Cascades Redevelopment Project  
Summary of Community Collaboration on Historical Plaza

Situation

• As the site of the nation’s first nonviolent jail-in during the Civil Rights Movement, the Firestone-Bloxham Annex site is steeped in historical significance. Three vacant historic buildings – including the former Leon County Jail, the Leon County Health Unit and the former WPA District Offices – currently occupy the property. All three buildings display architectural features of the 1930’s-era Art Moderne style.

• After careful evaluation, North American Properties (NAP) determined it can and will preserve the former Leon County Health Unit in its entirety. However, the other two structures cannot be incorporated into the new development because their position within the site significantly limits the development team’s ability to create an economically viable, urban mixed-use destination as required by the Tallahassee Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA).

• NAP, local government and several Tallahassee residents strongly desire to honor the history of the site, regardless of what can be preserved structurally.

Solution

• Recognizing the breadth of cultural, architectural and community history represented on the property, NAP decided to incorporate a large public plaza into the site plan to highlight the property’s historical significance.

• NAP engaged the community in this effort by forming a Community Historical User Group (see Exhibit A, pg. 3) comprised of educators, preservationists, civil rights activists and community leaders to explore the significance of the site and help cast a vision for how to honor its past.

• The user group began by touring the historical buildings to understand their decaying condition and see firsthand the results of the extensive renovations that took place over the years to transform them into state office space.

• Following the tour, and after learning about the history of the site from a local historian hired by NAP, the user group co-facilitated a Community Listening Session with the development team. Nearly 50 citizens participated in the listening session and provided suggestions for stories they wanted to see retold via outdoor memorials, monuments and/or interactive exhibits within the new plaza. Residents were also asked to submit ideas via email.

Outcome

• After reviewing dozens of ideas, the user group’s efforts culminated in a narrative design criteria (see Exhibit A) developed jointly with NAP.

• The document incorporates user group and community feedback to outline the vision for what should be included in the historical plaza, ensuring that the space will reflect the interests and wishes of the Tallahassee community.

• This collaborative and consensus-building initiative has received praise from those involved, local media and local government officials.
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HISTORICAL PLAZA – DESIGN CRITERIA

The historical plaza should evoke a “sense of place” honoring the history specific to this site. It shall be compatible with the existing adjacent historic properties and the newly constructed development. The plaza memorial shall pay tribute to the Civil Rights movement in Tallahassee, the architectural history of the site, and the history of WPA-era services, as stated in the required and preferred features below. Memorial components of the plaza shall not be “just a plaque” and statues are discouraged, but should endeavor to be inspiring and engaging. This place represents both modernism and segregation in Tallahassee’s history, and should be acknowledged with dignity and reverence. The historical plaza shall symbolize the vision and courage of individuals that were part of this history and shall reaffirm respect for all life.

Tier 1: Required Features – Per the CRA Request for Proposal

A. A Civil Rights Memorial will be located on the Firestone property to recognize the local civil rights protests, arrests, and jailing in the 1960s. This may include images, quotes, or other depictions to acknowledge the events that took place and honor the individuals involved.

B. The Memorial will be constructed in the area designated in the Site Plan as the “Historical Plaza”.

C. The final memorial will be approved by the CRA Board.

Tier 2: Priority/Preferred Features – Per input from Community Historical User Group

D. The Civil Rights Memorial (noted in Tier 1 requirements above) shall specifically recognize the courage of individuals such as Patricia Stephen Due, Priscilla Due, Rev. Henry Steele, and the other students who were jailed following the Tallahassee lunch counter sit-ins. This may include images, quotes, audio components, and other depictions, as well as narrative (written or audio) which tells the story of these events and individuals. This may also include the letters written and received by Patricia Stephens Due during her time in the “Old County Jail”.

E. The historical plaza shall acknowledge and memorialize the architectural history of the “Old County Jail” Firestone building and of the two Art Moderne buildings on the Bloxham property. This may include images or visual depictions of the buildings and/or incorporate original details from these buildings in the memorial or newly constructed buildings.

F. The historical plaza shall acknowledge the history of the health services provided in the WPA Old County Health Department Bloxham building. This may include images of the building, staff, and visitors during the time that the building served as the County Health Department. It may also include narrative (written or audio) which tells the story of its significance in Tallahassee’s history.

G. The plaza memorial shall have an immersive quality, and the plaza shall communicate a sense of place of what once was located on the site. This may also include a component or feature which depicts a sense of the isolation and confinement of the students jailed during the Civil Rights movement.

H. The plaza shall have places to pause and/or sit, encouraging reflection and contemplation of the impact and significance of this part of Tallahassee’s history. Places to sit shall be easily accessible and reasonably comfortable in exterior conditions.

I. The plaza memorial shall be interactive and incorporate current technology which allows visitors and observers to experience visual and audio components. This may include the ability to use one’s phone or mobile device to see an image and/or hear an audio recorded narrative story. The requirement for
technology shall not overshadow the immersive quality of being physically present with the memorial in this place, and shall not be the only way in which the stories are told.

J. The Community User Group desires an acknowledgement of four (4) specific lynchings in Tallahassee’s history that are associated with this location. The names of the four individuals may be incorporated into the Civil Rights Memorial component or as a separate memorial. The four individuals are: Pierce Taylor (1897), Maik Morris (1909), Richard Hawkins (1937), Ernest Ponder (1937).

K. The Community User Group desires for the development to include programming of the “Curb Market”, to acknowledge the history of the Curb Market that existed on/near this site in Tallahassee’s history and to revive a new “Curb Market” or “Farmer’s Market” tradition at this site.

Tier 3: General Considerations

L. Materiality. The historical plaza will be an exterior environment. Any exposed materials shall have reasonable ease of maintenance and care. Materials should be selected for durability, longevity, and resistance to vandalism.

M. Safety. The plaza and its components shall not present a safety hazard. The plaza shall be well-lit, to permit public enjoyment after daylight hours. The design of any memorial components shall endeavor not to create blind areas, but maintain reasonable clear viewing across the plaza.

N. Accessibility. The plaza design must comply with all State and local Building Codes and with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The plaza shall be easily accessible by the public and allow reasonable clearances for circulation of the public through the plaza and around any memorial or other components.

O. Shade. Providing areas of shade and refuge from inclement weather is desirable to complement enjoyment of the plaza.

P. Budget. The budget for the historical plaza and memorial will depend upon the design, but shall not exceed amounts agreed upon by the development team and the CRA.

Resources to consider for historical content

A. Florida Department of State, Civil Rights documents and audio recordings
B. City of Tallahassee, Civil Rights documents and audio recordings
C. Letters written and received by Patricia Stephens Due
D. New audio recording content; Rev. Henry Steele
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Acknowledgements

Community Historical User Group participants

Althemese Barnes, community leader, Founder Riley House Museum

John Due, Civil Rights activist and attorney, husband of the late Patricia Stephens Due, who was held in the “Old County Jail” after a lunch-counter sit-in in Tallahassee in 1960

Gerald Ensley, retired Community Columnist for Tallahassee Democrat

Delaitre Hollinger, Exec. Director National Assoc. for Preservation of African-American History & Culture

Dr. David Jackson, Dean of Graduate College and Professor of History, Florida A&M University

Dr. Jennifer Koslow, Associate Professor of History, Florida State University

John Lawrence, community leader, first African-American Principal at Godby High School

Alissa Lotane, Chief, Bureau of Historic Preservation, Florida Department of State

James McAllister, PhD student of 19th century American history

Rev. Henry Marion Steele, Civil Rights activist, held in the “Old County Jail” during Civil Rights Movement

Dr. Melissa Stoller, Executive Director Tallahassee Trust for Historic Preservation

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