

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

High Ridge Estates is a low-income neighborhood located in unincorporated Clay County just outside of the Keystone Heights town limits. The neighborhood is 1,070 acres and 1.67 square miles with a total of 1683 platted parcels of land that have 509 dwellings on them, and another 81 lots that are “improved.” High Ridge Estates was developed in the early 1970s as a 55+ community, but the development failed. The company, Select Western Lands, based in NM with a FL branch office, platted the land into 1/3 acre lots for a subdivision in 1969. The N. FL Regional Planning Council labeled High Ridge as an antiquated subdivision, at risk of becoming an area of blight, in 2002.

While the subdivision had an established HOA, it operated with varied levels of success for decades before becoming completely inactive and dissolved in 2005. With an absent developer and a dissolved HOA, private citizens are left with limited pathways forward for improving the large neighborhood. There are miles of unpaved and unmaintained streets, no sidewalks, and virtually no safe green space for children to play, the neighborhood needs attention. What will it take to bring residents, elected leaders, Clay County public services, and friends together to *begin* improving High Ridge Estates?

The College Drive Initiative provided an excellent model for discussing large and complex community needs in a way that provided a pathway to a solution-based strategic plan that includes idea developed by the most affected community members. The partnership with College Drive through Impact Clay and the Kettering Foundation has equipped this project with important information and best practices while engaging neighbors and stakeholders.

A simplified dialogue resource was used for ten Keystone Heights forums in October and November. A “steering group” including governmental leaders and staff, nonprofit agency employees, business leaders, and High Ridge residents contributed to creating the simplified dialogue resource. We called the forums that took place in High Ridge Estates Hot Dog Dialogues. Rev. Carey Morford presented the High Ridge Estates Initiative to the Lake Region Prosperity Partners and met with teachers from both local schools. To date, Rev. Morford has collected data from approximately 70 post-forum surveys. Residents and community leaders shared their concerns and hopes for the future of the neighborhood by using the framework of this dialogue resource. Equal time was devoted to each of the three options, after which groups identified areas of agreement. Deliberative Dialogue is “choice work” where participants share what they hold valuable about their community and offer recommendations for improving community life.

This dialogue resource has been adapted, from the simplified version, to include the data and information gathered from the first ten open forums. Now it is your turn, as key stakeholders, to share your ideas and vision. Many thanks for taking the time to participate in today’s deliberative dialogue.

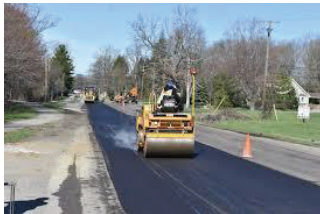
## Approach #1 Community Safety

Until Clay County decided to pave a central road to provide access for essential services – emergency vehicles, school buses, and garbage pickup – the neighborhood streets were 100% dirt. Today, High Ridge Estates has approximately 20 miles of unmaintained dirt roads. Residents have raised concerns about walking safety, safe places for children to play, trash and rubbish, and property maintenance. Another concern involves drug sellers and users.

The ancillary benefits of improved roads, based on forum dialogues, include vehicular safety, access for emergency medical care, firefighting, school attendance, pedestrian safety, and property values. While asphalt paved roads are beneficial, there are economical options. Well-constructed gravel roads are cheaper to build and easier to maintain. In fact, some experts suggest gravel roads are better suited for rural communities and ecosystems. In combination with road maintenance, residents voiced a concern about the lack of lighting throughout the neighborhood, adding to the safety concerns when walking the neighborhood.

Community safety is imperative. High Ridge Residents and community members from the larger Keystone area both expressed a desire for improved relationships between CCSO and private citizens. During forums, the possibility of the sheriff doing a neighborhood walk or hosting a neighborhood forum was discussed multiple times.

Many homes in High Ridge Estates have shallow wells that are at risk of going dry. Mission of the Dirt Road often knows of a handful of families who don't have a working well. Clean water provided by county utilities and reduced dependence on wells offer another critical safety feature. What will it take to connect High Ridge Estates to area utilities?



### Actions:

- Work with Clay County Road Department to estimate cost for bringing roads to county minimum.
- Use CBDG funding to bring roads up to county minimum for adoption



Actions: Create a campaign in cooperation with CCSO and CAC to improve relationships between law enforcement and residents and to create a drug free community. Seek funding as necessary.



Action: Work with CCUA to build infrastructure for improved access to clean water.

**Are there other ideas for improving neighborhood safety?**

## Approach #2 People Power

The people who have the best vision for a community are the residents. Almost everyone can share their skills with neighbors or teach a neighbor or young person how to do something. Residents are also the best sources of information public officials need to do their jobs. This approach asks us to think about what we can do to help and advocate for High Ridge Estates.

High Ridge residents and the Mission of the Dirt Road volunteers have conducted three neighborhood clean-up events. Advocacy efforts resulted in Clay County collaboration on clean-up projects by supplying vehicles and equipment to remove unsightly material. This resulted in more than 3.5 tons of trash and 3 tons of tires being removed from the neighborhood.

Neighbors also express concerns about safety related to animal care. There are many stray animals in High Ridge. Some of these animals may have an “owner,” but some do not.

Providing opportunities for young people could become a key neighborhood initiative. Neighborhood-based sports activities, 4H programs, and scouting among other options could make for safe, afterschool opportunities. Twin Lakes Park is within walking distance of High Ridge Estates and programming at the park could be expanded to include some of the activities mentioned above.



Action: Create a Neighborhood Property Upkeep Committee that will work with neighbors to encourage and reward property maintenance.

Action: Work with Code Enforcement to address abandoned properties with a long-term plan of using foreclosed properties as opportunities for rebuilding and rehabilitating properties for affordable housing with High Ridge Initiative influence.



Action: Work with Clay County Animal Services and Twisted Oaks Rescue to provide education and resources to address stray animals.



Action: Work with Parks and Rec to develop and expand youth programs and activities at Twin Lakes Park.

**Are there additional ideas for community engagement?**

### Approach #3 Caring for Neighbors

All humans have basic needs including water, clean air, food, shelter, safety and security, and health. In addition, feeling like we are loved, belong, and enjoy friendship is important for our well-being. This final approach speaks to these important needs. Can we attract a grocery store to locate in the area? How can we help people get medical help? How could public transportation be improved?

A significant concern emerging from the October forums focused on improving public transportation. Lack of public transportation is compounded by the unmaintained roads, creating no alternative for transportation if a car breaks down or a school bus is missed. With the neighborhood being 1.67 square miles with no essential services within the neighborhood, it becomes extremely difficult to access necessary products, services, education, and employment.

Medical services – urgent care, ERs, medical specialists and hospitals – require driving to Starke or Orange Park. Many would like expanded public or private transportation. In November of 2022, through Mission’s advocacy efforts with The Way Free Medical Clinic, Emmanuel Project began providing free primary care and pediatric services for the *uninsured* at Answers Resource Facility on the first Thursday of every month. Mission also hosted the Healthy Harvest Event on Oct 15 (rescheduled due to Ian), where 150 people were able to interact with over 20 non-profit organizations offering a wide variety of health and medical resources.

Healthy food is another important issue. Hitchcock’s Grocery is the largest grocery store in Keystone Heights. The closest Winn Dixie is in Melrose. The closest Publix grocery stores are in Gainesville and Palatka. Years ago, Keystone Heights hosted a successful weekend farmer’s market in Azalea Park across from Town Hall, but it dissolved due to lack of leadership and has not been revived.



Action: Work with the business community and non-profits to develop a creative plan for providing consistent access to affordable fruits and vegetables within walking distance of High Ridge Estates.



Action: Work with JTA & Clay transit to expand localized transportation in Keystone Heights and increase advertisement of Magenta and Green Lines.



Action: Continue efforts to increase health resources in conjunction with Emmanuel Project and The Way Free Medical Clinic.

**Are there other ideas for caring for basic needs?**