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Contact: Michael Parks, Harrisonburg Director of Communications
540.432.7701
Michael.Parks@harrisonburgva.gov

Survey, public meeting give community opportunities to envision Northeast Neighborhood's future

Two options will allow neighborhood members to be driving force in creation of small area plan

HARRISONBURG, Va. – People who live and work in Harrisonburg's Northeast Neighborhood are being asked to be the driving force in envisioning the neighborhood's future through two current engagement opportunities from the Harrisonburg Community Connectors project.

The project – a partnership between the City of Harrisonburg, Northeast Neighborhood Association (NENA), Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project and Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance – seeks to work with Northeast Neighborhood community members to create what's known as a Small Area Plan that can be used to guide future growth and investment in the area. Community members currently have the chance to describe their vision for that future through an online survey and upcoming engagement session, with that input directly informing plans to address housing, transportation, community spaces, economic opportunities and other needs in the neighborhood. The survey is available at the City's website, www.harrisonburgva.gov/community-connectors, with the public meeting taking place Saturday, Feb. 15, at 11 a.m. at the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center, 620 Simms Ave.



(Above) Northeast Neighborhood community members listen to a presentation in November 2024 about the Harrisonburg Community Connectors project. A visioning session to help create a future small area plan for the community will be held Feb. 15.

Northeast Neighborhood community members are urged to take part in this process to ensure their ideas, goals and concerns are incorporated into the effort.

“It’s vital that the people who call the Northeast Neighborhood home take this survey and come to our visioning session on Feb. 15 to make sure they are the ones determining what’s best for their neighborhood,” Harrisonburg City Councilwoman and Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project Executive Director Monica Robinson said. “Too many times in the past, decisions for the people who live in this area have been made without them having a voice in the process. Community Connectors is going to make sure that this diverse, historic neighborhood gets to chart its own future. Nobody in this community should miss this opportunity, so make sure you come out ready to discuss all of your ideas for making the Northeast Neighborhood the best it can be for you and your family’s future.”

Harrisonburg's Northeast Neighborhood, a section of the city roughly bounded by East Market Street, Old Furnace Road, Tower Street, Washington Street, and Mason Street – grew out of the original Newtown community that had been founded by formerly enslaved people in the 1800s. Home to many in Harrisonburg's Black community, the area was the focus of the Harrisonburg Northeast Urban Renewal Project R-4 and Project R-16 in the 1950s, which led to many Black-owned homes and businesses being taken by the City to make way for commercial development and the construction of Mason Street. The effort displaced 166 families from the area, in the process eroding trust between many in the Black community and their local government.

“Urban renewal is still negatively impacting the people of the Northeast Neighborhood all these years later, and its effects have had far reaching consequences on generations of families in our community,” NENA Director Karen Thomas said. “But with Community Connectors we now have an opportunity to begin addressing these issues and focusing on how we can all make sure these types of harms aren't repeated in the future. I hope everyone who has a stake in our community's wellbeing comes out to this event and shares their ideas for where we go in the years to come.”

The Harrisonburg Community Connector project was envisioned as a means to rebuild trust between the neighborhood and their local government while working to repair past harms and reconnect the neighborhood to Downtown. The local partnership was selected as one of 15 in the nation to receive grant support from nonprofit Smart Growth America, which manages the national Community Connectors program in an effort to repair the damage of divisive infrastructure across the country. The project is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and is in partnership with Equitable Cities, the New Urban Mobility Alliance and America Walks.

A series of events and information sessions have been held in the neighborhood in past months to begin hearing from community members about issues that can be addressed in the area. Now, the online survey and Feb. 15 meeting will give participants the chance to directly state how they feel positive change can be brought to the Northeast Neighborhood.

“We hope everyone in the Northeast Neighborhood takes the survey and joins us on Feb. 15 to talk about what's most important to them and their families when it comes to the community's future,” Harrisonburg Director of Communications & Public Engagement Michael Parks said. “Your voice has to be the driving factor in order to make sure this effort is a success, because nobody knows the Northeast Neighborhood and what's best for it than the people who live and work there. Together we can create a small area plan that prioritizes the needs, wants and desires of community members today and for many years to come.”

More information on the Harrisonburg Community Connectors project and the history of the Northeast Neighborhood can be found online at www.harrisonburgva.gov/community-connectors.

***The City of Harrisonburg** is centrally located in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. It is home to approximately 55,990 people. More information about the City of Harrisonburg is online at www.HarrisonburgVA.gov.*

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