



## Fall 2021 Change Academy CITY PLAN 2040 Session 3 Notes

For this session, participants read the Responsible Regionalism and Resilient Economy sections of City Plan 2040.

**Observations:** We began this session by asking participants to share their observations about the sections for this week's reading. Participants brought up the concept of land use, which they said seems like a big theme of the plan, but is not talked about much. The City is 42.5 square miles, and it is important to think about land use within the city as a whole. How does a certain use of a plot of land in a given neighborhood convey into the city as a whole and into surrounding localities?

**Presentation:** Aisha Johnson, an Economic Development Specialist with the City of Roanoke, discussed the Department of Economic Development's role in the comprehensive plan. She noted that the focus on equity is relatively new for the City, but that current and past leaders set the groundwork for current efforts.

- While Economic Development has traditionally focused on attracting, retaining, and growing businesses, it is now also focusing on equity. The 2018 Innovation and Equity Cluster focuses on:
  - The Innovation Corridor: The area of Jefferson Street around the medical school. The goal is to grow the Innovation Corridor and create more jobs there
  - Economic Development is also focusing on underserved individuals (as opposed to underserved communities) and connecting them to opportunities
- Economic Development has received some grants focused on advancing equity, including:
  - Virginia Business Resurgence Grant: A \$50,000 planning grant from HUD to assess economic development in Gainsboro. This work is looking at the Gainsboro business community's offers and needs, particularly for SWAM (small, women-owned and minority-owned) businesses
  - The National League of Cities (NLC) Equitable Economic Mobility Initiative: In conjunction with Virginia Tech, this is assessing the ALICE (asset-limited, income-constrained, employed) families and looking at ways to help families thrive
  - NLC Informational Entrepreneurship Commitment: This program is using Rising Tide's technical assistance to bring 5 business owners into the formal space
- Economic Development also provides services to citizens in order to increase individual economic mobility
  - Summer youth internships have been offered since 2017, in partnership with the Western Virginia Workforce Development Board and Goodwill
  - NLC-Cities Advancing Equitable Youth Economic Recovery and Empowerment grant application: This program will help with jobs in STEM for minority youth

- Bank on Roanoke Valley was started in 2014 to help families who otherwise are excluded from the banking system to have bank accounts
- Launched in 2020, the Financial Empowerment Center offers free financial counseling with Freedom First Credit Union
- The economic development goals outlined in City Plan 2040 include recruiting diverse industries, supporting local businesses, and revitalizing underperforming commercial spaces (particularly in Northwest and Southeast)

**Stakeholder Perspective:** Local entrepreneur Tommy Page shared his perspective on economic development in Roanoke.

- Originally from Roanoke, Tommy is the founder of NuFocus Group, which supports small businesses and people in entertainment. He moved the business back to Roanoke from Miami in 2013 to help keep businesses in the area.
- Tommy said that entrepreneurship was sparse in Northwest when he was young. He credited Anita and Charles Price with laying the groundwork for development in Gainsboro and for helping to motivate the community.
- Tommy noted that businesses in Northwest were struggling even before the pandemic.
- He started training small businesses, nonprofits, and artists to help them develop business strategies. His mission is to use innovation to create opportunities. NuFocus’s WEB academy offers a business curriculum, support resources, workspace, and networking opportunities. He would like to be able to offer stipends to entrepreneurs so they can focus on developing their businesses.
- Mr. Page presented his three-phase vision for a new business corridor in Gainsboro, including:
  - 1) Using the WEB academy as an accelerator for 10 entrepreneurs
  - 2) Capital improvements to the Lawson Building, where he is headquartered
  - 3) Purchasing and restoring the Claytor property to be a dental clinic, commercial space, and garden

**Q&A:** Participants asked Aisha Johnson and Tommy Page some questions. Below are some of their responses:

- Economic development is looking at offering stipends for ALICE individuals who are in job training, so they can focus on their training
- Going downtown for services is a barrier for some people. The City is trying to meet people where they are, but there is more work to do. For example, the City worked to bring the DMV to Goodwill so teenagers could get state IDs in order to get jobs.
  - Anita Price said that “you can’t address what you don’t first acknowledge.” The fact that the City is acknowledging barriers is important.
- Tommy is inspired by how local people are supporting others. Barbers are mentoring others and opening up opportunities. Xavier Duckett and Ryan Bell are other examples of community leaders.

**Large Group Discussion:** The group as a whole talked about their takeaways from reading and discussing City Plan 2040:

- One participant compared the work to a spiderweb effect, with efforts across the city coming from the center of the plan. This makes the library’s work across the community even more important.
- A challenge is to focus people on local shopping after COVID. How can people find out what shops, services, and programs are available? We as a community need more communication in order to strengthen local efforts.
  - The group agreed that talking about local resources is better than using social media. Tommy Page said that “each of us has to take the personal accountability to get back to talking more.”
  - It’s especially important to consider how young people get this information. Tommy said that it’s the responsibility of people over 30 to mentor young people because they “will follow what they see.”
  - One participant reminded others that Points of Diversity has community conversations
- A participant noted that every element of the comprehensive plan has an equity component.
- Focusing on strengthening neighborhoods and on regionalism are equally important.
- A participant said that people of different ages have different contexts and perspectives.
- A participant asked how extricated politics are from City Plan 2040. Can this work keep moving forward regardless of who is elected? The consensus was that the drive has to be from the community.