

**Clay County Board of Commissioners  
January 24, 2023**

***What's Next for High Ridge Estates?  
Creating a Stronger and Safer Neighborhood***

**A Report on Using Deliberative Dialogue to Engage Clay County Concerned Citizens**

**Rev. Carey Morford**

**Executive Summary**

Over the past nine months, about 100 Clay County citizens including High Ridge residents, nonprofit organizations, Clay County staff, staff and elected officials of the City of Keystone Heights, Keystone Heights educators, and local business owners worked together to envision the future of the High Ridge Estates neighborhood. Monthly steering group meetings, the Keystone SafetyNet monthly meeting, and ten deliberative forums in October and November resulted in the following report.

Several outcomes emerged from many hours of deliberative effort.

1. **Community Safety.** High Ridge has the potential to become a vibrant neighborhood where families can enjoy a walk around the neighborhood after work and school. Deliberators agreed that maintenance of roads, rehabilitation of private properties, animal control, and drug prevention were all important issues facing the neighborhood.
2. **People Power.** High Ridge and Keystone Heights residents have shown interest and initiative in strengthening the neighborhood. There is a desire to improve relationships and increase education between residents, Clay County departments and other agencies like Clay County Sheriff's Office, Clay Transit, Clay County Code Enforcement, and Clay County Community Services.
3. **Caring for Neighbors.** Due in part to the size of the antiquated subdivision, access to important services is limited. High Ridge residents agree that there is a need for easier access to medical, social, and food resources. More reliable, local transportation along with local economic development would be helpful.

**The Deliberative Process**

The deliberative dialogue process is dedicated to engaging citizens to think critically about their local community. The High Ridge Initiative began in March 2022 as Carey Morford applied for High Ridge Initiative to become a project of Impact Clay, modeled after the College Drive Initiative.

Deliberative Dialogue is a process of thoughtfully weighing options relative to a community challenge. Deliberation begins when people share what they hold dear about improving their

community. In small groups citizens look at the costs and consequences of possible solutions to daunting problems, and discover what they will or will not accept as potential solutions. Contrasted to open-microphone public forums or expert panel presentations, deliberative forums engage citizens one to two hours to listen carefully and discover areas of agreement leading to sharing recommendations with elected leaders and decision-makers. These Deliberative Dialogues had proven to be an effective method for the College Drive Initiative, and the High Ridge Initiative has followed in their footsteps.

Carey Morford invited people from several nonprofit organizations, Clay County staff, High Ridge residents, and Keystone Heights business owners to participate in a “steering group.” The initial group included representatives from county staff, UF/IFAS Extension Clay County, Lake Area Ministries, Seeds of Grace, Commissioner Besty Condon, and High Ridge residents. The first monthly meeting took place on May 9, 2022, where Gabrielle Gunn, who had been trained by Gregg Kauffman, introduced deliberative dialogue as a community engagement and civil discourse process. The group was enthusiastic and agreed to move forward with the naming and framing steps required for creating an “issue guide” as a dialogue resource for future deliberative forums.

Subsequent monthly meetings reviewed the concerns and framed an issue guide draft. New participants included representatives from Keystone SafetyNet, additional High Ridge Residents, Keystone Heights city manager and two city council members, a number of departments of the Clay County Government, Clay County Sheriff’s Office, and educators and administrators from Keystone Heights High School and Keystone Heights Elementary School. These meetings resulted in significant revisions to the issue guide draft.

The steering group named the issue guide *What’s Next for High Ridge Initiative? Creating a Stronger and Safer Neighborhood*. The issue guide included an introduction, three distinctively different approaches for discussing the future of High Ridge Estates, a reflection section devoted to ascertaining agreement, tensions, and common ground, and a post-forum anonymous survey for each forum participant to complete. Two hours were devoted to each forum.

## **The Issue Guide**

### **Approach #1 – Community Safety**

This approach focused on community safety. There was much discussion about the 20+ miles of dirt roads that have been unmaintained for almost half a century and possible pathways for improvement. Participants also considered how relationships with Clay County Utility Authority and Clay County Sheriff’s Office could be strengthened and how a playground or park might benefit the community.

### **Approach # 2 – People Power**

The second approach focused on the assets of the neighborhood and skills that residents could use to work toward a stronger, safer community. Participants discussed ways that property owners could be encouraged to improve their properties by instituting a yard of the month

program, engaging with the code enforcement process, and developing programs for youth development.

### **Approach #3 – Caring for Neighbors**

The final approach suggested that residents of High Ridge Estates may need more access to necessary services and resources like food, transportation, and affordable health care. Discussions focused on creative solutions and collaborating with existing non-profits.

### **Reflection**

After deliberating through each of the approaches and considering many of the specific actions and corresponding tradeoffs, the moderator encourages participants to reflect on areas of significant agreement or common ground. What might be the best “first steps” toward transforming High Ridge Estates? Additional questions for consideration:

1. Can we detect any shared sense of direction or agreement?
2. What did you hear the group saying about tensions, difficulties, or what might prevent progress?
3. Are there any particular common ideas we hold valuable?
4. Are there next steps we might want to recommend?

### **Using the Issue Guide**

On September 12, 2022, the High Ridge Initiative gathered at Mission of the Dirt Road to participate in a “trial deliberative forum” dedicated to envisioning the future of High Ridge Estates and to learn the key concepts of facilitating these deliberative dialogues. While High Ridge is a large neighborhood with a great deal of potential, it has been under-resourced almost since its inception in 1969. People expressed a desire to see things improved, but it will be vital that residents are involved in the planning and implementation of improvements. Can High Ridge Estates become a safe, beautiful, place to live while maintaining its affordability?

The following organizations were represented: Clay County Board of Commissioners, Mission of the Dirt Road, Lake Area Ministries, Impact Clay, Keystone Heights Elementary, Seeds of Grace, Community Partnership School at Keystone Heights High School, and UF/IFAS Extension Clay County. There were four High Ridge Residents at this initial meeting. This group was comprised of key community leaders and people who have the understanding and passion to seek significant change for High Ridge Estates.

With the help of a timekeeper and recorder, a neutral moderator elicited participant opinions and questions. The quality of the dialogue and the way elected officials, county staff, and agency representatives interacted was impressive. There was absolutely no “expert domination” or resistance to discussing any of the actions. In fact, people clearly recognized tensions between actions and drawbacks. The group was adamant about engaging the public, especially those who live in the neighborhood, in creating a vision for revitalizing High Ridge Estates. The forum

concluded by discussing the next steps and the need for significant help in convening diverse forum groups comprised of residents and other stakeholders and scheduling *What's Next for High Ridge Estates* forums over the next several months.

Subsequently, five open forums which were affectionately called “Hot Dog Dialogues” were held at Mission of the Dirt Road over the course of a few weeks in October. These forums were intentionally scheduled so that people with all kinds of work schedules could identify a meeting that worked for them, and Mission of the Dirt Road provided dinner and childcare. An open forum was held at Lake Area Ministries on Oct 20<sup>th</sup>, another at Keystone Heights Elementary on November 7 and at Keystone Heights High School on November 14, with the final open forum being held at a Lake Region Kiwanis Club Meeting on Nov 17. On November 17<sup>th</sup>, county staff members and other key leaders were invited to a meeting at the Clay County Administration Building offices to take part in a deliberative dialogue with an issue guide that had been adapted to reflect what had been learned during previous open forums. At every meeting other than the Kiwanis and key stakeholder meeting, there was a drawing for a door prize to incentivize participation. The Keystone SafetyNet was engaged through a survey like College Drive engaged the Clay SafetyNet. Forty-five people attended the forums, including moderators. While it can be difficult to engage community members who are living in poverty, the steering committee utilized a High Ridge Initiative Facebook page, neighborhood canvassing, and nonprofit organization messaging, so that 26% of discussion and survey participants lived in High Ridge Estates. Gaining public engagement can be a challenge; however, the outcomes derived from the meetings and forums should be useful to generate public interest moving forward.

### **Deliberative Forum Outcomes**

With 100+ people over the past ten months using the deliberative materials developed by the HRI Steering Group, several areas of agreement or common ground for action emerged from the forums. These outcomes are offered for CCBC consideration.

1. **Community Safety.** High Ridge Estates has the potential to become a strong and safe neighborhood for low-income residents in Clay County. More than just providing affordable housing, this neighborhood could provide a place where families could thrive in a healthy, peaceful community.

Residents of High Ridge Estates will need assistance from outside agencies to be able to maintain access to clean water. Wells are drying up, and many residents cannot afford the cost to replace the well. Building infrastructure for water through Clay County Utility Authority is a solution worth exploring.

The two most frequently mentioned “action steps” were to improve the quality of the roads in a sustainable way and to improve relationships with Clay County Sheriff’s Office to address drug use in the neighborhood. Participants tended to see access to water as a basic right and an important issue, but difficult to solve. While community members would love to see a playground in the neighborhood, it was the lowest priority.

Conversations also included some focus on the stigma around High Ridge Estates, and there was some suggestion that rebranding and beautification efforts like enhancing the entrance with new signage and landscaping.

2. **People Power.** Resident involvement will be key to any successful neighborhood revitalization, and residents are most interested in working towards improved property maintenance through code enforcement and creative incentives for responsible property maintenance.

There was momentum around discussions of clean-up days and yard of the month programs as well as creating some friendly competition with seasonal decorating contests, which would be led by High Ridge Residents. Another important matter that arose was the number of stray animals in the neighborhood. While adults agree that there needs to be more programming and activities for youth, it was also apparent that it would be extremely beneficial to engage more youth in these conversations. One suggestion that will need further exploration is the possibility of creating a master plan for High Ridge Estates and adjacent properties.

3. **Caring for Neighbors.** Deliberators strongly believe that access to healthcare for those who are uninsured needs to be addressed. There was also a deep desire to have easier access to more affordable fresh fruits and vegetables, but the solution to that was less clear. With so little available commercial property in the area, it was clear that this will need to be approached with creativity.

Ultimately, there seemed to be consensus around the lack of transportation, with some reference back to lack of road maintenance and the resulting degradation of personal vehicles. The closest full grocery store is a two mile walk, which is a long distance with bags of groceries. Participants were very interested in pursuing conversations with JTA and Clay transit about the possibility of establishing more localized transportation, while continuing some routes to Gainesville and Middleburg. Participating educators suggested that if localized transportation provided routes to the schools, then they may see increased engagement from students and parents.

#### **Additional Outcomes from High Ridge Initiative Advocacy:**

Clay County Community Services has accessed CDBG funds to provide a dumpster for neighborhood clean-ups. Neighbors and other community members have removed 3.5 tons of trash and 3 tons of tires since March 2022.

The Way Free Medical Clinic developed a partnership with The Emmanuel Project who is providing a free monthly clinic at Answers Resources Facility.

Mission of the Dirt Road hosted The Healthy Harvest where over 20 organizations gathered to provide education and resources to the area. 150 people attended.

Christ's Church, Mission of the Dirt Road, and Keystone Elementary collaborated to bring their Christmas Shop to a more accessible location for Keystone families living in poverty.

Twisted Oaks Rescue was recruited to assist Animal Services in identifying and advertising to families who would have dogs who could benefit from free spay/neuter.

Mission of the Dirt Road has been awarded approximately \$35,000 from KHVFD and Community Foundation for Northeast Florida, and is operating a home repair program for people living in poverty, prioritizing families in High Ridge.

## **Conclusion**

Clay County citizens with an interest in the character and future of High Ridge Estates devoted many hours to developing and executing a deliberative dialogue process. Our efforts seek to support the Clay County Board of Commissioners' mission to ensure Clay County citizens' safety, welfare, productivity, and quality of life. We respectfully commend the results of our efforts and pledge to continue working with CCBC and Clay County staff to envision a bright future for High Ridge Estates.

Respectfully submitted,

**Rev. Carey Morford**

## **High Ridge Initiative Requests to our County Commissioners**

### **Community Safety Requests:**

1. Work with Urban Land Institute and Clay County zoning and planning department to develop a master plan that considers road improvements and maintenance, branding and aesthetics for the neighborhood, water and sewage infrastructure, and development of quality affordable housing.
2. Collaborate with Clay County Sheriff's Office to address drug prevention measures in High Ridge Estates.

### **People Power Requests:**

1. Seek support from the University of Florida Extension 4-H program and Clay County Library and Parks and Rec departments to develop youth programming near the neighborhood.
2. Support Mission of the Dirt Road efforts to bring residents together for clean-up days, neighborhood aesthetic improvements, and community events intended to provide education and resources.

### **Caring for Neighbors:**

1. Pursue conversations with Clay Community Transportation and the Jacksonville Transportation Authority to improve transportation to neighboring communities and provide shuttle services within the Keystone Heights area.
2. Support non-profit and small businesses development around providing health care and access to healthy foods near High Ridge Estates.
3. Encourage Clay County Animal Services to continue addressing animal care education and resources to pet owners in the neighborhood.