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Mayor Donna Deegan, Groundwork Jacksonville and Lead Investor Baptist Health Host Ribbon Cutting of the Emerald Trail LaVilla Link

Jacksonville, Fla., May 6, 2024 – On Monday, May 6, City of Jacksonville (City) Mayor Donna Deegan, Groundwork Jacksonville CEO Kay Ehas, and Baptist Health President and CEO Michael A. Mayo, DHA, FACHE, hosted the ribbon cutting and official opening of the LaVilla Link, the first segment of the much-anticipated Emerald Trail. Hundreds of community members joined in the celebration at the foot of the Park Street Bridge near the Prime F. Osborn Convention Center to commemorate this community milestone.

This is a historic day for Jacksonville as our vision for this transformational project begins to take flight,” said Kay Ehas, CEO of Groundwork Jacksonville, the City’s nonprofit partner in building the Emerald Trail and restoring McCoys and Hogans creeks. “We see the Emerald Trail as the centerpiece for downtown, where residents and tourists come to experience nature, recreation, art, culture and a sense of connectedness. But just as important, we intend it to be a key driver of neighborhood revitalization by supporting and empowering long-time residents along the trail to become the architects of their neighborhood’s future.”

The 1.3-mile LaVilla Link connects Brooklyn to the S-Line Rail Trail through the historic LaVilla neighborhood. It serves as the “Model Project,” allowing residents near the trail and throughout the region to envision what the Emerald Trail system will offer once complete. The LaVilla Link was designed and constructed by the City in partnership with Groundwork Jacksonville and was funded by the City and charitable support and investment secured by Groundwork.

“The Emerald Trail will be a shining jewel for this city, and it represents so much of what my administration is about. Economic development. Strengthening community ties. Health. Resilience. Infrastructure. Through the trail, we are taking a big leap forward in all of these areas,” said Mayor Donna Deegan.



According to Ehas, the LaVilla Link was not a part of the initial Emerald Trail plan draft but was suggested by Durkeeville and New Town residents who wanted direct access downtown. “This project is a testament to the value of community engagement and bringing residents to the decision-making table,” said Ehas. “When residents suggested LaVilla it was an ‘Aha Moment.’ Not only did it make perfect sense to include this link to support the redevelopment happening in LaVilla, but the LaVilla Link also offers several important connections.”

It links the Prime F. Osborn Convention Center, the Regional Transportation Center, Beaver Street Enterprise Center and the existing S-Line Rail Trail, creating nearly three miles of contiguous trail. In addition, residents along Water and Lee streets, across the Park Street Bridge in Brooklyn, and at the LaVilla townhomes, along with visitors to the soon-to-open Lift Ev’ry Voice & Sing Park will provide immediate trail users.

Advancing health and well-being

In alignment with its mission to advance the health of the community, [Baptist Health](#) is the lead investor in the LaVilla Link. The health system will continue its commitment to the activation of the LaVilla Link by offering community health and education events along the trail.

Beyond people having access to health care services, research shows that length of life and quality of life are primarily impacted by the social determinants of health – the conditions in which we are born, grow, live, work and age.

The development of trails is a proven way to advance health outcomes for whole communities. Access to walking and biking trails offers innumerable health benefits including increased physical activity, reduced blood pressure, improved mood and heightened social connectedness, according to the [Florida Department of Environmental Protection](#).

“The Emerald Trail provides a platform to improve social determinants of health for Jacksonville residents by providing a safe, welcoming environment for physical, social and community interactions,” said Michael A. Mayo, DHA, FACHE, president and CEO of Baptist Health. “We believe the LaVilla Link will help people move more, connect more, learn more and enjoy more – all of which are important factors for helping foster greater health and well-being.”

The LaVilla Link

LaVilla Link users will enjoy features designed to enhance the trail experience and provide opportunities to stop, reflect and engage with nature. Planned educational signs will share some of the fascinating history of LaVilla as well as the environmental benefits of native plants, living shorelines and rain gardens. Public art installations are also planned to celebrate the neighborhood's rich history and culture.

According to Ehas, the LaVilla link added six acres of green space in the urban core including 166 trees and a variety of native plants and grasses. “This is just the beginning of the positive environmental benefits the trail will deliver in reducing carbon, stormwater runoff and heat island effects,” she added.

In addition, measures to improve pedestrian and bicycle safety were added including new lighting; ADA-compliant curb ramps; boldly painted crosswalks to make the crossings more visible to car traffic; blinking



light sensors to alert drivers of trail users ahead and for two mid-block crossings; and road diets to slow traffic on the Park Street bridge, Lee Street, and the I-95 off-ramp at Monroe Street.

Beginning the journey at Stonewall Street in Brooklyn, the LaVilla Link crosses over the Park Street bridge. The two northbound lanes were repurposed for the Emerald Trail to allow for active recreation and plantings including a bioswale to filter stormwater runoff. The Emerald Trail also took over the existing elevated walkway to create a pedestrian path separated from runners and cyclists.

Atop the span, glass panels and an elevated concrete seating structure offer a unique view of McCoys Creek and the railroad tracks. A shade structure is planned for later this year. The Park Street Overlook is supported by a gift from the Delores Barr Weaver Legacy Fund at The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida.

A road diet along Lee Street from Water to Houston Street slows traffic and creates a tree-lined canopy along the Emerald Trail. Planted beds along the trail provide separation from vehicle traffic and will create shade as the trees mature.

Continuing north on Lee Street, the trail connects to the new Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing Park, expected to open in late June. The Park will honor two of Jacksonville's most famous residents, James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson. The Johnson brothers wrote "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," often called the Black National Anthem, at their home in the LaVilla neighborhood in the early 1900s.

Just beyond the park, between Monroe and Duval streets, is the LaVilla Pond. This was an existing retention pond that has been reimagined with a boardwalk made from recycled materials, and a seating platform with swings. A variety of aquatic/wetland plants and grasses were planted along the bank to create a living shoreline that will help to improve water quality, reduce erosion, and provide habitat for birds, fish and pollinators. The LaVilla Pond overlook is supported by a gift from David and Monique Miller.

As the trail heads west along Church Street a butterfly garden sponsored by the Late Bloomers Garden Club adds beauty and food for pollinators. At Eaverson Street the trail connects to the Florida C. Dwight Memorial Playground which was upgraded by the City of Jacksonville Parks Department in preparation for the trail, and includes new playground equipment, a basketball court and a skateboard ramp. The site also features a rain garden, with water-loving native plants that will capture, clean and absorb stormwater runoff and filter pollutants. The environmental feature is supported by a gift from the Pajcic family.

At its northern end, the LaVilla Link connects to the existing S-line Rail Trail at State Street. This area has great potential for future activation. The property owner has exciting plans for the large warehouses, one dating back to the late 1800s. His vision for the 500,000 square foot property includes creating a center for commercial, performing and visual arts with retail shops, dining and an outdoor event space, similar to King Plow Arts Center in Atlanta.

For turn-by-turn directions of the LaVilla Link trail-goers can download the **Art Bikes Jax app** for IOS or Android.



About the Emerald Trail

The 34-mile Emerald Trail will connect 14 urban neighborhoods to downtown, the St. Johns River, McCoys Creek and Hogans Creek. It will link 16 schools, two colleges, three hospitals, 21 parks and the Regional Transportation Center, along with other destinations like restaurants, shopping and businesses, with an additional 13 schools and 17 parks located within three blocks of the trail.

The LaVilla Link is part of the Emerald Trail Master Plan developed by Groundwork Jacksonville and adopted by City Council on March 26, 2019. Created in collaboration with the PATH Foundation and KAIZEN Collaborative, the plan was privately underwritten by a donation from JTC Running as well as through grants from Local Initiatives Support Corporation and the Giving Forward Community Endowment Fund at The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida.

Currently, 40% of the trail is complete, under construction or in design by Groundwork and the City. These include the LaVilla Link; Hogan Street, which is expected to be under construction this summer; Hogans Creek, which is in design and expected to be under construction in 2026, and McCoys Creek which is in various stages of construction or design.

The five remaining trail segments will be designed and constructed by Groundwork in partnership with the Jacksonville Transportation Authority (JTA) and the City and funded by \$147 million Neighborhood Access & Equity Program Grant from the US Department of Transportation. JTA and Groundwork were awarded the grant in March of this year, leveraging a match from the Local Option Gas Tax and private funders.

The five segments include Segment 3, Southwest, connecting Riverside to McCoys Creek; Segment 4, S-Line Connector, connecting Springfield, Phoenix and Brentwood; Segment 6, Westside, connecting the neighborhoods of North Riverside, Woodstock, and Robinson's Addition; Segment 7, Northwest, connecting Durkeeville, College Gardens, and New Town; and Segment 8, Eastside, connecting Phoenix and Springfield.

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About Groundwork Jacksonville

Groundwork Jacksonville, Inc., was formed in 2014 by the City of Jacksonville in partnership with Groundwork USA, along with support from the US National Park Service and the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Jacksonville is one of 21 Groundwork Trusts across the country focused on environmental equity, resilience, and stewardship, and transforming the natural and built environment in low-resource and climate-vulnerable communities. Visit groundworkjacksonville.org or follow @GroundworkJax.

About the City of Jacksonville

The City of Jacksonville is the largest city by land mass in the contiguous United States, serving nearly one million residents. City of Jacksonville leadership includes Mayor Donna Deegan and a 19-member City Council led by President Ron Salem. To learn more, visit jacksonville.gov.

About Baptist Health

Baptist Health is a faith-based, mission-driven system in Northeast Florida comprised of Baptist Medical Center Jacksonville; Baptist Medical Center Beaches; Baptist Medical Center Clay; Baptist Medical Center Nassau; Baptist Medical Center South and Wolfson Children's Hospital – the region's only children's hospital. Baptist Health is part of Coastal Community Health, a highly integrated regional hospital network focused on significant initiatives designed to enhance the quality and value of care provided to our contiguous communities. Baptist Health has the area's only dedicated heart hospital; orthopedic institute; women's services; neurological institute, including comprehensive neurosurgical services, a comprehensive stroke center and two primary stroke centers; a Bariatric Center of Excellence; a full range of psychology and psychiatry services; urgent care services; primary and specialty care physicians' offices throughout Northeast Florida; and Baptist Home Health Care by BAYADA. Baptist MD Anderson Cancer Center is a regional destination for multidisciplinary cancer care, which is clinically integrated with MD Anderson Cancer Center, the internationally renowned cancer treatment and research institution in Houston. For more details, visit baptistjax.com.

