

## North Port St. Joe's Collaborative Problem Solving Grant

***North Port St. Joe is an underserved, historic African-American community overlooking St Joseph's Bay, in Gulf County, Florida.***

In 2016, a group of residents formed the North Port St. Joe Project Area Coalition (or 'the PAC'). Its goal was to update a Community Master Plan that had been shelved by the local City Commission years previously. Even though North Port St. Joe had just been identified by the State of Florida as a 'Blighted Community'. By 2016, the neighborhood had declined even further.

***Enough was enough.***

While attending the community meetings that culminated in its 2016 Master Plan, PAC members knew that the cost of redeveloping North Port St. Joe would be considerable - and certainly beyond the means of the City's annual budgets.

***More help would be needed.***

So, from that point onward, the community began to seek financial support from outside of the Region.

***It took some time but now we are seeing the fruit of our efforts.***

The \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that I'm about to take you through and which was announced last November is the largest and most significant that the community has received, to date.

But for the community to be truly redeveloped - ***without*** the displacement of its current residents - this grant should be considered just the beginning.

The grant's focus is on the community's health and welfare in relation to its homes - (***particularly***, following the damage caused by Hurricane Michael and, more recently, the impacts of living through two years of the Covid-19 pandemic).

***Why these concerns, you may ask?***

***Because***, following Hurricane Michael, many homes within the community experienced damage that was followed over the coming weeks with mold and, consequently, respiratory issues for its residents.

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***This wasn't all.*** Other issues that have been raised in the community over recent years have included concerns about drinking water and, its possible cause, lead piping.

***But the most critical concern,*** raised by a group of residents, has been the slow but steady subsidence of their homes over the last several decades, living as they do, mainly along and around Battle Street.

This Collaborative Problem Solving Grant - as it's termed by the EPA - is designed to understand how to best create safe, healthy and resilient housing in post-Hurricane Florida. To achieve this goal, the collaborators must engage in as many ways possible with the citizens of North Port St. Joe

***Who are the collaborators?***

- Pioneer Bay Community Development Corporation (on behalf of the North Port St. Joe Project Area Coalition),
- Florida Department of Health in Gulf County,
- University of West Florida,
- University of South Florida,
- The Port St. Joe City Commission,
- Gulf County Commission, and
- the Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Church.

***The grant will be carried out in three steps:*** the first step will be to gain, via a survey, more information from those within the community about a number of issues including: indoor air quality, potable water quality and the impact of Covid-19 on resident's health and wellbeing.

***The second step*** will be to use this initial survey (or 'assessment' as it's sometimes called) to broaden within the community, the discussion of health and welfare and the means of improving it.

***The third step*** will be to address the conditions of the community's older homes, built prior to 1960.

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A number of outcomes (or goals) are being pursued during the two years that this grant is expected to cover. In the **short-term**, its goal is to identify the scale of need within the community and from that, to prioritize it accordingly, as well as increasing awareness of these needs.

The **inter-mediate goal** is to use the data gathered to bring more external resources and funding into the community.

This in turn we hope will result in the **long-term outcome** of a reduction in health hazards, anxiety and housing issues and in so doing will improve the overall wellness and resilience that North Port St. Joe resident deserve.

***To wrap up:***

It is worth re-emphasizing the importance of this grant and its intended outcomes. By having a ready-made Master Plan and an active not-for-profit Community Development Corporation in its midst, the community has been able to attract the interest of the EPA.

Our aim is to ensure that the EPA grant will, in turn, attract other external sources of funding that will be essential to the ultimate success of the 2016 Master Plan by **improving housing** in North Port St. Joe, **restoring and redeveloping** Martin Luther King Boulevard, and **completing the re-use** of the George Washington High School campus, to mention three examples.

***Thank you for listening to this short presentation of a fundamental part of one community's effort to transform its neighborhood.***

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