

Planning for the Future of the JO Johnson High School Campus

The JO Johnson High School site represents a unique and special opportunity. The BIG Picture began studying this site over two years ago, before Jemison High School even opened. The City Planning Department recognized in Johnson what local leadership already knew: that this was a great, perhaps even once-in-a-lifetime, opportunity for the community.

It's unlike any other high school site in Huntsville, when you consider Johnson's context. No other high schools are tucked among single-family neighborhoods the way Johnson is. New and old, high schools usually on major corridors, often near commercial or higher-density developments. Johnson's placement is unique, and recognizing that this was a unique site meant that we wanted to be very deliberate in how we planned for its future.

The BIG Picture started the public process back in January of 2016, when Dr. Showers hosted the first public open house regarding JO Johnson. At that time, we took the opportunity to get some early feedback on what the future might include...

COMMERCIAL



Neighborhood Retail



Neighborhood Office



Retail/Residential



Retail/Office



Medical Office



General Retail



General Restaurant



General Restaurant



General Retail



General Retail



Neighborhood Rest.



Neighborhood Retail



General Retail



Neighborhood Rest.



Outdoor Market



General Retail

We shared some examples of commercial development, public space, and residential types, to see what resonated best (and not so well) with residents...

MOST LIKED



Neighborhood Office



General Restaurant



Medical Office



Neighborhood Rest.

Among commercial images, a variety of uses were supported, but generally at a smaller scale. The exception was medical office, which would often be a larger tenant regardless.

LEAST LIKED



General Retail



General Retail



General Retail



General Retail

Least favored were retail, particularly high-traffic chains. Most commented that these would not be compatible with a neighborhood setting.

PUBLIC SPACE



Recreation Field



Community Garden



Gazebo



Disc Golf Course



Dog Park



Playground



Public Art



Greenway



Open Space



Pavilion



Pond



Walking Trail



Sand Volleyball Court



Open Space



Plaza



Splash Pad

The BIG Picture started with the assumption that there would be a green space component to the project, and solicited ideas on what that might include...

MOST LIKED



Public Art



Community Garden



Plaza



Recreation Field

Smaller, less-intense uses were most popular...

LEAST LIKED



Open Space



Dog Park



Splash Pad



Disc Golf Course

...while active, highly-programmed uses were less popular.

RESIDENTIAL



Single Family (Mid)



Townhome



Duplex



Triplex



Fourplex



Live/Work Units



Single Family (Small)



Apartments



Patio Home



Senior Living Facility



Bungalow Court



Courtyard Apts.



Single Story
Apartments



Lofts



Single Family (Large)



Student Apartments

Given the location of the site amidst existing neighborhoods, there was a sense that new residential development might be in demand here. Many formats were presented...

MOST LIKED



Live/Work Units



Senior Living Facility

...and among the most popular were types that were in short supply in the area. Live/work is a newer format that can accommodate small business development, and senior living is in demand pretty much around the country.

LEAST LIKED



Apartments



**Single Story
Apartments**



Triplex



Fourplex

Least liked were not surprising. Higher-density, multi-family apartments were out of favor not just because of a desire to avoid rental development, but also because they were seen as inconsistent with the scale of the existing neighborhood.

We also heard a lot of specialty ideas, things to add to the mix. These ranged among small office space, business incubators, education, medical facilities... even a fish farm. What we learned was that in terms of program, there were a lot of ideas, but no real consensus. Where we DID find consensus rather...



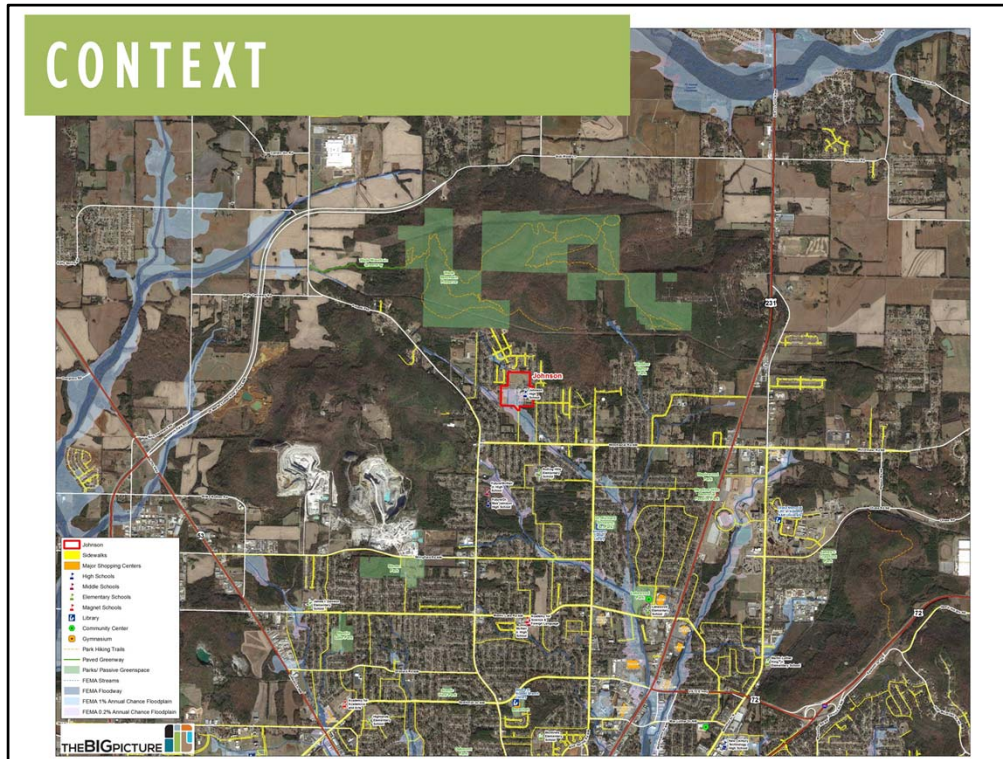
...were in the goals. Regardless of what folks said they wanted – housing, office, recreation, etc. – they were nearly unanimous in what they wanted to achieve:

‘Respect the adjacent neighborhoods’ means that whatever the Johnson site becomes, it should improve the quality of life and the value of the neighborhoods immediately surrounding it;

‘Create economic development and build value for the community’ recognizes that what is done on this site can and should also have a positive and catalytic impact on economic activity in NW HSV.



So that sent us to the drawing board. How do we spur economic activity, while also developing in a manner that would have a positive impact on the neighborhoods close by? Part of what needed to guide us was the context: that is, understanding the market for the area.

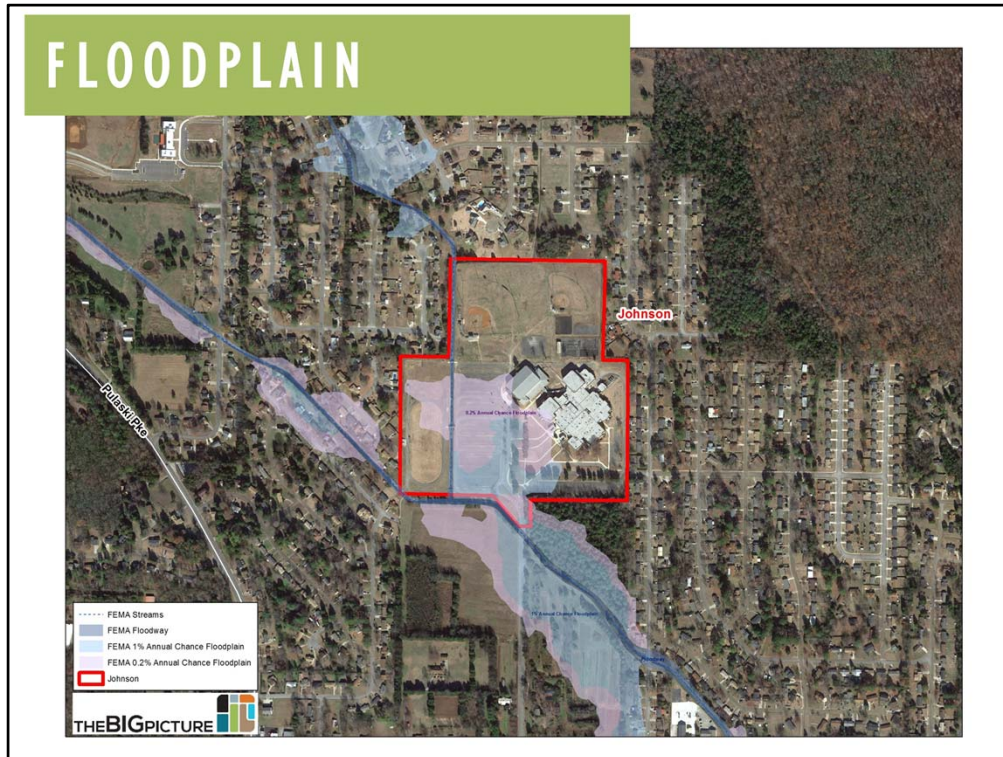


It's important to acknowledge the hurdles that exist, and there are some challenges:

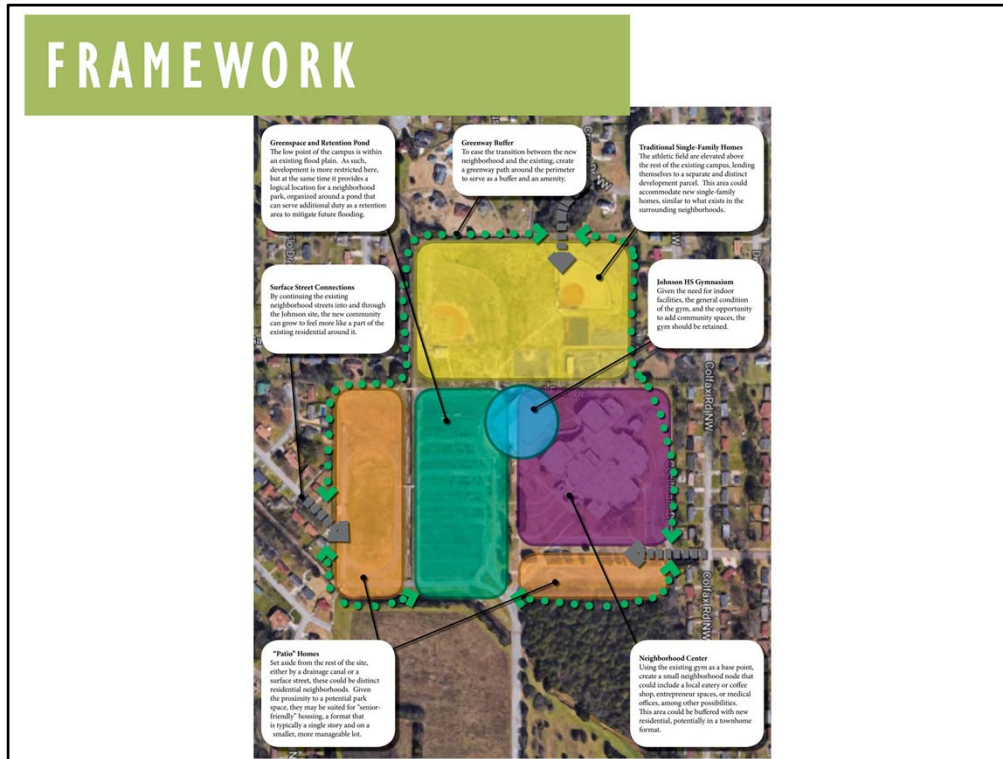
- Housing and population growth have been stagnant in the past decade;
- Median incomes are lower than average;
- Significant new, market-rate single-family housing construction hasn't occurred in the immediate area in 30 years.

But there are also some strengths we can work with:

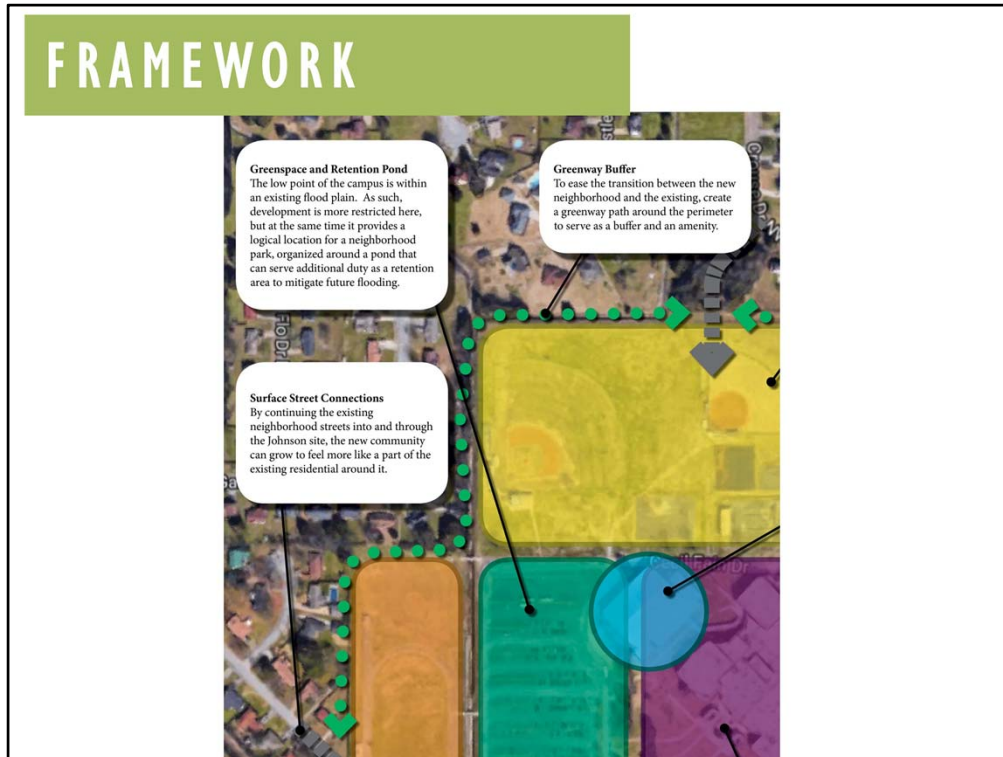
- Vacancy rates are low (indicating the existence of demand for housing);
- Home ownership rates are much higher than the City average (a great sign of stability);
- Families and HH's are larger than average (the neighborhood has a higher than average rate of 5-14 year olds and Boomers, meaning people are raising families here);
- MLS sales prices have rebounded to pre-recession levels, and remain higher than surrounding neighborhoods even after the school closure.



It's also important to understand the physical constraints. Not only is the site surrounded by single-family neighborhoods, it also has significant acreage in the floodplain and floodway. These will also inform how we might plan for the site development.



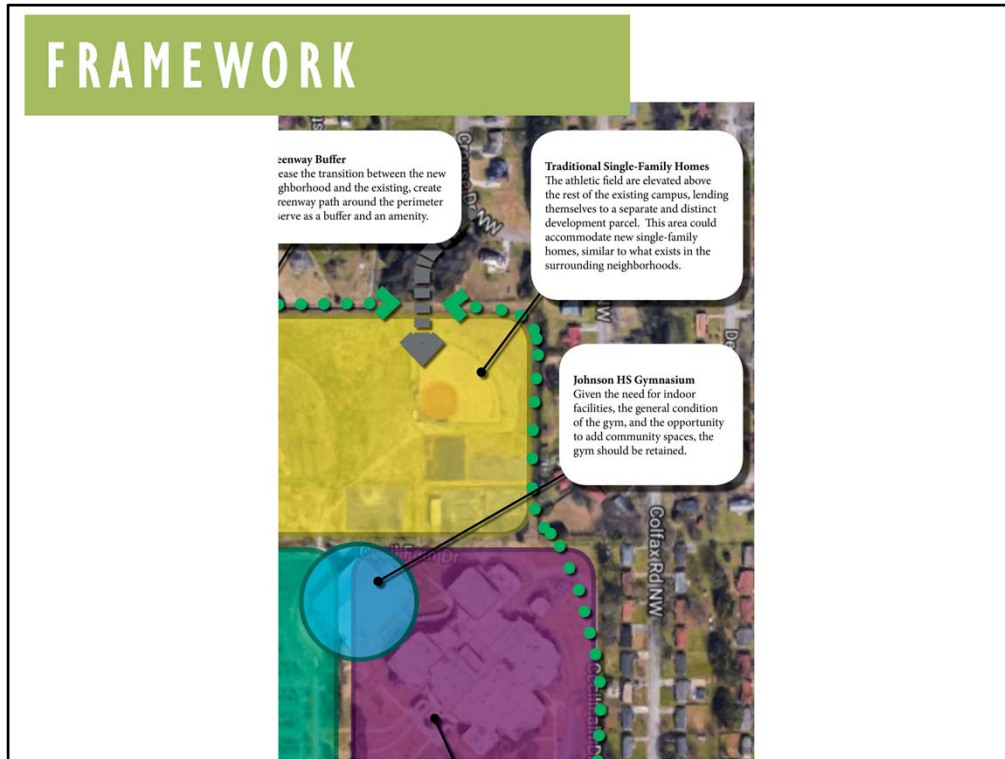
What we work toward first is a Framework Plan. This breaks the site into distinct areas, and identifies what might potentially go in each. Zooming in...



...noting the flood plain area, there is potential to leverage that into a small community park/pond.

The park can also serve as a jumping off point for a walking trail network around the perimeter of the site. This not only offers an amenity, but also adds a bit of a buffer between new development and existing.

It's also important to link in the existing surface streets, so that the new growth feels like a part of the community, and that so residents can more easily access the open space and amenities.



To the north, surrounded on three sides by neighborhoods, we see potential for new single family housing, similar to what exists, or slightly larger if there's market demand.

It is vital that we encourage private sector investment in the development, because in doing so we can demonstrate that the broader community is a great place to invest.

We'd also see keeping the gym as an amenity, and as a focal point for town center development...

FRAMEWORK



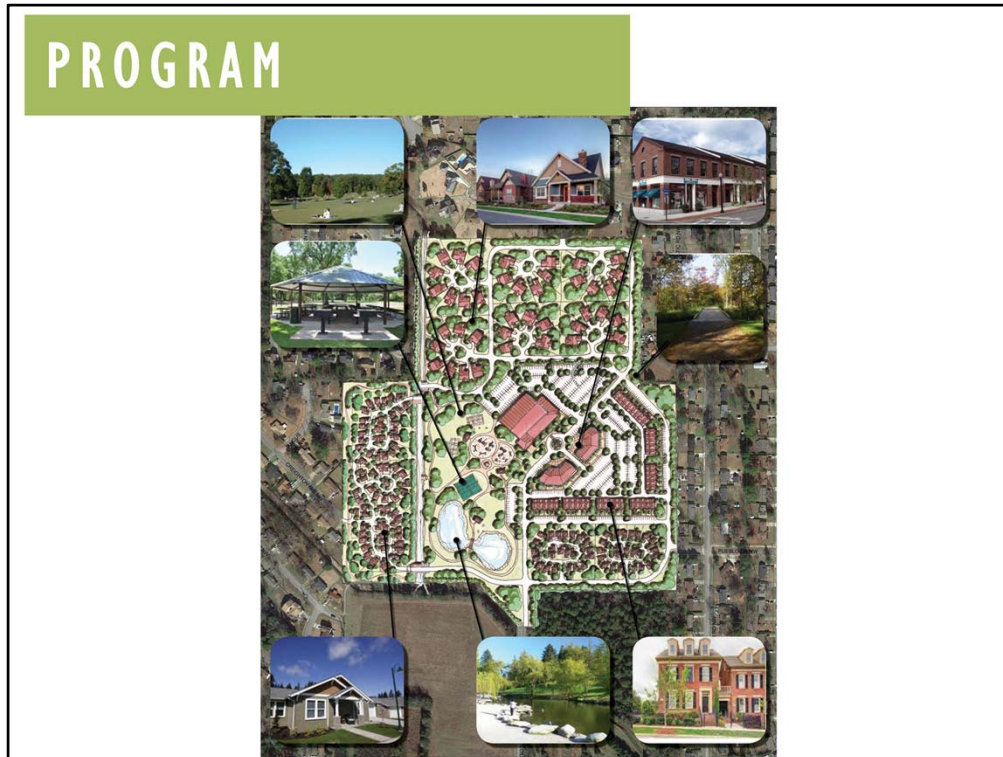
The neighborhood center, which feeds off the gym, could include a range of uses, including small, locally-owned shops; business incubation; medical offices; etc. Much will be dictated by what the market might bring, but it should be kept in a format and size that serves and does not overwhelm the surrounding neighborhoods.

FRAMEWORK



Variety will be the key to success for the site, and adding a mix of housing types will help do that. We imagine them to be predominantly for-sale, but we also know there is a market for more senior-friendly housing. Not necessarily assisted living, but places that are smaller, single story, zero entry, with manageable yard and a walkable environment.

Again, this is where, based on our homework, we think the market will add value in a format that will be sensitive to the neighborhoods, but this is by no means the end of the design discussion...



The Program board shows some EXAMPLES of what some of the development MIGHT look like... but again, we are still early in the process. It's almost certain that it won't look exactly like any of the images above, but we did want to provide an idea of what types of development COULD occur in each area of the site.

The next step in how we get there is via a development RFP. These are the sorts of agreements you've seen used to assist development all around the city, and they're a great way to get both the creativity of the development world in touch with the vision of the community...

For more information, visit bigpicturehuntsville.com or e-mail bigpicture@huntsvilleal.gov.