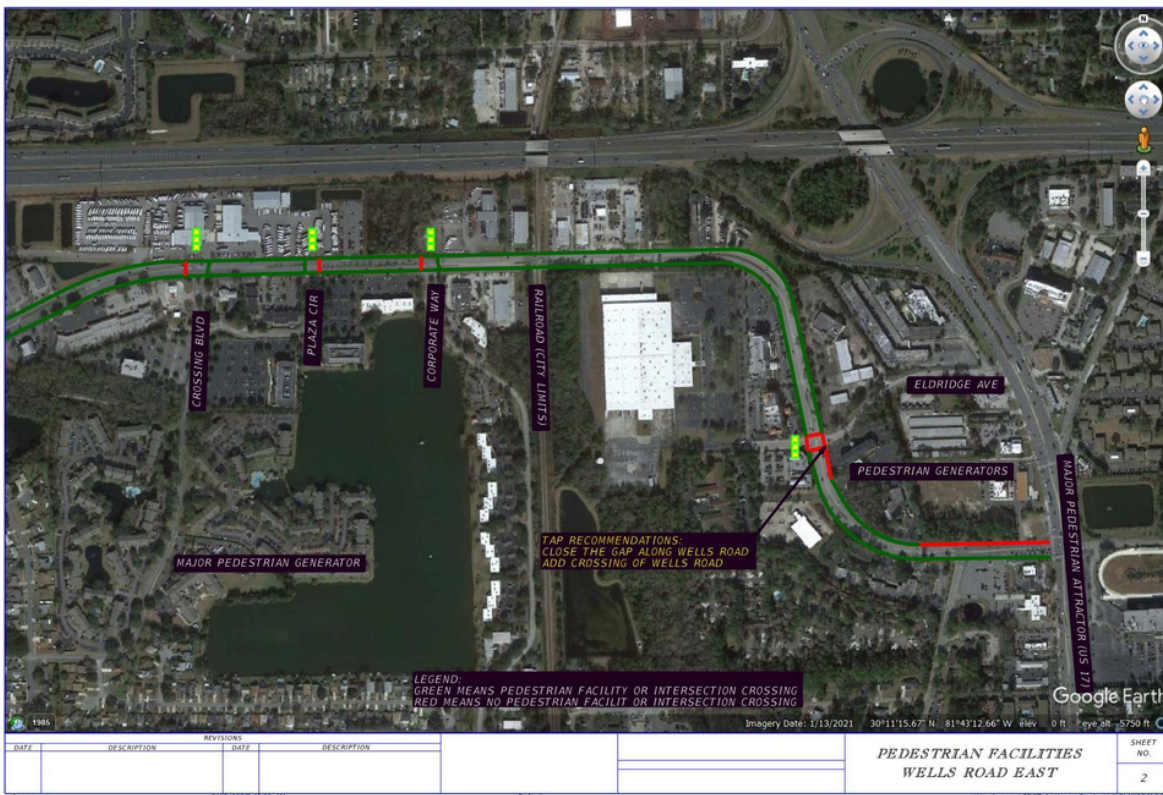
One of the impediments to development is zoning. Currently, two portions of the property are zoned for single-family homes, which will require a change. Other challenges include stormwater capacity, which must be addressed, and resistance from River Road residents, who may wish to block development and keep single-family residential zoning in place.



U.S. 17 to CSX Railroad Tracks (Town of Orange Park boundary)			
Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
New businesses	No social gathering	Beautification	Traffic impact from U.S. 17 modifications
Interest in development	Some sidewalks	Signage	
Proximity to destination points	Fragmented jurisdiction	Complete sidewalks	
	Appearance of Hanania Collision Center		
	Visual inconsistency		

Wells Road from U.S. 17 in the Town of Orange Park to the municipality’s boundary at the railroad line is not dense with retail and commercial entities. However, it has seen several new businesses added recently, including the Borland Groover endoscopy center and the Morocco Shriners headquarters. The area is home to several hotels, given its proximity to the I-295/U.S. 17 interchange. This area is also conveniently located to the bestbet poker room.

This section of Wells Road lacks visual consistency, particularly the Hanania Collision Center, and would benefit from additional beautification. Some sections lack sidewalks and there is a need for crosswalks. Fragmented jurisdiction will require collaboration with respect to any improvement efforts. The modifications to the I-295/U.S. 17 interchange, the U.S. 17/Wells Road intersection and Eldridge Avenue may affect traffic patterns.





PHOTOS: HANANIA COLLISION CENTER, MOROCCO SHRINERS, AND COURTYARD BY MARRIOTT

CSX Railroad Tracks to Orange Park Mall/Blanding Boulevard			
Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
RV Center	Lack of major grocery	Sears property	Lack of coordination between state/county
Marine/BMW new facilities	No green space	Landscaping palettes	Perceived crime
Destination	Traffic	Clay Electric/All utilities underground	Vacant Sears property
Mall occupancy rates	Lack of walkability	Improve aesthetics	Competing visions
Mall tax revenue	No bike lanes	Widening sidewalks	
Community engagement		Partnering with FDOT to add sidewalks/lighting	
		Increase roadway jurisdiction coordination between state/county	
		1648 Wells Rd. lot for park	

This section of Wells Road is thriving with businesses. Orange Park Mall, LLC is the third largest taxpayer in Clay County. As a destination, the mall draws 90,000 visits a week. The center’s occupancy rate of 98 percent exceeds average occupancy rates for indoor malls. According to a Coresight Research study on public mall operators in 2022, top-tier malls (malls featuring luxury retailers and located in areas where a typical shopper has an annual income of over \$200,000) had an occupancy rate of 95.1 percent, while the rate for non-top-tier malls was 89.1 percent.

The vacant Sears property provides both a threat and an opportunity. Situated on the southwest corner and facing heavily trafficked Blanding Boulevard, the empty buildings undermine the mall’s image and that of the surrounding area. A 2020 National Association of Realtors study noted: “Vacant malls contribute to urban decay, declining property values, and lower tax revenues. Because of these adverse effects, it is important that vacant retail stores are repurposed for other uses.”

The inability of the four property owners to come to an agreement on the site has hindered redevelopment. Nevertheless, the property has great potential and apparent interest from junior boxes, a grocer and restaurants, and has an opportunity to be transformed into a vibrant mixed-use town core.

Mall revitalization efforts, however, “require (1) a sophisticated understanding of [a] site’s current and future competitive position in the local market and (2) a hard analysis of which redevelopment opportunities are financially realistic,” as noted in ULI’s “Ten Principles for Rethinking the Mall.”

The area around the Orange Park Mall suffers from traffic woes. The FDOT has proposed improvements to the Blanding Boulevard/Wells Road intersection to relieve congestion and enhance driver safety. However, it is not clear how it would improve pedestrian safety. Currently, Wells Road near Blanding lacks crosswalks, sidewalks and bike lanes.



PHOTO: Unlock the value of the land: 10 Principles for Rethinking the mall

The space needed to add sidewalks for pedestrian safety could be created by putting utilities underground. Efforts including lowering the speed limit on Wells Road, widening sidewalks, incorporating a Complete Street design, code enforcement, and adding landscaping and green space not only around the mall but throughout the corridor can go a long way in improving residents' perception of the area.

There are a few spots along Wells Road that have the potential to serve as a park or dog park. A vacant 1.25-acre parcel for sale for \$500,000 on Wells Road just east of Debarry Avenue could be an opportunity to create a park for nearby residents. In addition, redevelopment at the mall could include a "green" area with appropriate landscaping, trees and benches as part of a redefined town center.

Residents living in and around the Wells Road corridor also have limited access to grocery stores. Other than Rowe's IGA, the closest supermarket is the Argyle Forest Publix in Duval County.

Aldi could be a potential grocer either at the Orange Park Mall or elsewhere on Wells Road. The store requires a daily traffic count in excess of 20,000 vehicles per day and a dense trade area population within three miles.

Sites must be located in a community or regional shopping district. The discount grocer has been in an expansion mode in the southeast and recently announced an agreement to acquire 397 Winn-Dixie and Harveys stores from Southeastern Grocers—299 of which are in Florida. However, not all stores will be converted to the Aldi brand.

Ten Principles for Rethinking the Mall

1. Grab your opportunities or they will pass you by.
2. Broaden your field of vision.
3. Unlock the value of the land.
4. Let the market be your guide.
5. Create consensus.
6. Think holistically before planning the parts.
7. Connect all the dots.
8. Design parking as more than a ratio.
9. Deliver a sense of community.
10. Stay alert, because the job is never done.

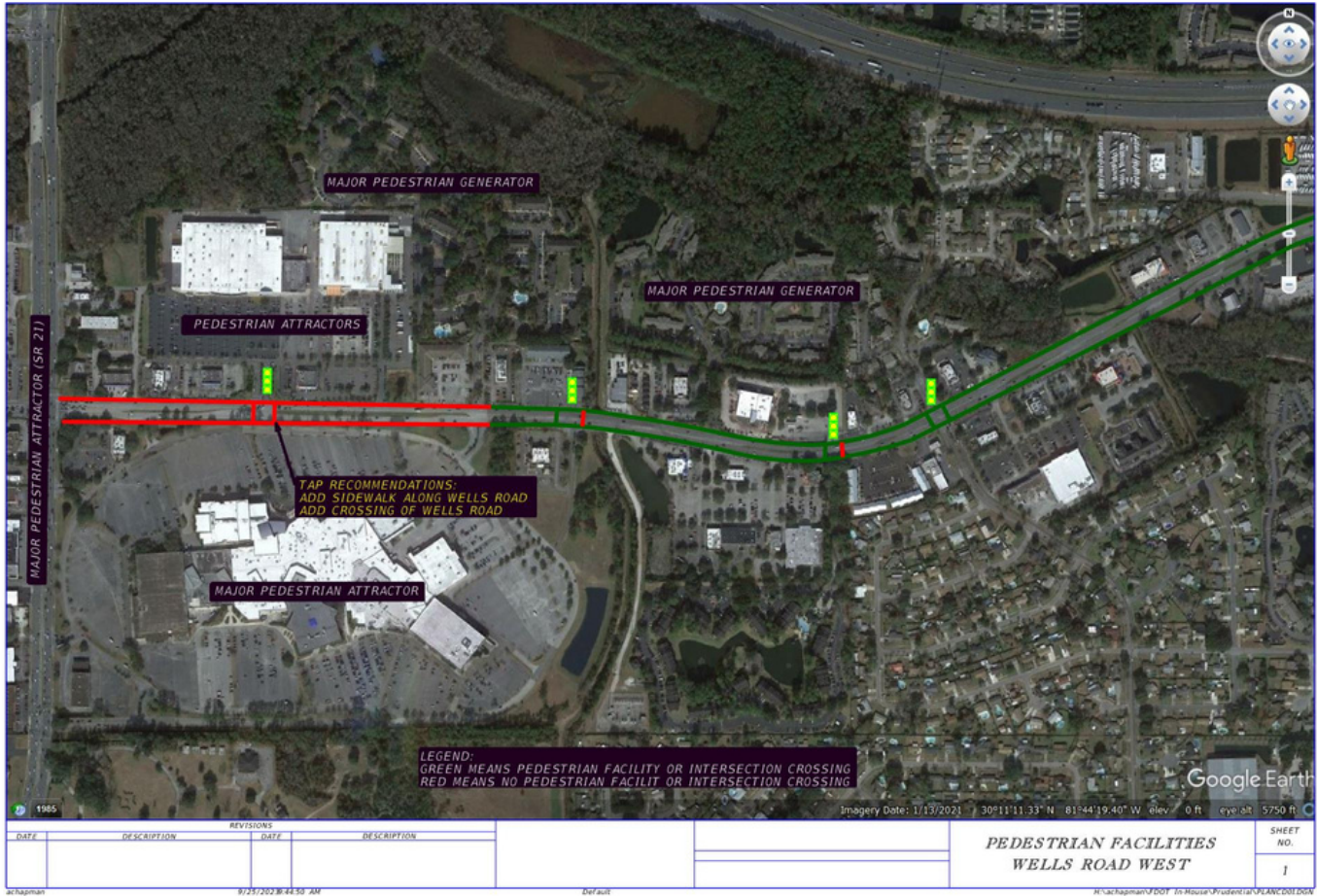


PHOTO: Vacant property at 1648 Wells Road

Blanding Boulevard to Hilltop Restaurant (Wells Road end)

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<p>Meeting space at Hilltop restaurant</p> <p>Occupancy</p> <p>Thriving businesses</p> <p>Less traffic</p>	<p>Outdated commercial assets</p> <p>Missing sidewalk</p>	<p>Refresh with paint</p> <p>Connector between Argyle to west side of Wells Road (FDOT/Wetlands)</p> <p>Feasibility study</p> <p>Engage business owners</p> <p>Park</p> <p>Landscaping</p>	<p>Intersection modification</p> <p>Prohibitive cost</p>

The area west of Blanding Boulevard is home to a shopping center, strip malls, Carpetman Flooring, a boat and RV storage center, apartments, and the Hilltop Restaurant. The commercial assets on Wells are outdated and in need of refurbishing. The commercial end of the street lacks landscaping and sidewalks on the north side of the street. There is an opportunity to create a park at the end of Wells Road.

The proposed FDOT modifications to the Blanding Boulevard/Wells Road intersection are problematic from a design standpoint. Northbound drivers on Blanding will not be able to make a left turn on to Wells. Instead, they will be required to drive 900 feet past the street, make a U-turn, head south and then turn right to access the shops, restaurants and apartments on Wells. This proposed configuration may well be opposed not only by drivers but also by the businesses and residents affected.

There could be a long-term option to alleviate southbound traffic on Blanding from Jacksonville. Three of the four intersections with the highest number of crashes in Jacksonville in 2021 were Blanding/Youngerman, Blanding/Collins and Blanding/Argyle Forest.

FDOT could create a connector between Argyle Forest Boulevard and the west end of Wells Road to divert southbound traffic from the Argyle/Blanding intersection. A study could determine the feasibility of a flyover and whether the cost would be prohibitive.



PHOTOS: Carpetman Flooring and strip mall

RECOMMENDATIONS

In analyzing the Wells Road corridor, panelists identified several overarching recommendations that could be applied to the scope area in general. Panelists also identified distinct characteristics that were applicable to sections of the corridor and made recommendations specific to those areas.

Overarching Recommendations

Leverage and enhance the existing destinations.

Wells Road has the advantage of being home to two distinct destinations—the Orange Park Mall and bestbet—both of which have great potential to be redeveloped to their highest and best uses. The county should work in collaboration with those assets to help them overcome any obstacles to such development.

Increase stakeholder engagement and agency coordination.

The Gateway to Wells initiative is a combined effort of local government, residents, business owners, and first responders. However, there does not appear to be a cohesive network that brings Wells Road businesses together. Panelists recommend the establishment of a strong merchant's association to help serve as an organizing and communications tool. It can champion the Gateway initiative and foster a climate of cooperation among businesses with those efforts.

Develop context-sensitive solutions that take a holistic approach to revitalization.

A holistic approach to revitalization should address roadway improvements, streetscapes, façades, economic development, landscaping, green space and neighborhood character.

Develop consistent design standards.

Consider both the existing conditions and a vision for the future as old structures are replaced. This should include not only architectural standards but landscaping, parking and signage.

Explore funding mechanisms and partnerships.

Creation of a Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) for the nonincorporated area of Wells Road can provide the funding needed to foster and support redevelopment of the targeted area. The CRA's boundary could mirror that of the Regional Activity Center, which was established but never implemented. CRA projects typically include: streetscapes and roadway improvements; building renovations; new building construction; flood control initiatives; water and sewer improvements; parking lots and garages; neighborhood parks; sidewalks; and street tree plantings. The plan can also include redevelopment incentives such as grants and loans for such things as façade improvements, sprinkler system upgrades, signs and structural improvements. CRA improvements are paid for through tax increment financing—tax revenues from increases in real property value are dedicated to the redevelopment area.

In addition, the county can fund projects through existing impact fees and partnerships with private entities, Orange Park, Clay Electric and FDOT. To encourage economic development, the county should consider providing incentives for infill and redevelopment (e.g., reduced taxes).

Federal and state grants for street improvements, beautification and recreational area development should be explored, such as:

- Community Block Development Grant (<https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/cdbg>)
- Safe Streets and Roads for All (<https://www.transportation.gov/grants/SS4A>)
- Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) Discretionary Grant Program (<https://www.transportation.gov/RAISEgrants/about>)
- FDOT Beautification Grant (<https://www.fdot.gov/designsupport/highwaybeautification/grants.shtm>)
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Land and Recreation Grants (<https://floridadep.gov/grants>)
 - Florida Communities Trust Parks and Open Space Program
 - Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program

Create a safer roadway to enhance pedestrian and bicycle mobility.

Implement a Complete Streets approach to roadway design. This includes filling in fragmented sidewalks (short-term); widening sidewalks (long-term); reducing speed limit within the unincorporated area of Wells Road; reducing lane width; and adding bike lanes, pedestrian crosswalks, lighting, signage and landscaping.

Develop a proactive communications and marketing plan.

Any initiative needs to build awareness and buy-in. Frequent and consistent communication is vital. Target communications using various channels to reach different audiences.

Consider burying utilities and connecting Argyle Forest to Wells Road.

Underground utilities would provide more space to add and/or widen sidewalks as part of greater safety for pedestrians as well as storm resiliency. The county should work collaboratively with Clay Electric to seek federal funding for utility conversion to underground. Funding sources include a FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) and the federal Transportation Enhancements Program that covers utility burial for landscaping and scenic beautification programs.

A flyover between Argyle Forest Boulevard and the west end of Wells Road could improve southbound traffic flow and help to alleviate traffic bottlenecks and crashes at the Argyle Forest/Blanding Boulevard intersection.

River Road to U.S. 17

Support highest and best uses for bestbet redevelopment.

The highest and best uses to complement a new bestbet facility is a higher-end hotel and conference center that provides medium-size event space and a high-end and/or rooftop restaurant and bar. Zoning changes and stormwater capacity will need to be addressed.

Create a recreational area/park on River Road.

The 3-acre River Road lot that is for sale provides an ideal opportunity for a recreational area, particularly in conjunction with a portion of the adjacent bestbet property, which bestbet appears willing to provide. The county and Town of Orange Park could collaborate on the purchase and creation of the park.

U.S. 17 to the CSX railroad tracks

Landscape and beautify this section of road.

Enforce code to ensure compliance with storage visibility and perimeter landscaping adjacent to public rights-of-way.

Collaborate with the Town of Orange Park.

CSX railroad tracks to Orange Park Mall/Blanding Boulevard

Redevelop Orange Park Mall as mixed-use.

Mixed-use development provides the highest and best use for the Orange Park Mall property. A sample study of 153 U.S. mall redevelopments found that nearly half redeveloped as mixed-use, incorporating at least three uses. Common uses reported by the Jones Lang LaSalle study included residential, office, hotel, green space, and health and medical facilities.

Explore future tenant opportunities with underrepresented product/service types.

Underrepresented businesses and services provide an opportunity for strategic economic growth. Examples include grocery, entertainment, additional healthcare, education and government services.

Explore creating a park on Wells Road.

The vacant 1.25-acre parcel for sale at 1648 Wells Road has potential as a small park or dog park for nearby residents. It is one-fifth of a mile east of Debarry Avenue and one-half mile to an apartment complex on Crossing Boulevard. Seek other opportunities to create parks as they present themselves.

Blanding Boulevard to Hilltop Restaurant (Wells Road end).

Establish a park at the end of Wells Road.

Green space for public use would be highly desirable for residents of the surrounding apartments and homes.

Add sidewalks on the north side of the street.

Adding sidewalks will enhance pedestrian safety for customers of the strip malls established there.

Beautify the street by adding landscaping on either side of the road and replacing missing landscaping/trees in the median.

There is little to no landscaping in the green spaces there to screen parking lots and fencing.

Refresh the strip malls to improve aesthetics.

Provide incentives to encourage business owners to spruce up their façades, such as fresh paint, etc.

Conduct a feasibility study for connecting Wells Road to Argyle Forest Boulevard.

While this is a long-term option, it could be a consideration for diverting traffic from the Argyle Forest/ Blanding Boulevard intersection and would require multijurisdictional collaboration.

Next Steps

Ensure Gateway to Clay committee includes all Wells Road stakeholders.

Conduct a Complete Streets study (that includes underground utilities).

Repair/add sidewalks and crosswalks.

Develop a stakeholder management plan.

Create a merchants association.

Develop a budget/cost performance schedule.

ABOUT THE PANEL



Douglas Booher, TAP Chair

Fidelity National Title | Jacksonville, Florida

Douglas Booher is vice president and counsel, National Commercial Services, at Fidelity National Title Group, focusing on Florida and Southeast commercial customers. He joined the Fidelity Companies in 2009 and has served as the company’s chief claims counsel, managing a team of 95 attorneys and 60 support personnel, as well as the company’s national underwriting development counsel, focusing on building a strong and deep team of talented underwriting counsel for the Fidelity Companies across all markets.

Previously, Booher spent 11 years in private practice as a real estate and business litigation attorney and seven years as an in-house real estate attorney with a large land development company in Jacksonville.

He has extensive experience in nearly all aspects of real estate development and operations, including land and building acquisitions, title and underwriting issues, permitting and entitlements, construction, financing, leasing, management, marketing, and disposition of commercial, office, retail, industrial and multifamily properties.

Booher graduated from the University of Florida with a juris doctor degree and a bachelor of science degree in finance.



Austin Chapman, PE, PTOE, RSP2I

Peters & Yaffee, Inc. | Jacksonville, Florida

Austin Chapman is a senior engineer with Peters & Yaffee with 16 years’ experience in transportation engineering, traffic operation studies, safety studies, planning studies, signal design, roadway design, signing and pavement marking, and signal timing design.

Chapman’s roadway design experience includes new, reconstructed and existing corridors. His signal design experience includes new signals, minor modification to existing signals, full signal reconstruction, as well as isolated and coordinated signals. With regard to traffic operations, Chapman is versed in signal warrant, 4-way stop, sight distance, and speed studies, along with turn-lane need and lane-length studies. His transportation planning experience includes access management studies, capacity analysis, cost estimation, and roadway and development traffic projection.

Chapman earned a bachelor of science degree in civil engineering from the University of North Florida and is a state of Florida licensed professional engineer, professional traffic operations engineer and road safety professional, level 2, infrastructure.

He is a member of the Citizens Advisory Committee of the North Florida Transportation Planning Organization and a former member of the City of Jacksonville Mobility Plan Technical Advisory Committee.



Natalie DeYoung

Wingard | Jacksonville, Florida

Natalie DeYoung is a partner and vice president of public relations and communications at Wingard, a Jacksonville-based marketing and communications agency. In her role, DeYoung guides the development and execution of public relations, brand messaging, communications strategy and copywriting projects, with a specialized focus on supporting commercial real estate and nonprofit client partners.

Her approach to PR is informed by previous roles as an editor and contributing writer for Forbes Travel Guide, Jacksonville Magazine, The Florida Times-Union, Orlando Magazine, and LearnVest.com She has been recognized by the Jacksonville Business Journal as a 2023 “Women of Influence” honoree, and was selected for the “40 Under 40” class of 2020.

DeYoung is actively involved in the Urban Land Institute (ULI), the JAX Chamber Trustees program and the North Florida chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). She holds a bachelor of arts in English from Stetson University.



Holly Irish, PE

Vector Civil Engineering | Gainesville, Florida

Holly Irish is vice president of engineering for Concept Companies, a vertically integrated commercial real estate developer.

She has more than 14 years of experience in the field of land development, having served in the roles of project engineer, project manager and managing engineer for a variety of projects, including small- and large-scale commercial, office parks, residential subdivisions and multifamily housing developments. Through her experience, Irish has gained the knowledge and understanding needed to successfully complete a project through the planning, design, permitting and construction process.

Irish received a bachelor of science degree in civil engineering from the University of Florida and is a licensed professional engineer in the state of Florida.



Blair Knighting, AICP

Kimley-Horn and Associates, Inc. | Jacksonville, Florida

Blair Knighting is a planner with Kimley-Horn. She has more than 10 years of experience in municipal and private-sector planning. Prior to joining Kimley-Horn, Knighting was a historic preservation planner with the City of Jacksonville. Her experience includes but is not limited to analyzing land use and zoning regulations, land development entitlements, comprehensive plan updates, historic preservation planning, and grant writing and management.

Knighting is a member of the St. Johns County Cultural Resources Review Board, the American Planning Association, and the First Coast Florida Planning and Zoning Association (FCFPZA) Executive Board.

She graduated from the University of Florida with a master's degree in historic preservation, with a minor in urban and regional planning, and a bachelor's degree in psychology.



Kyle Larsen

Regency Centers Corporation | Tampa, Florida

As senior manager of investments, Kyle Larsen leads Regency Centers' development program in Central and West Florida. He joined the Tampa office in 2023 and is responsible for sourcing new deals across the state. Additionally, Larsen assists the acquisitions and operations teams with the purchase and redevelopment of existing centers.

Larsen graduated from the University of Florida with a bachelor of science degree in construction management and a master of science degree in real estate.



Joseph Lentz

Cushman & Wakefield | Jacksonville, Florida

Joseph Lentz serves as senior director of Cushman & Wakefield's Florida Land Advisory Team, which focuses on acquisition and disposition services for every property type and size—from infill sites to thousand-acre tracts. The team's coverage area spans West, North and Central Florida. In total, the statewide team has completed more than 375 land transactions representing 41,550+ acres and \$2.35+ billion in land transaction volume.

Lentz brings to the table experience with master-planned communities, major national builders, as well as multifamily, commercial and healthcare development. His interest in working with master-planned communities led to his involvement with the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and Association of Florida Community Developers (AFCD).

He holds a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of North Florida.



Michael Salik, CCIM

Matthews Real Estate Investment Services | Jacksonville, Florida

Based in Jacksonville, Michael Salik is first vice president, Industrial, for Matthews, a commercial real estate investment services and technology firm with 19 offices across the United States. Salik specializes in North Florida industrial sales and leasing. His submarkets include Lake City, Daytona, St. Augustine and Gainesville. He specializes in minor/major acquisitions of industrial land and industrial warehouse spaces, including distribution and cold storage centers.

Salik has more than 22 years of combined federal service—17 years with the Department of Navy on Active Duty/Civilian and five years with the Department of Agriculture (USDA). While serving, he deployed four times in support of the global war on terrorism. In his civilian roles he served as a project manager for a public-private venture with Balfour Beatty and led the expansion of Townsend Bombing Range in Georgia for the USMC. For the General Services Administration (GSA), Salik served as a lease contracting officer for the USDA in Florida, Georgia, and North and South Carolina.

He earned a bachelor of science degree and a master's degree in aeronautical science from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.



Ameera Sayeed, AICP

Geo One Tech | Jacksonville, Florida

Ameera Sayeed is a transportation planning and land development executive. She is an entrepreneur with over 22 years of state and local comprehensive planning experience. Her entrepreneurial spirit and executive leadership skills oversee a planning consulting firm and its business operations, and she serves as founder and CEO for two tech startups. Sayeed has created and marketed proprietary software, including Go-Tech Portal®, SRM®, and Prioritizer® to municipalities and clients in the transportation industry nationwide.

Her experience fosters long-term relationships and consensus with customers by offering data-driven, innovative, future-oriented, and effective solutions for transit planning, freight planning, highway planning, and land planning. Sayeed serves on local boards and mayoral appointments with a passion to support planners and engineers in making data-driven decisions that are trusted and well-founded. She continues to provide strategic counsel, fostering collaborative partnerships across stakeholder groups and earning high-profile clients and well-reputed projects. Through research and analysis, collaborative leadership, purposeful initiative, and operational excellence, she leads and has consulted and supported a cumulative investment portfolio of over \$1.9 billion in the state of Florida.



Douglas Smith

Cross Regions Group | Jacksonville, Florida

Doug Smith is chief operating officer (COO) for Cross Regions group, a real estate company headquartered in Jacksonville, Fla., that specializes in commercial real estate services. He oversees commercial real estate development, brokerage and property management, providing management, leadership and vision to ensure the organization meets its short- and long-term objectives.

He has more than 20 years of experience in real estate. In addition to owning a residential real estate office with more than 30 agents, he has served as national director of real estate for a company with more than 300 locations and as regional director of real estate for Ascension Florida/Gulf Coast.

Smith is a trustee with JAX Chamber, where he is involved with the Government Affairs Committee, and is active with the Downtown Council of Jacksonville as a board member, the Arlington Council and the Three Rivers Council. In addition, Smith is an investor with JAXUSA Partnership and serves as a director of the Cross Regions Disaster Relief Fund.

He is a licensed real estate broker and holds a bachelor of science degree in secondary education from Tennessee Temple University.



The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to shape the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide