

SECTION FIVE: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is essential to the Dixieland CRA planning process, ensuring that the voices of residents, business owners, and stakeholders directly help shape the vision and priorities for the district. By fostering transparency and collaboration, the City has built trust and gathered valuable insights that reflect the community's unique needs and aspirations. This inclusive approach helped identify both challenges and opportunities, guiding the development of strategies that are proactive, responsive and relevant to those who live, work, and travel through Dixieland.

Timeline of Public Engagement Activities:

Project Kickoff:	May 28, 2025
Begin Round 1 Community Outreach Planning:	June 2025
Site Visit:	August 13, 2025
Internal Stakeholder Meetings:	August 27, 2025
External Stakeholder Meetings:	September-October 2025
Community Open House:	November 06, 2025
Close Round 1 Community Outreach:	January 2026
Begin Round 2 Community Outreach:	March 2026

ENGAGEMENT EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES

The community engagement process for the Dixieland CRA Plan began with a series of targeted meetings. These meetings brought together internal City departments, external stakeholders, residents, and business owners to discuss key issues affecting the district.

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of addressing public safety concerns, such as:

- Emergency response delays and crime in alleyways
- Improving infrastructure, including sidewalk connectivity, alley repairs, and utility upgrades.

- Transportation challenges such as traffic bottlenecks, poor transit connectivity, and limited parking—were identified as major barriers to business vitality and visitor experience.
- Participants highlighted the need for coordinated investment and ongoing community involvement to support successful revitalization efforts.

PROJECT SURVEY AND INTERACTIVE MAPPING EXERCISES

An online survey was developed to solicit input from community members by asking questions about the key features of the Midtown, Downtown, and Dixieland CRAs. Overall, these questions focused, such as how they would describe the neighborhood's character, what they value most about the area, and what changes or opportunities they hope to see in the future. The survey also explored transportation habits, accessibility, and desired improvements, as well as the types of businesses and services residents feel are missing.

The overall survey across all CRAs generally revealed the following:

- **Demographics:** Most respondents are long-term Lakeland residents, living primarily in single-family homes. The survey captured a diverse range of ages, backgrounds, and connections to the city.
- **Top Priorities Across Areas:**
 - Safer sidewalks and crosswalks
 - Landscaping, beautification, and lighting/safety features
 - More green spaces and parks
 - Business recruitment and incentives
 - Streetscape improvements and historic preservation.
- **Desired Amenities:**
 - Grocery stores, food markets, and cafés
 - Family dining and specialty retail
 - Arts, culture, and entertainment venues
 - Fitness/recreation options
- **Development Preferences:**
 - Support for mixed-use buildings, small-scale local businesses, and multi-family housing
 - Interest in preserving historic buildings and enhancing community identity.
- **Challenges:**
 - Transportation, housing access, safety, and job opportunities are the most cited quality-of-life concerns.
- **Communication Preferences:**

- Most prefer updates via the CRA website, social media, and flyers at community spaces.

Specifically in Dixieland, these questions helped the planning team understand how people experience Dixieland and what priorities should guide its redevelopment.:

- **Top Priorities for Improvement:**
 - Sidewalk repairs and safer crossings (68%)
 - Parking improvements (56%)
 - Landscaping and beautification (52%)
 - Traffic calming and speed control (38%)
 - Lighting and safety enhancements (36%)
 - Signage and wayfinding (9%)
- **Desired Businesses/Amenities:**
 - Specialty retail or vintage shops (65%)
 - Grocery or convenience options (58%)
 - Arts, maker spaces, or galleries (54%)
 - Services (salon, pet care, printing, etc.) (31%)
 - Fitness (24%)
 - Other (14%), of which:
 - 67% included additional ideas for businesses, including alternative grocery options, local restaurants and cafes, and bars\
 - 17% included ideas for public amenities, such as community centers, parks, and increased public safety measures.
 - 10% included comments on parking.
 - 7% included comments on affordable housing.
- **Preferred Development:**
 - Mixed-use projects with shopfronts and residential or office space above (35%)
 - Pocket parks or public gathering space (24%)
 - Townhomes/cottages/missing-middle housing (19%)
 - Small-scale commercial (15%)
 - Other (7%), of which:
 - 38% included comments on the business mix of the area.
 - 31% included comments on desired public amenities, such as art and community gardens.
 - 15% included comments on housing.
 - 15% included comments on desired roadway improvements.
- **Biggest Challenges:**
 - Lack of parking (42%)

- Traffic/speeding (38%)
- Safety/crime (9%)
- Access to housing (8%)
- Noise/nuisance activity (2%)
- **Historic Character:**
 - Over 78% say historic character is “extremely important” or “should guide new construction.”
 - Most want to protect/restore historic buildings and storefronts, expand historic markers, and host events celebrating local history.
- **Investment Priorities:**
 - Streetscape improvements (31%)
 - Public parking solutions (29%)
 - Historic preservation projects (20%)
 - Business recruitment/incentives (20%)

Full survey results for Dixieland specifically are shown in Appendix E Community Survey.

On November 06, 2025, the City of Lakeland and Kimley-Horn hosted an interactive open house event. This gathering provided a forum for residents and stakeholders to share their perspectives on Dixieland’s assets, challenges, and future opportunities.

The open house featured an interactive and informative theme, using visual aids to convey the proposed ideas. Attendees participated in a mapping exercise by placing stickers and comments on a large map of Dixieland to pinpoint locations for improvement and areas of concern. Additionally, the interactive map encouraged participants to comment on the downtown area and offer specific input on the space to meet their community needs better. This activity revealed several clear priorities:

- **Mobility and Safety:** South Florida Avenue was frequently identified as a critical corridor needing safer pedestrian crossings, better lighting, and enhanced bike and walker connectivity.
- **Public Spaces and Placemaking:** Residents expressed a strong desire for more pocket parks, green gathering areas, and public art installations. The Cob & Pen area was repeatedly praised as a vibrant neighborhood asset, serving as a model for future streetscape improvements and local investment.
- **Economic Development:** There was widespread support for initiatives that would help local businesses thrive, including building rehabilitation, incentives for mixed-use development, and improved transit stops.
- **Historic Preservation and Identity:** Attendees emphasized the importance of maintaining Dixieland’s historic charm while modernizing infrastructure,

suggesting themed streetscaping, gateway features, and placemaking nodes to reinforce the district's unique character.

This direct engagement provided invaluable qualitative data that was instrumental in refining the recommendations.



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FROM ROUND 1 COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

Overall, feedback collected through the stakeholder meetings, open house, survey and mapping exercise reflected a unified community vision for Dixieland—one that balances mobility improvements with vibrant public spaces, economic growth, and historic preservation.

- Transportation consistently emerged as the top priority, with residents expressing strong support for safer, more connected streets, improved pedestrian crossings, better lighting, and increased bike and walker connectivity.

- Economic development and enhancements to the public realm followed closely, with calls for greater support for local businesses, investments in streetscape improvements, and the creation of inviting public spaces.
- The Cob & Pen area was frequently praised as a successful example of local investment, demonstrating the potential for similar improvements to strengthen Dixieland’s identity and economic vitality.

These insights directly informed the plan’s recommendations, ensuring that proposed initiatives align with the community’s vision for a thriving, inclusive, and distinctive Dixieland.

UPCOMING ROUND 2 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

As the Dixieland CRA Plan continues to get developed, the project team is planning to present the draft plan to the community, businesses within Dixieland, stakeholders, and anyone that may have an interest in the project. The planned approach to Round 2 engagement will be based on “This is what we heard, did we get it right, and what feedback do you have?” Due to the demographic feedback from Round 1 engagement survey results, those who identified as business owners in Dixieland were found to not be as responsive. Therefore, stakeholders and business owners will be targeted in this second round of engagement to make sure that their feedback is solicited.

ROUND 2 ENGAGEMENT SCHEDULE

To ensure future investments reflect the priorities of the people in Dixieland, specific engagement events will be focused on different groups. The below anticipated schedule will solicit feedback on the draft Plan approach:

Event Date: March 10, 2026

Location: Union Hall, 1023 Florida Avenue S., Lakeland, FL 33803

Schedule: Stakeholder/Business Meeting, Option 1 (12:00-2:00 p.m.)

Stakeholder/Business Meeting, Option 2 (2:00-4:00 p.m.)

Open House Community Meeting (4:30-6:00 p.m.)

Homeowner Association Specific Meeting (6:00-8:00 p.m.)

The plan for the stakeholder/business meetings is to engage with those that have a vested interest in Dixieland and the CRA plan outcomes. Identified topics and information will be presented and set boundaries on what feedback is solicited with the intent being to gather information on if what has been identified is accurate and how

final plan recommendations can be implemented. These meetings will contain a short overview presentation about the project and then move into a small group structured format where one-on-one discussions about certain topics will be presented and discussed. Attendees will be given stickers or markers correlating to topics discussed and they will walk through an exercise to mark a map of Dixieland where they think the topic is best to be implemented. This will be similar to the round 1 engagement mapping activity. We plan to reuse this method, because input from this group was underwhelming during the first round.

The open house community meeting will have a short overview presentation about the project, placed on a loop, so attendees are able to view the presentation whenever they are able to attend the meeting. Various project topic boards will be set up around the room, and project team members will be able to discuss the information with attendees.

The homeowner's association meeting will largely mimic the stakeholder/business meetings by providing the project presentation, then having a question-and-answer session with the attendees to discuss the topics.

The project team will be available throughout these events to speak directly with attendees and take notes of all comments. Materials will be developed in understandable formats applicable to public understanding. At the end of the events, a summary report of engagement will be developed to memorialize what took place and comments received.