

## WORKSHOP SUMMARY

To: Lucinda Statler, City of Columbia  
From: Kevin Bacon, Toole Design  
Date: June 6, 2025 (Revised August 13, 2025)  
Project: **Planning for the Former I-277 Corridor**

### Introduction

The City of Columbia is preparing to solicit proposals for developing the approximately 20-acre site situated around the intersection of River Drive and a future segment of the Vista Greenway just north of Downtown Columbia. From May 12-14, 2025, the City of Columbia partnered with Toole Design to lead a community design workshop to engage major community stakeholders to develop a vision, goals, and a series of conceptual designs for the site's development that feature the future Vista Greenway as an integral part of the development. The work completed in association with this workshop both considers and is complementary to the market viability study being completed for the City by Agora Partners. Taken together, these illustrate the potential benefits of integrating the planning and design of the Vista Greenway with new development at this site. All images included with this report document have been provided for convenience; full size versions can be found in **Attachment 1**.

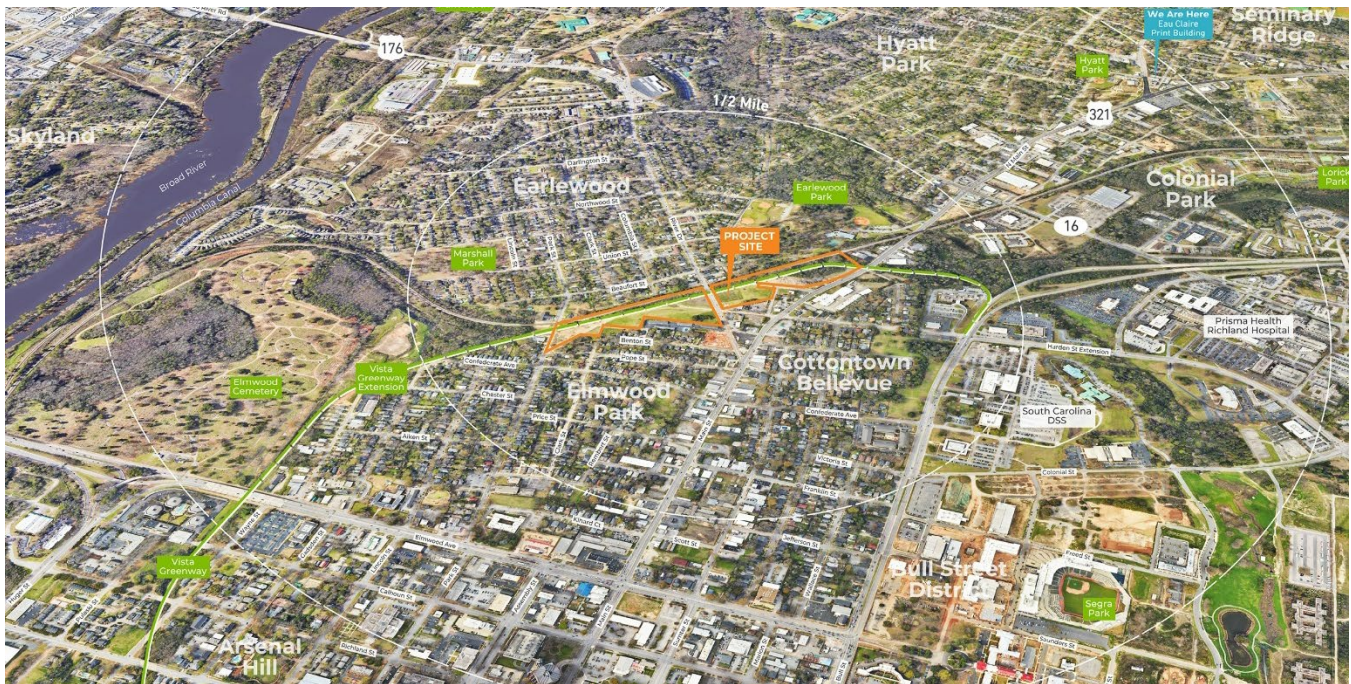


Figure 1. Site Location & Context



**Figure 2. Project Site**

## About the Site

The currently undeveloped site was historically home to single-family residences and small businesses that helped bridge the gap over the freight rail corridor between the neighborhoods of Earlewood and Elmwood Park. The site was cleared in the 1970s to make way for the planned I-277 corridor that would have connected I-126 near Downtown Columbia with I-77 for faster access to Charlotte, NC. The highway segment was never completed, and this site has remained undeveloped. The site's location along a future segment of the planned Vista Greenway is an opportunity to develop the site in a way that engages the greenway to restore the fabric of the neighborhoods, provide amenities that serve communities surrounding the site, and create connections with destinations throughout the city.

### *Physical Conditions*

The two-parcel site stretches for almost a half mile from Park Street to Main Street. Though the site is fairly flat along River Drive, it drops in grade almost 70 feet from River Drive to Park Street and River Drive to Main Street. The active freight rail corridor that runs parallel to the site sits approximately 35-40 feet below the site's grade at River Drive but crosses over Park Street and Main Street due to the changes in topography. A continuous, dense tree line serves as an additional buffer between the rail corridor and the site. The site is relatively clear though long stretches of broken concrete and asphalt serve as artifacts noting the location of former streets on the site. Despite the dramatic changes in topography, the site does not lie in any recorded floodplains or floodways. The property controlled by the City also includes a third parcel on the east side of Main Street that was omitted from consideration during this study due to the parcel's location and topography.

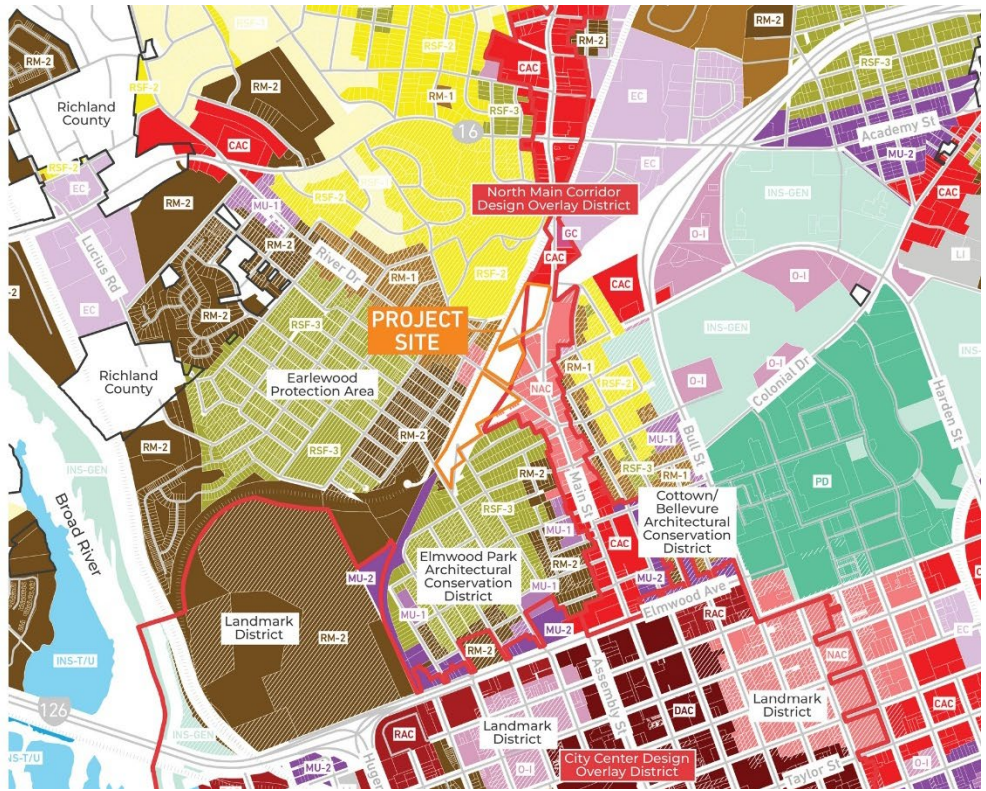
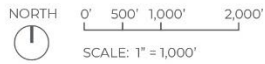


**Figure 3. Site Photos**

*Planning & Regulatory Context*

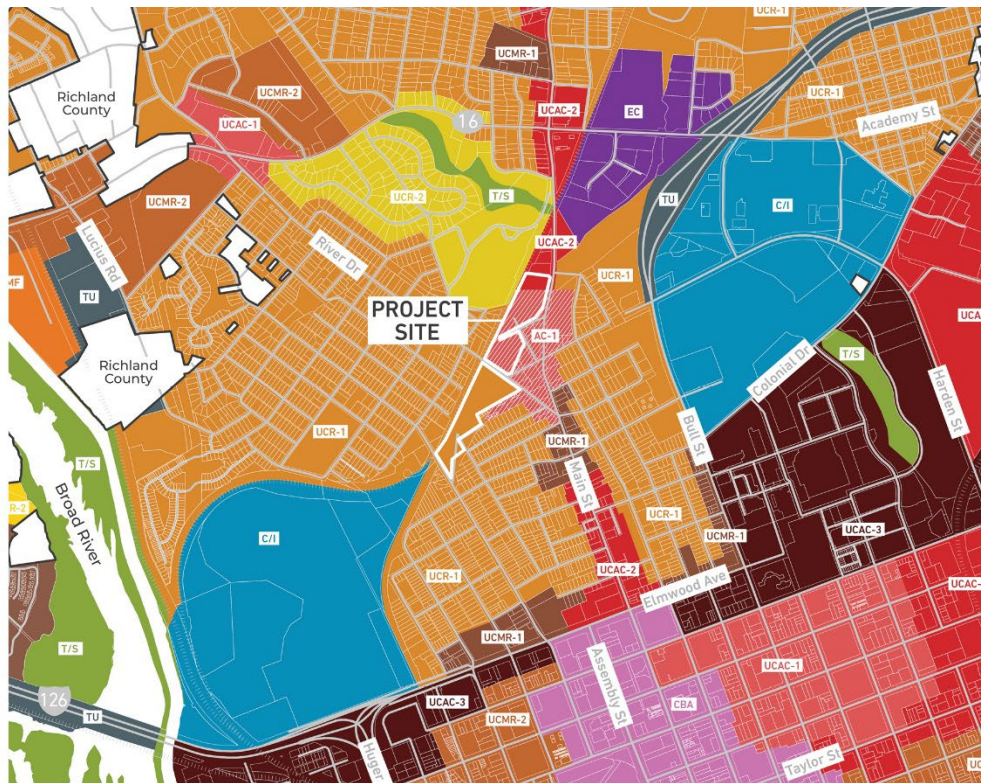
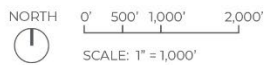
Until its recent acquisition by the City of Columbia, the site was still held as right-of-way for the formerly planned interstate corridor. It has yet to receive a specific zoning designation which would control the type, form, and intensity of future development on the site. This preliminary community design work, in combination with the market viability research, is intended to also inform a process for rezoning the site. The zoning of surrounding properties varies between various residential districts (RSF-3, RM-1, RM-2) in the heart of the Elmwood Park and Earlewood neighborhoods to mixed-use centric districts (NAC, CAC) along Main Street and River Drive. The future land use element from the City's most recent comprehensive plan, *Columbia Compass: Envision 2036*, shows the site as a combination of Urban Core Multi-family (UCMF) on the southern parcel and Neighborhood Activity Center (AC-1) and Urban Core Community Activity Center (UCAC-2) on the northern parcel. This regulatory and policy context suggests that a zoning district (or combination of districts) that accommodates some level of higher intensity mixed use along the major roadways transitioning to compact residential uses closer to the established neighborhoods may be most appropriate. A mixed-use neighborhood center situated around Main Street and River Drive is also consistent with a similar study for the area on this site illustrated in the Master Plan for the *Villages of North Columbia (2005)* and anticipated by the *North Main Corridor Design Guidelines (2010)*.

- DAC** Downtown Activity Center/Corridor
- RAC** Regional Activity Center/Corridor
- CAC** Community Activity Center/Corridor
- NAC** Neighborhood Activity Center/Corridor
- O-1** Office & Institutional District
- GC** General Commercial District
- MU-2** Mixed-Use
- MU-1** Mixed-Use
- RSF-3** Residential Single Family-Small Lot District
- RSF-2** Residential Single Family-Medium Lot District
- RSF-1** Residential Single Family-Large Lot District
- RM-2** Residential Mixed
- RM-1** Residential Mixed
- RD** Residential Two-Family District
- LI** Light Industrial District
- EC** Employment Campus District
- PD** Planned Development
- T/C** Transitional/Conservation District
- INS-200** Institutional-Riverbanks Zoo & Garden District
- INS-TU** Institutional-Transportation/Utilities District
- INS-GEN** Institutional-General District
- Design Overlay District**
- Historic Preservation Overlay District**



**Figure 4. Current Zoning**

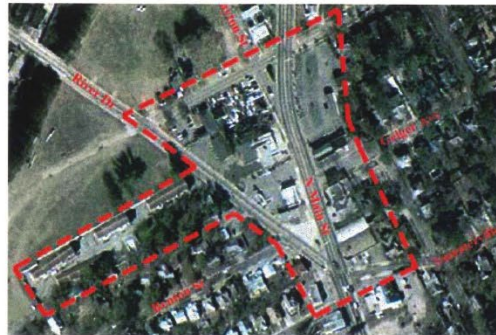
- UCMR-1** Urban Core Mixed Residential-1
- UCMR-2** Urban Core Mixed Residential-2
- UEMR** Urban Edge Mixed Residential
- UCMF** Urban Core Multi-Family
- UCR-1** Urban Core Residential Small Lot
- UCR-2** Urban Core Residential Large Lot
- UER-2** Urban Edge Residential Large Lot
- UCAC-1** Urban Core Neighborhood Activity Center
- UCAC-2** Urban Core Community Activity Center
- UCAC-3** Urban Core Regional Activity Center
- AC-1** Neighborhood Activity Corridor
- AC-2** Community Activity Corridor
- AC-3** Regional Activity Corridor
- EC** Employment Campus
- TU** Transportation & Utilities
- C/I** Civic/Institutional
- Z00** Riverbanks Zoo & Garden
- U/C** Universities/Colleges
- T/S** Transitional/Sensitive Lands



**Figure 5. Future Land Use**

**First Tier Catalysts**

**Catalyst 1-2 (N. Main Street at River Drive)**



*Existing Conditions*

This area at the intersection of N. Main Street and River Drive is composed of a dated apartment complex, vacant asphalt parking lots and vacant/underutilized buildings. The site is approximately 12 parcels on eight acres and has a mix of commercial zoning types. It is adjacent to the formerly proposed Highway 277 road extension project that is currently vacant.

The participants from the public workshop sessions emphasized the need to make this area part of a larger park greenway system that would connect to the Three Rivers Greenway and downtown. This sentiment has been echoed by City Staff and is further supported by the proposed park system as part of the adjacent Bull Street redevelopment.

The catalyst site is bounded by the historic Elmwood Park neighborhood to the west and Cottontown to the east. According to the market analysis, these neighborhoods have the highest income and property values within the community.



*Future Land Use*

Even with the good economic buying power associated with the area, no quality retail services are located within the area. During the public workshops, the residents identified a need for a small mixed-use retail node, with an emphasis on attracting the arts community at a location within a short walking distance of their homes. The catalyst project would develop a mixed-use activity node at the intersection of N. Main Street and River Drive and become the center of the Artist Village. This intersection forms a development triangle, with Anthony Avenue being the northern edge. Included in this triangle would be retail components with an emphasis on small lifestyle shops, such as a coffee store, boutiques or galleries with residential or office on a second story. Live/work units would help to define the northwest corner of the development of the triangle. These units would take advantage of the views and open space created by the future greenway to the west. Additional retail and live/work units would be constructed on a mostly vacant former car lot fronting N. Main Street between Geiger Avenue and Anthony Avenue.

The existing apartment complex along River Drive would be redeveloped with owner occupied townhomes that also face the future park. Due to the apartment parcels' small size and narrow width, an extension of Cedar Street along the future greenway's southern boundary is crucial in making this element of the catalyst feasible. An additional

Figure 6. Pages From The Master Plan for the Villages of North Columbia (2005)

## Connectivity Context

The first segment of the Vista Greenway was opened in 2012. It follows a former freight rail corridor from its entry point at Lady Street and Lincoln Street in Downtown Columbia, crosses Finlay Park, and connects with the edge of the Elmwood Park neighborhood as it passes under I-126 and terminates at Elmwood Avenue. This 0.9-mile long segment is envisioned to continue north following the same former rail corridor along the eastern edge of Elmwood Cemetery before turning east to follow an active freight rail line along the northern boundary of the former I-277 site eventually connecting with the Bull Street District farther to the east. While this general alignment is included in the City's comprehensive plan, it is a starting point for determining a specific placement for the future greenway trail that optimizes the balance between providing a recreational asset, catalyzing and connecting to new development, and serving as part of a larger regional mobility network.

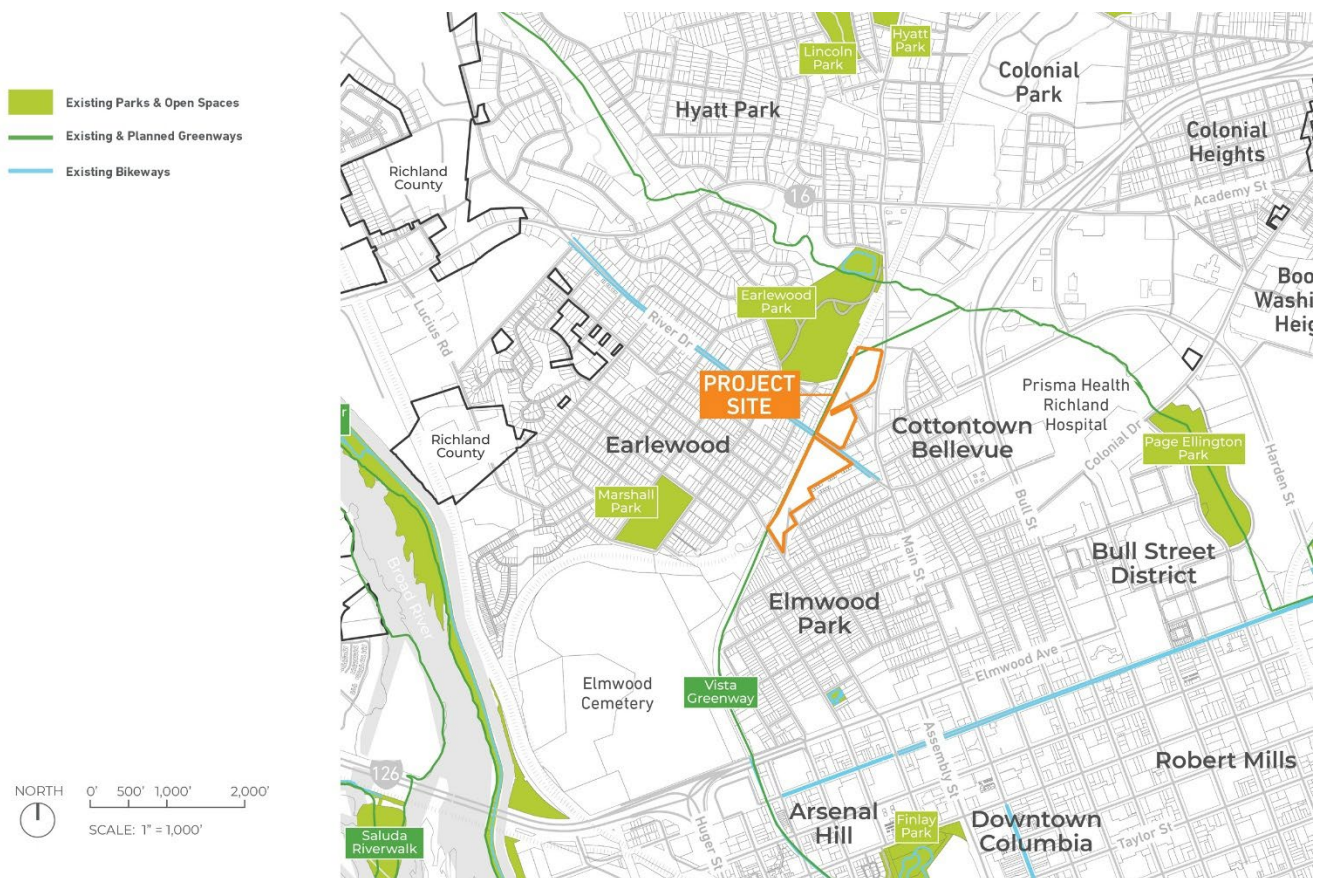


Figure 7. Parks & Trails



Figure 8. Reaching Riverbanks: Community Mobility Plan (2025)

The recently adopted *Reaching Riverbanks: Community Mobility Plan (2025)* proposes a larger framework of various greenway types, including existing trails and greenways, connecting local park and open space assets to create an area wide non-vehicular mobility network as an alternative to the existing regional vehicular network. This site sits at the edge of this area plan. The future Vista Greenway extension and the recent bicycle facility improvements to River Drive are key components of this plan.

Today the former I-277 site remains relatively clear and unused except for a small portion along River Drive which is home to the NOMA Community Garden, intermittent use for youth football practices, and stockpiles of broken asphalt and concrete from former roadways found in the overgrown areas along the rail corridor edge. Beyond supporting recreational and mobility needs, integrating the Vista Greenway through the site is an opportunity to also support economic and real estate development objectives. Many greenways – such as the Atlanta BeltLine (Atlanta, GA), Joe Louis Greenway (Detroit, MI), Little Sugar Creek Greenway (Charlotte, NC), Swamp Rabbit Tail (Greenville, SC), and the Mary Black Rail Trail (Spartanburg, SC) – provide examples where the greenway, as a public space investment, can catalyze private development and provide additional community benefits when the two are designed integrally. This style of “trail-oriented” development focuses on putting active uses and accessible frontage along the edge of the trail increasing use and activity along the trail and improving safety and the perception of safety. Understanding how these and other, similar examples might inspire a community vision and strategy for organizing the former I-277 site was the primary goal of the community design workshop.



Figure 9. Current Aerial & Property Survey



Figure 10. Historic Aerial (1971)



**Figure 11. Precedent Greenway Projects**



**Figure 12. Community Design Workshop Photos**

## Engagement Process

The community design workshop was an opportunity to discuss a vision, goals, and approaches for developing the former I-277 site. It was structured as a highly interactive, multi-day charrette where stakeholders, the community, designers, and agency partners worked together to develop these items in real time. This approach has the benefit of understanding community expectations early on, managing expectations of what may or may not be feasible, and generating big ideas for site development that can be used as a springboard for a fully scoped design and development process later on.

The workshop began on the evening of May 12, 2025 with a community kick-off meeting. During this open-house style meeting, planners and designers from Toole Design and the City of Columbia met with community members and stakeholders to review and discuss existing site conditions, previous plans and studies, and example projects as well as discuss ideas and goals for the site's development centered on basemaps of the existing site. Of the many comments and ideas documented during the kick-off meeting, the following key themes were identified:

1. **Integrate the Vista Greenway with New Development:** the existing portion of the Vista Greenway occupies a former rail corridor in downtown. Community members pointed to its isolation in the corridor as reason for perceptions of a lack of activity and safety. The desire for this segment is to engage the existing neighborhood and new development in a way that integrates these elements and activates the greenway on a consistent basis.
2. **Include Public Spaces for Community Use:** the community currently uses the vacant site for the NOMA Community Garden and informal youth football practices. Spaces that accommodate these and other community-oriented activities should be interwoven with new development. Locations of existing activities can shift as long as the new locations still meet the needs of these activities.
3. **Balance Areas for Density with Existing Neighborhood Scale:** New development should respect the scale of the existing neighborhood. Some higher intensity development (no more than 6 stories) would be acceptable closer to Main Street and River Drive. These higher intensity areas should transition thoughtfully to meet the existing scale of the neighborhoods at the edges.
4. **Minimize the Amount of Space Dedicated to Parking:** The Vista Greenway is an opportunity to reinforce the walkable and bikeable nature of the existing neighborhoods and larger goals of the City. Large areas devoted entirely to surface parking should be avoided. Parking, when needed, should be sized appropriately and integrally designed into new development.
5. **Tell the Story of I-277 by Reconnecting Neighborhoods:** the area cleared for the future I-277 corridor created a gash that divided the neighborhoods. New development "should tell this story" by ensuring that new development is wholly integrated with the adjacent neighborhoods and provides new connections wherever possible.

Over the next two days, the Toole Design team translated this feedback into three unique approaches for potentially organizing the site for new development each integrating the Vista Greenway in a different way. The main themes were reinforced by community feedback received during the final open house on May 14, 2025 when community members were invited to review site concepts with the design team.



## Big Ideas

The Toole Design team incorporated community feedback into three very different concepts for potentially organizing the former I-277 corridor site. These site concepts feature different balances and arrangements of community spaces and places for new development organized by different potential alignments for the Vista Greenway and other trail and street connections. Each of these incorporate the main themes and specific features discussed in community engagement as well as design and planning elements from the greenway examples. Concepts were not tested for specific development yields or building feasibility though locations for proposed development intensities and priority building frontages to achieve the desired result have been considered and indicated. None of the concepts are to be taken as a development-ready plan. They are starting points to demonstrate major organizing elements and will require further study and community engagement to be advanced for this purpose.

### *Concept 1: Central Greenway*

The “Central Greenway” emphasizes the urban opportunities for the potential trail alignment. In this concept the Vista Greenway leaves the former rail corridor on the south end of the site and replaces Barrett Street and Anthony Street with the trail alignment to bring the trail into the heart of the former I-277 site. Following the existing Barrett Street alignment allows the trail to use the existing street’s grade to navigate steeper slopes in this portion of the site. From Park Street to River Drive, the trail would be a pedestrian and bicycle only connection that provides frontage for new development on the east side of the trail and provides access to new community spaces to the west. After crossing River Drive, the trail would be designed as a flush, shared space serving new development on both sides and providing a flexible space for pedestrians, bicyclists, and special events. The trail would become a side path as it turns north and follows Main Street.

New community spaces in this concept include a terraced water garden on Park Street that takes advantage of steep slopes in this area, a relocated community garden on the south side of River Drive, and a practice field north of Newman Street. The field area could also support a future trail spur over the railroad that would restore the former George Street connection to Earlewood Park on the other side of the railroad. While such a crossing may not be immediately feasible, it would be important to develop the final site design in such a way that a future connection is not prevented. This connection received broad community support and should be considered in any potential site development concept going forward.

Relocating the community garden to the south side of River Drive allows the creation of a larger development parcel where the garden exists today. This would allow new development to leverage some of the flattest areas of the site to place the greatest intensity of development along River Drive adjacent to existing properties that are already zoned and planned for a similar intensity of development. Higher intensity development at this location would support activation of the greenway and adjacent community spaces. Frontage of new development should be oriented towards the greenway and new community spaces to further encourage activation. Development on new parcels south of River Drive would gradually step down in intensity until it matches the scale of Elmwood Park around Clark Street and Park Street.

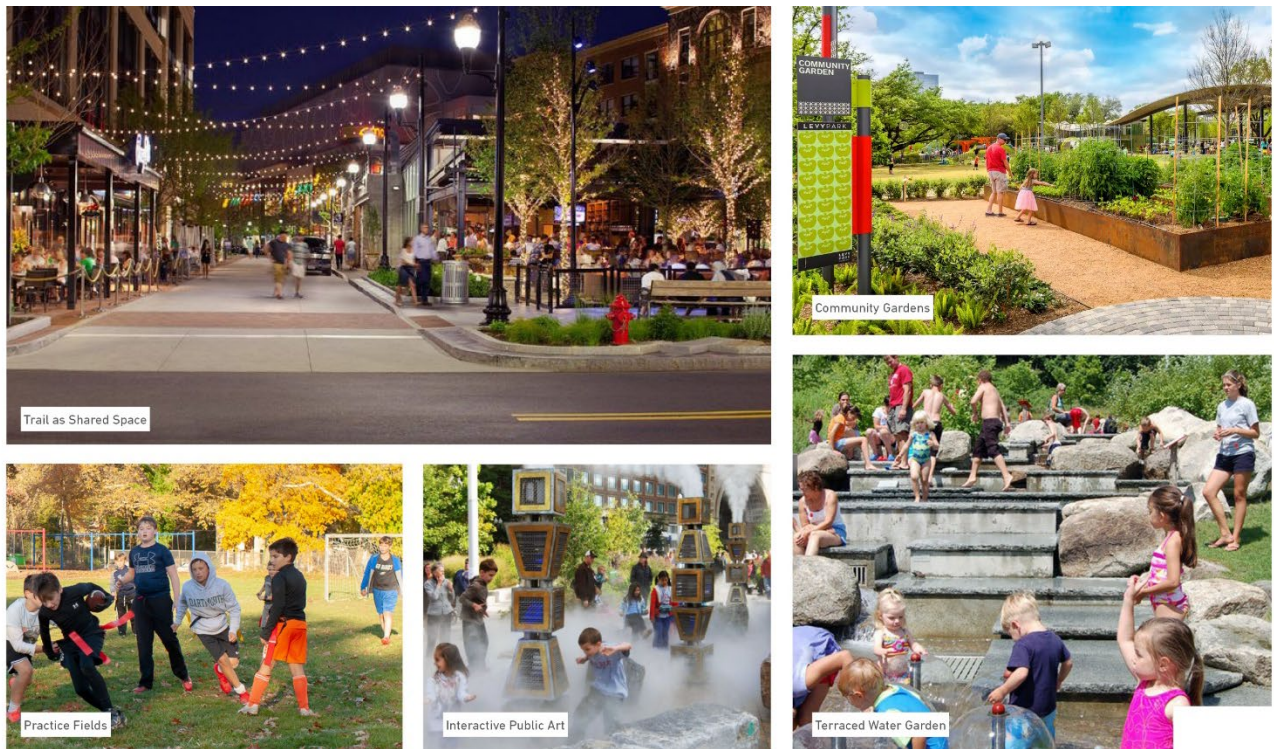
Figure 16. Central Greenway Concept – Framework Plan



Figure 17. Central Greenway Concept – Development Diagrams



Figure 18. Central Greenway Concept – Character Imagery



### *Concept 2: Fields, Forest & Front Doors*

Attempting to capture the best of both worlds, the “Fields, Forest, and Front Doors” concept balances passive recreational opportunities with discreet opportunities for urban edge conditions. South of River Drive, the Vista Greenway runs parallel to the active rail corridor below but expands to create opportunities for new community spaces and frontage opportunities for lower to medium intensity development matching the scale of the existing neighborhood around Park Street and transitioning to higher intensities towards River Drive. This segment of the greenway is anchored by a workout area integrated into trail switchbacks ascending from Park Street on the south end and a multi-purpose event field at River Drive on the north end. This field could be used for a variety of community events from markets to movie nights. A multi-purpose event field can be a great community asset, but consideration will need to be given to the long-term management and operation of the space to ensure that it generates the desired type and frequency of activities.

The multi-purpose event field is the splitting point for two separate trail routes. The first routes around the event field and then along Newman Street and Main Street where the trail would be integrated with the street design and organize higher intensity development fronting along the trail in this area. The design of the trail could either be a side path located along the street or more integral to the overall street design similar to the Central Street concept. The second segment continues following the rail corridor where it passes a community garden and traverses a forested area of the site before crossing Main Street near Grace Street. This approach provides future trail users with route options based on the desired destination and experience.

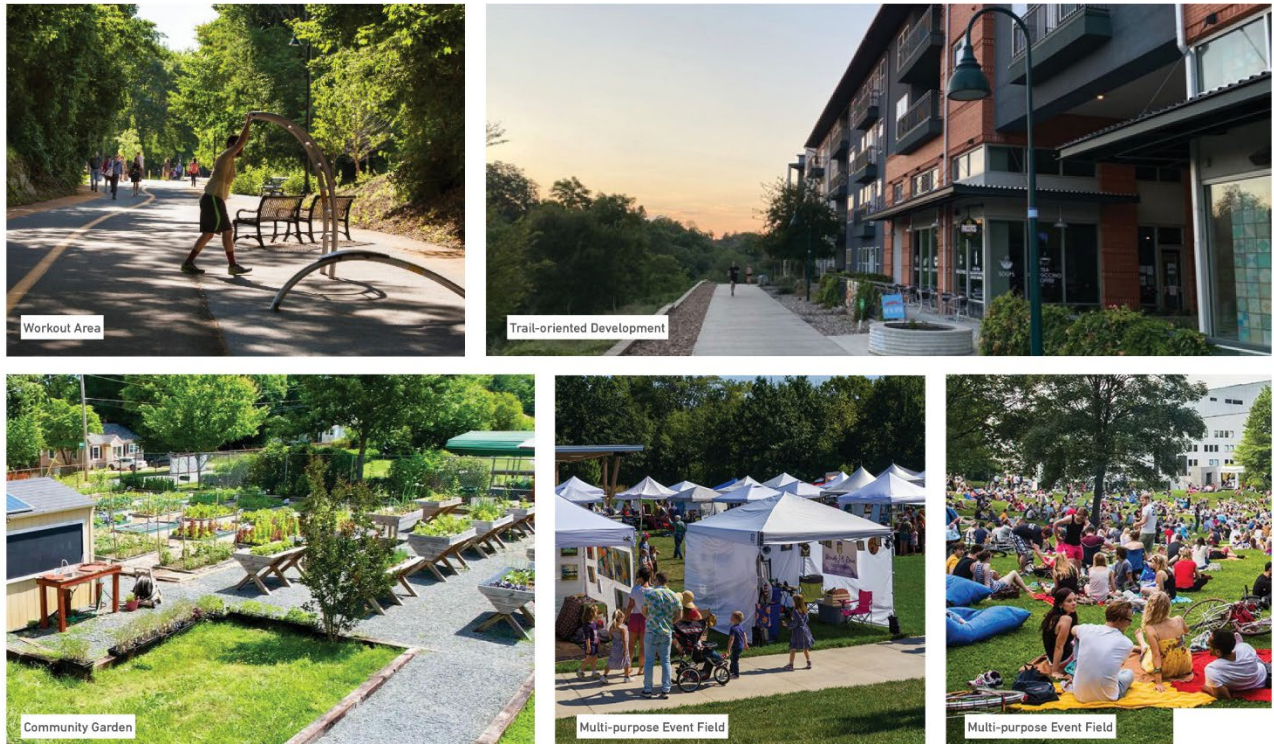
**Figure 19. Fields, Forest, & Front Doors Concept – Framework Plan**



**Figure 20. Fields, Forest, & Front Doors Concept – Development Diagrams**



Figure 21. Fields, Forest, & Front Doors Concept – Character Imagery



### Concept 3: Neighborhood Branches

In contrast to the other two concepts, the “Neighborhood Branches” concept focuses on creating a series of smaller community spaces built on frequent community connections. It features a Vista Greenway alignment that parallels the existing rail corridor across the site before turning east towards Main Street on the north end of the site. The trail is separated from the active rail line by several stories of topography and a running tree line along the site’s western edge. Unlike the other two concepts, the trail in this concept becomes a “backyard” element to overall lower intensity development across the site reinforced by the small parcel sizes. Higher intensity development would primarily be focused towards Main Street and away from existing neighborhoods.

A new alignment for Barrett Street to Newman Street is used to organize and provide access to these new parcels. The lower and medium development intensity parcels would be accessed from the front along the realigned Barrett Street while higher intensity parcels on the east side of the site would be accessed by side streets. The length of these parcels is interrupted by new community connections to the primary Vista Greenway trail that extend deep into the adjacent neighborhood via existing street connections. Each of these connections would be designed to include a unique community space that would also serve as a trailhead. These trailheads include a terraced garden along Park Street and an outdoor pavilion area at Drayton Street. The outdoor pavilion would also serve as a gateway for a connection to Elmwood Park using the former George Street alignment over the railroad.

Figure 22. Neighborhood Branches Concept – Framework Plan



Figure 23. Neighborhood Branches Concept – Development Diagrams



Figure 24. Neighborhood Branches Concept – Character Imagery



## Next Steps

The community design workshop for considering the relationship of the future Vista Greenway alignment within the former I-277 site was an excellent opportunity to engage stakeholder, generate big ideas, and gauge expectations early on in the development process. Community expectations for this site are many; balancing every single one while maintaining a feasible development project will be an on-going challenge. The three concepts developed during the workshop provide great examples of using the greenway's trail alignment to organize the site for different development outcomes each including some, but not all, of the community's priorities to offer as a starting point for design and making compromises during the design process. Just as these high-level design concepts are a starting point for developing a site design for development, it is highly recommended that the community design workshop be viewed as the starting point for engaging community members through the design and development process. For any concept that is ultimately selected and refined for development, it will be important to consider the phased construction of this site. It's likely that development of the site will occur incrementally over time. The alignment of the Vista Greenway and the organization of the surrounding property should allow the greenway to be built and become an active place in early phases so that new development can be integrated later to accommodate ever changing real estate market cycles. New development should be organized in such a way that public connections to and from the greenway are created, or at least not precluded in the future, to the greatest extent possible.