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## Will Washington Heights Plan Happen?

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Highlands Today

The final draft of the Washington Heights Neighborhood and Urban Design Plan is in, and now comes the question: Is a large-scale plan like this doable in the current economic climate?

The plan incorporates a number of parts and issues including: land use and zoning, urban design, transportation, community life, historic and cultural preservation, employment, economic development, parks and recreation, social life, code enforcement, neighborhood beautification, safety, housing and oversight.

With the understanding that this could take as long as 20 years to complete the question was asked, is it realistic?

"It's as realistic as we want to make it," said Pete Pollard, Community Redevelopment Agency executive director. "The reality of it is we have already made an investment in the neighborhood (with the streetscape project) that the residents can see and touch; it's a tangible thing. It's not just talk."

It was the CRA that made the \$60,000 investment to have Keith and Schnars, P.A., an engineering, planning and surveying company, draw up the plan.

"We negotiated hard on this because generally these plans cost a whole lot more," Pollard said. "A plan such as this can cost easily \$100,000 to \$150,000 or more."

Pollard said he received the final draft of the plan on Friday and has not had a chance to go over the entire document. Besides that they have not yet received the visual graphics, only the text.

"There's always that possibility that even though this is a final draft document, that this could change," he said.

The city council still has to review and approve the plan, he added.

"Once approved, it provides the CRA with a plan it can provide to developers once the economy becomes more favorable," he said. "Yeah, I think it's realistic depending on certain circumstances."

Is this an attempt to placate the neighborhood, which may only lead to more hard feelings if it doesn't materialize?

"I'm really offended by the question," Pollard said. "The fact that we have already made an investment in the neighborhood's infrastructure, working with the residents of Washington Heights, shows this is not an effort to just placate the residents. It's just a beginning."

"The plan also called for the creation of some public spaces to attract development around them. The

plan calls for the private sector to invest, which under the current circumstances is a little iffy at this time."

The ultimate success of the plan will result from a partnership between the residents and the city, he said.

"Long-term success will come from a commitment within the neighborhood," he said.

The formation of the Washington Heights Concerned Citizens Group as a non-profit was a necessary step toward this. It made the group able to benefit from the Front Porch Florida Program, a state-sponsored program that provides assistance to not-for-profits to make changes come about in deprived neighborhoods.

John Hawthorne is the chief operating officer for the Habitat for Humanity of Highlands County. As a planner for the city of Sarasota who worked on the Newtown Revitalization Plan for five years, he knows full well the importance of getting the commitment from government, as well as citizens and private sector.

This was a \$100 million-plus project for a blighted area similar in size to Washington Heights, about 1.5 square miles. That project ended up taking a serious back seat to other projects when the city changed city managers and elected three new city commissioners, he said.

That economic development had eight elements involving housing, infrastructure, transportation, land use, parks and recreation, public safety and administration.

Plans there were to spend \$35 million over the first 10 years and included a Wal-Mart Supercenter, for another \$30 million part of the plan, and a new \$15 million community center. There was a public housing portion for \$15 million as another part of the plan.

Hawthorne felt the Washington Heights project was not realistic in the current environment of spending.

"A lot of work has to go in on the front end," he said. "You have to turn the conceptual plan into a working plan. That's a two-to three-year process by itself. While we're in this economic process, that's what they may be able to do.

"You've got to create a market. You've got to come up with good tangible reasons for businesses to be created or current businesses to relocate to Washington Heights.

"You're going to have to change the demographics. You've got to change it from a low income to a mixed income area. You have to give people a reason to move into Washington Heights."

Businesses need to know they will have a customer base. If all you have is low income, you're not going to attract a business, because they're looking to make a living, he said.

Michael Jacobson, president of Habitat for Humanity of Highlands County, said Tuesday that two Habitat housing projects, 100 Ridgeview townhomes and 52 single family homes, which are less than a quarter of a mile from the Washington Heights Neighborhood Plan, need to go hand-in-hand.

"I'll take it a step further," said Jacobson. "Without this project (the Washington Heights plan) won't happen."

Habitat is trying to get Tallahassee to give it back the \$2.5 million it had committed to the townhome project through its Community Workforce Housing Innovative Pilot program, but funding was taken back by the Florida Housing Finance Corporation.

Habitat won't know for certain until March 13 if it will get the money. If it doesn't get the money, it could still build 65 single-family units.

"What criteria are you going to use if you're going to open a store?" Jacobson said. "You count rooftops. If you have 100 more rooftops within a quarter of a mile, you take a second look.

"Build residences and the commercial retail will follow. This is our answer to the local stimulus plan."

In order to make Washington Heights happen, his project has to happen by creating urban density, he said.