

2018

# Reimagining 1st Avenue



## A Corridor Plan for Opelika

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# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Background .....	1
Problem Definition.....	1
Vision.....	2
Current Conditions.....	2
Overview and Divisions.....	2
1 <sup>st</sup> Avenue West.....	5
1 <sup>st</sup> Avenue Central.....	6
1 <sup>st</sup> Avenue East.....	8
Public Input .....	9
Questionnaire.....	9
Results.....	10
Goals & Objectives.....	12
Goal 1.....	12
Goal 2.....	15
Goal 3.....	20
Implementation.....	21
Steps.....	21
Stakeholders.....	24
Financing.....	25
Appendices.....	26
Appendix 1: Business Questionnaire .....	26
Appendix 2: References .....	28

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## Introduction

**Background.** As its name implies, Opelika's 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue has been an integral street for most of the city's history, supporting the town's growth for over 150 years. Opelika's railroads came in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, bringing commerce and the textile industry with them. 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, running alongside the railroad, played a central role in the city's economic development during this time with the establishment of the Pepperell and Leshner Mills. Residential housing for employees and secondary industries were built to support their combined workforces. Many of these structures, the houses, churches, and railroad, remain today although the mills have gone.

**Problem Definition.** Despite its historic significance to Opelika and the neighborhoods it connects, 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue is far from achieving its potential.

Once dominating mill facilities are now rubble beside the road, indicative of a by-gone industry. Neighborhoods lack positive connection with one another, less than a quarter of the two-mile study has sidewalks and bicycle lanes, while consolidated, fail to link neighborhoods. Businesses located sporadically along its length are hidden from the rest of town. New industries, such as healthcare, have anchored within and just outside the project area, but the economic benefits have not been evident on the rest of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue. Eighteen food or retail establishments operate in the project area, most of which in a single shopping center, Parkway Village. Most secondary businesses opt instead for nearby 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and Gateway Drive, the latter of which has no direct access to 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue.



*Remnants of Pepperell Mill*

There is, however, much potential along the corridor. Industry, historical sites, parks, and the vehicle traffic of a minor arterial are consolidated along the single avenue. Developable land provides room for expansion and new commercial districts. Strong anchors exist just beyond the project area in Pepperell Village with Shady Park to the southwest and downtown Opelika to the northeast. East Alabama Medical Clinic is a regional employment center. All these strengths either reside along the corridor or within a few hundred feet of it. This project leverages these advantages to improve the commercial and residential landscapes of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue as well as bringing new opportunities to the community.

**Vision.** This plan will lay out what a 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue Corridor could be: an engaging district that connects residential communities and light industry in western Opelika to the downtown CBD. Pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicles are able to travel safely between destinations within the corridor and beyond. Commerce along the avenue is stimulated to provide goods and services to the community as well as employment opportunities that support the surrounding area. Historically significant sites are used to create meaningful community anchors and reduce blighted lots. All these functions are then consolidated into one complimentary avenue that attracts businesses and residents.

## Current Conditions

### Overview and Divisions.

The City of Opelika is regionally connected by Interstate 85, US Highways 431 and 280, and State Route 14. 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue generally parallels State Route 14 between US Highways 431 and 280. It connects a mix of uses from downtown to the western reaches of Opelika. Neighborhoods along its route include 16<sup>th</sup> Place, Westend, and Pepperell Village. It also includes portions of the East Alabama Medical Arts Center and stretches through Wards One, Three, and Four. In a 2010 transportation plan, it was designated a minor arterial with an average level of service or better (AOMPO).



*Regional Transportation Through Opelika*

The two-mile project area is in western Opelika between downtown and the Pepperell Branch to the Tallapoosa River. It is bound on either end by the first and final railroad crossing access points of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue west of the CSX-Norfolk Southern railroad intersection. Approximately 210 acres, it generally includes all parcels within one block of either side of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue. It is bound by 14<sup>th</sup> Street in the northeast, the CSX railroad to the southeast, the roads of Cunningham Drive and 28<sup>th</sup> Street to the southwest, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue along the northwest. 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue is interrupted between 19<sup>th</sup> Place and 21<sup>st</sup> Street. Here the project area's northern boundary includes all parcels within 300 feet of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue. (see next page)

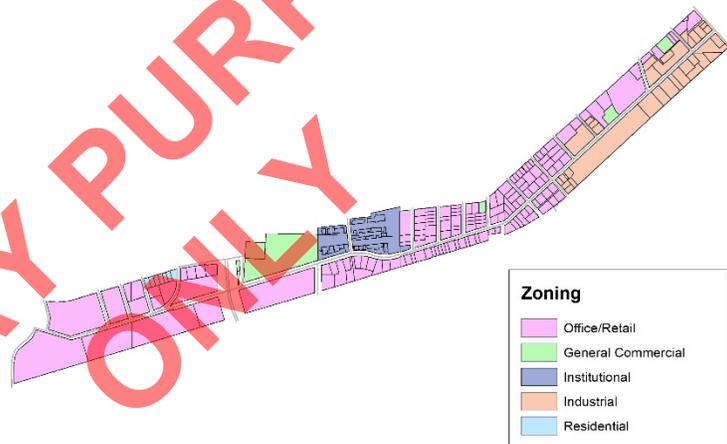


1st Ave Project Area

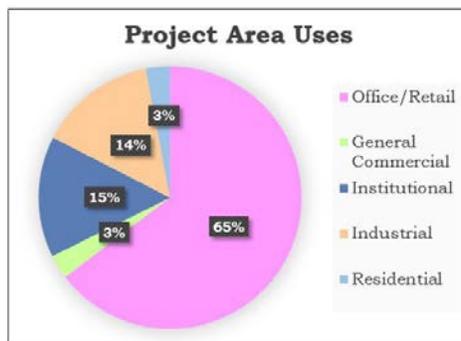
Current zoning within the project area includes *Office/Retail* (the vast majority), *General Commercial*, *Institutional*, *Industrial*, and *Low Density Residential*.

*General Commercial* has limited use, with four of seven lots being vacant. *Institutional* use supports medical offices part of the East Alabama Medical Center (EAMC) footprint.

The *Office/Retail* zone allows for a wide range of uses that include small neighborhood retail, residential, banks, and convenience stores. Contrary to its prevalence in the project area, its wide variety of uses promotes limited continuity.

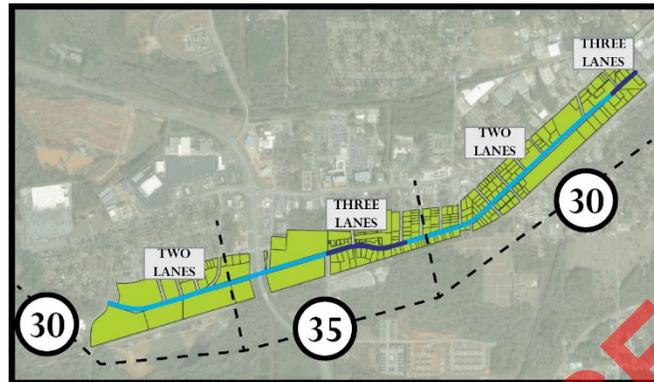


Project Area Land Use



Lot Distribution by Land Use

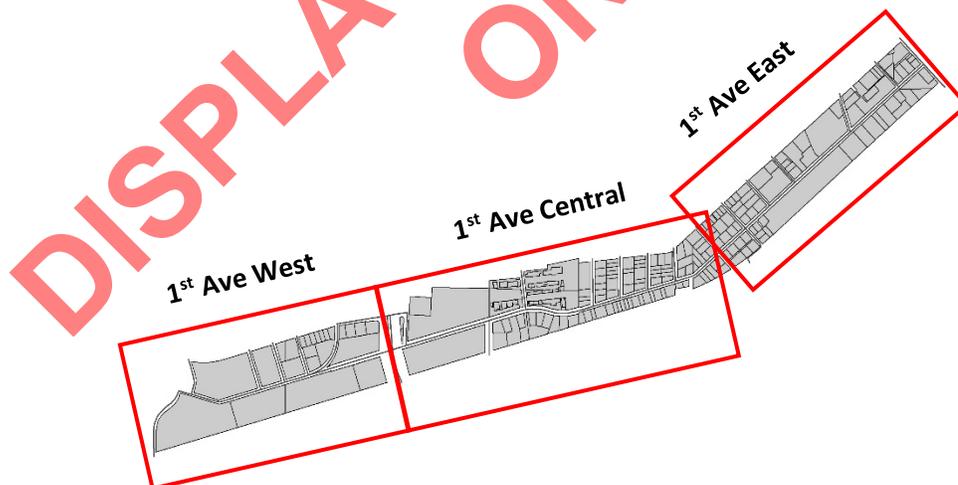
Roads are predominately two-lanes, with a short 0.2 mile three-lane section in the medical district and another 0.1 mile section at the far eastern end of the project area.



*Traffic lanes and speed limits*

An estimated 250 people live in the project area based on an average Opelika household size of 2.46 people, determined from the 2010 Census, and the number of occupied dwelling units. One hundred fourteen dwelling units exist inside the project boundary. Of these, there are 13 apparent vacancies leaving 101 occupied.

To help analyze the project area more closely, it is divided into three sections: West, Central, and East. Section boundaries were established to provide generally similar geographic sizes as well as being near identifiable physical features, such as the Gateway Drive overpass and residential area road bend. These sections enabled greater organization in data collection and analysis.



*Project Area Divisions*

## 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West.



*1st Ave West*

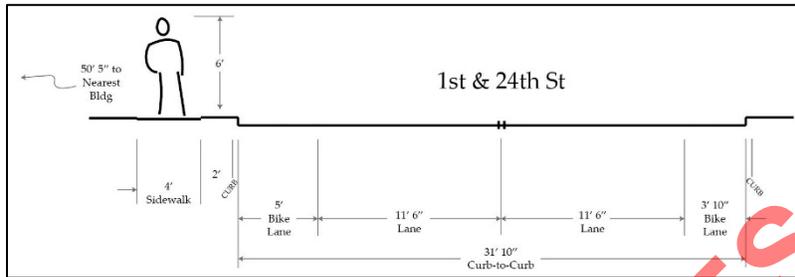
1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West extends from Cunningham Drive and 28<sup>th</sup> Street to the Gateway Drive/Highway 280 underpass. Its dominant feature is the former Pepperell Mill, now being reduced to salvage material, and its associated out-buildings that immediately surround it. It also includes a small section of single-family residences. Current businesses include two doctors' offices, an HVAC retail and distribution center, a farmer's market grocery store, and a soon to be constructed indoor shooting range (the last three are not represented on the above footprint). With the exception of seven homes along 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, the entire section is zoned *Office/Retail*. The homes are *Residential*.

It is indirectly accessible to Gateway Drive via 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and Pepperell Parkway via North 30<sup>th</sup> Street. There is one railroad crossing on Cunningham Drive; however, it is currently closed.



*Cunningham Drive, looking south*

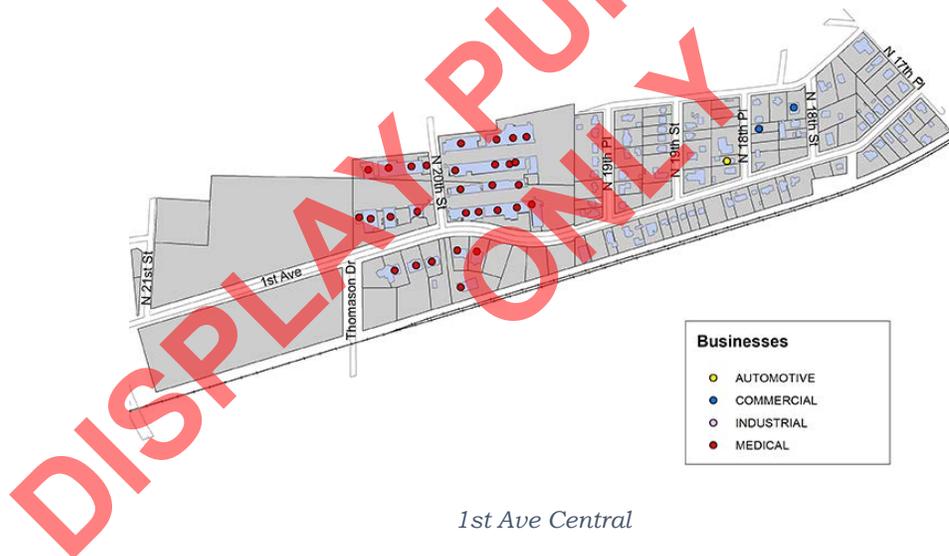
There are 10 occupied dwelling units in 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West; none vacant. Traffic lanes are a consistent 11.5 feet, but sidewalks are limited throughout the area. The below street section is from 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and 24<sup>th</sup> Street, looking east.



1st Ave West Cross Section

External to 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West are Pepperell Village and Shady Park. Commercial centers exist on Pepperell Parkway surrounding Wal-Mart and other strip developments.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue Central.

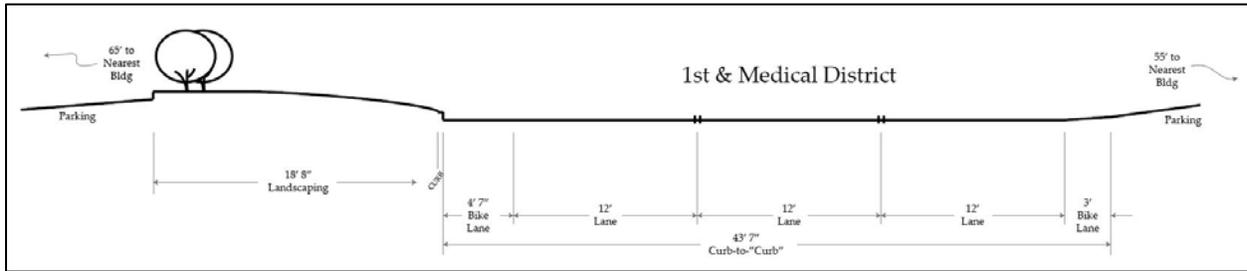


1st Ave Central

1<sup>st</sup> Avenue Central includes the area between Gateway Drive and North 17<sup>th</sup> Place. This section's significant feature is the area between Thomason Drive and North 19<sup>th</sup> Place which is part of EAMC's Medical Arts facilities. North 20<sup>th</sup> Street connects this area directly to EAMC on Pepperell Parkway to the north. To its west are vacant lots, zoned *General Commercial*, and to its east are single-family residences, zoned as *Office/Retail*. The Medical Arts facilities are within the *Institutional* zoning. Current businesses include 30 medical offices, one automotive repair shop, and two commercial establishments.

Like 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West, it is only indirectly accessible to Gateway Drive via a 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue spur and Thomason Drive. Its other primary access point is North 20<sup>th</sup> Street mentioned earlier. A railroad crossing is located on Thomason Drive.

Traffic lanes promote rapid flow between Thomason Drive and North 20<sup>th</sup> Street.



*1st Ave Central Cross Section 1*

However, street lanes change quickly prior to North 19<sup>th</sup> Place and flow becomes extremely constricted, with little in the way of shoulders or curbs in the residential area between the Medical Arts facilities and the next 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue division, 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue East.

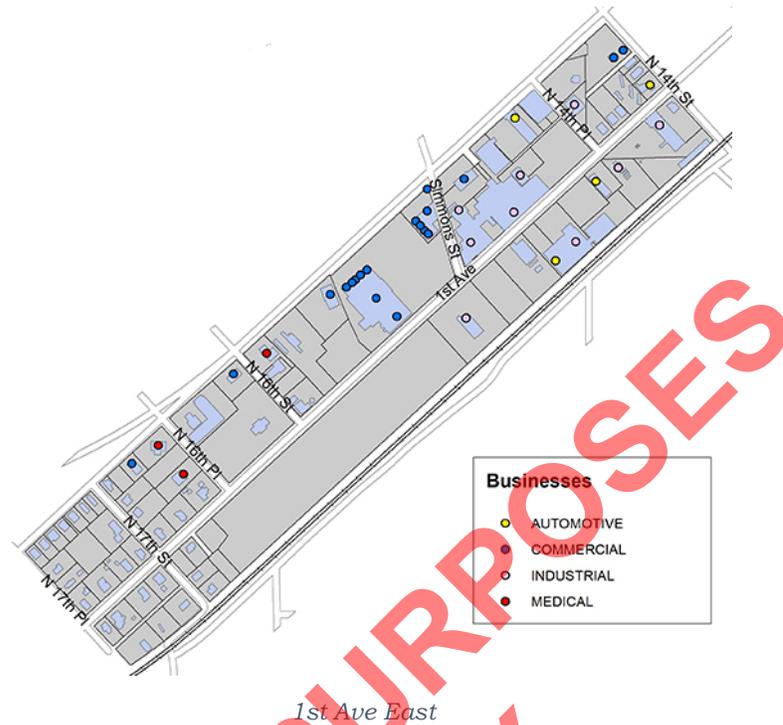


*1st Ave Central Cross Section 2*

The bulk of the corridor's existing houses are within this section. There are 66 dwelling units in 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue Central; 59 occupied and 7 vacant.

External to 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue Central is EAMC, a significant regional employer and destination. Thomason Drive is a primary connector to Gateway Drive and the Tiger Town commercial district to the south. Development along this road includes banks, a childcare facility, a storage facility, and residential development.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue East.



1<sup>st</sup> Avenue East extends from North 17<sup>th</sup> Place to North 14<sup>th</sup> Street and is the most commercially developed of the three divisions. Like 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West, this section's mill, the former Leshner Mill, is now a clean-up site following a 2013 fire that destroyed it. However, this section's close proximity to both Pepperell Parkway/2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and downtown Opelika sustains a mix of commercial and industrial developments. These include commercial and retail businesses in the Parkway Village shopping center, Flower's Baking Company, and Premium Beverage Company. *Industrial* use dominates the south side of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue after North 17<sup>th</sup> Street. The remainder of this section is primarily zoned *Office/Retail* and two lots are *General Commercial*.

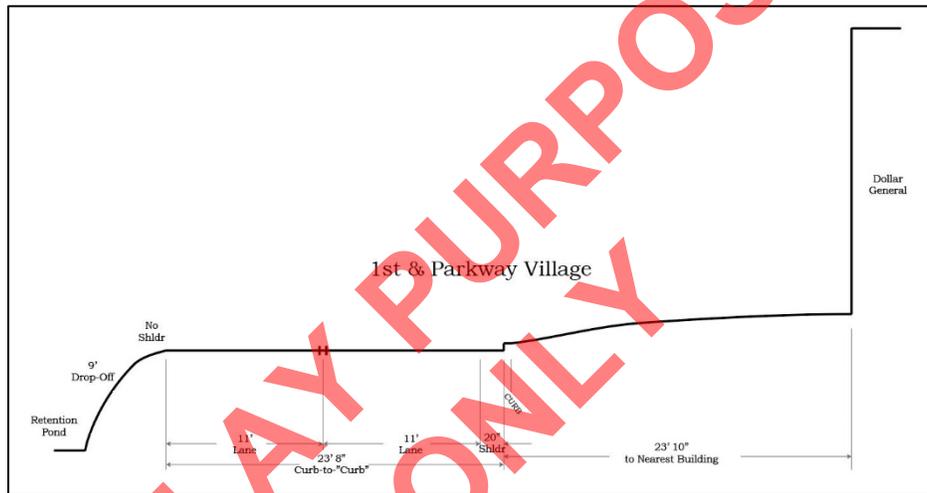
1<sup>st</sup> Avenue East is connected to the rest of Opelika primarily by the sidestreets between it and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue following its merger with Pepperell Parkway. Also, 10<sup>th</sup> Street and Downtown Opelika are one third of a mile beyond the project boundary. This section includes two railway crossings: North 17<sup>th</sup> Street/Talladega Street, connecting it to a mobile home park; and North 14<sup>th</sup> Street/Magazine Avenue, providing secondary access to downtown.

There are 38 homes in 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue East; 32 occupied and 6 vacant.

The majority of roads are two lanes, only widening to three at Simmons Street, one tenth of a mile from the project area boundary. This creates a funneling effect whereby traffic moving west bypassing 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue are canalized into the low density residential area beyond the former mill.



*Street Lane Narrows*



*1st Ave East Cross Section*

Landmarks immediately outside 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue East include the CSX/Norfolk Southern railroad intersection and Downtown Opelika.

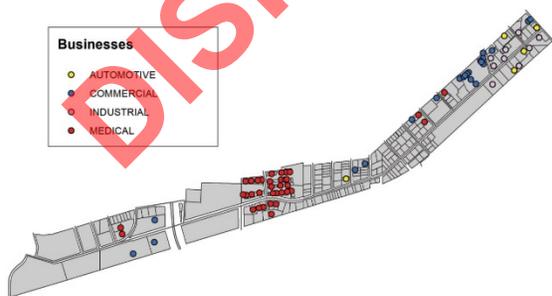
## Public Input

**Questionnaire.** Public input was gained by polling business establishments in the project area. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gain more understanding about how the built environment might support business operations and new customer development as well as employee commuting trends. It consisted of four multiple-choice questions.

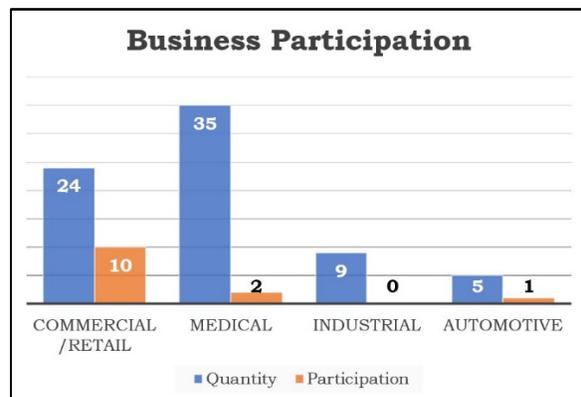
Questions:

1. From your understanding, how do customers first learn about you?
  - Established marketing
  - Internet search
  - Noticed from street
  - Recommendation
  - Other
2. On average, how far away do your employees live?
  - 1 mile or less
  - 1 to 5 miles
  - 6 to 10 miles
  - 11 miles or more
3. How do most of your employees get to work?
  - Walk/Bike
  - Personal vehicle
  - Carpool
  - Lee County Transit
  - Other
4. Would any of the below help your business meet your goals?
  - More pedestrians
  - Less pedestrians
  - More businesses nearby
  - Fewer businesses nearby
  - Larger traffic lanes
  - Better street appearance
  - More police presence
  - Less police presence
  - More people living nearby
  - Something else
  - None of these

**Results.** Attempt was made to include a representative sample of business addresses by type. Participation from Commercial/Retail establishments was highest with 42% of all locations in the project area. Automotive participation was 20%; Medical, 6%; and Industrial, 0%. The low participation of medical and industrial establishments is a limitation of the following results.

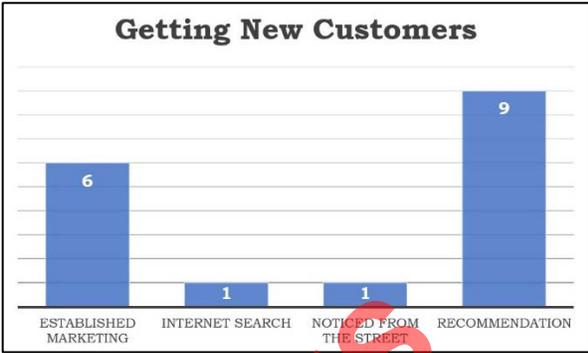


1st Ave Businesses



Questionnaire Participation

**Question One:** Businesses gain new customers primarily through word of mouth, followed by their marketing efforts. The low street recognition score was due to belief that drivers moved too quickly to notice establishments. The exception to this was an establishment near the Gateway Drive underpass which recognized the advantage provided by clear lines of sight from the bridge. The low internet score indicates little reliance on available broadband resources. “Recommendation” includes doctors’ referrals.



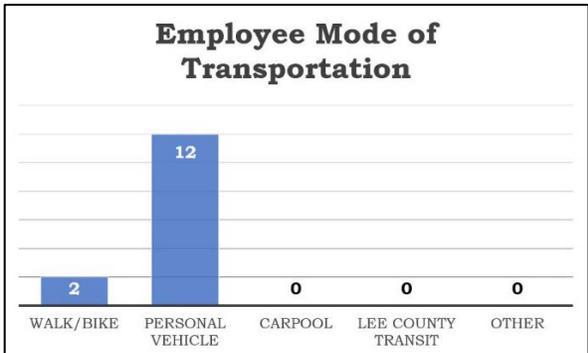
Question One Results

**Question Two:** The majority of employees in the sample travel between six to ten miles to get to work. This indicates a strong likelihood of non-Opelika residents or residents living on the periphery. Only about a third of the sample lived five miles or less to their job. Expanding this to the rest of the project area would mean that the average employee from 50 of the 73 business addresses live greater than six miles away. This has strong implications on traffic congestion throughout the area.



Question Two Results

**Question Three:** The vast majority of respondents, or 86%, used their personal vehicle driving alone to get to work. The low usage of all other options suggests a mono-modal environment. This encourages non-resident employees, indicates poor walkability, and mandates strong requirements for parking. The same two establishments whose employees lived less than a mile away on average also reported “Walk/Bike” as their mode of transportation. This demonstrates that employees who live within walking distance of their work will use non-vehicular modes.



Question Three Results

**Question Four:** “More businesses nearby” and “Better street appearance” were the two most selected improvements. This recognizes the benefit of having successful businesses adjacent to an establishment, creating more potential customers in a single area. This was especially stressed in 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West where a nascent business cluster is growing around 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and North 22<sup>nd</sup> Street. It also shows a desire for more aesthetic qualities to local streets. Samples from 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue East desired more police presence, more residents nearby, and larger lanes to facilitate freight access.



Question Four Results

Other requests included traffic control measures to slow traffic on more narrow sections of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue as well as greater allowances for signage.

**Goals & Objectives.** Reimagining 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue focuses on three overarching goals:

- Make 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue a successful place for businesses.
- Make 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue a desirable place to live.
- Support City of Opelika sustainability.

Each goal has a set of objectives which support its achievement. These objectives are reached through specific strategies. Several strategies support multiple objectives and should be prioritized to reach broader impact. How these strategies are implemented is discussed in another section: *Implementation*.

Goal 1.

**Goal 1: Make 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue a successful place for businesses.** This goal promotes the success of existing businesses and the growth of new ones. Achieving an economically healthy industrial mix will sustain the area with a variety of customer destinations employment opportunities for a variety of backgrounds and qualification levels.

**Objective 1.1: Recruit more businesses.**

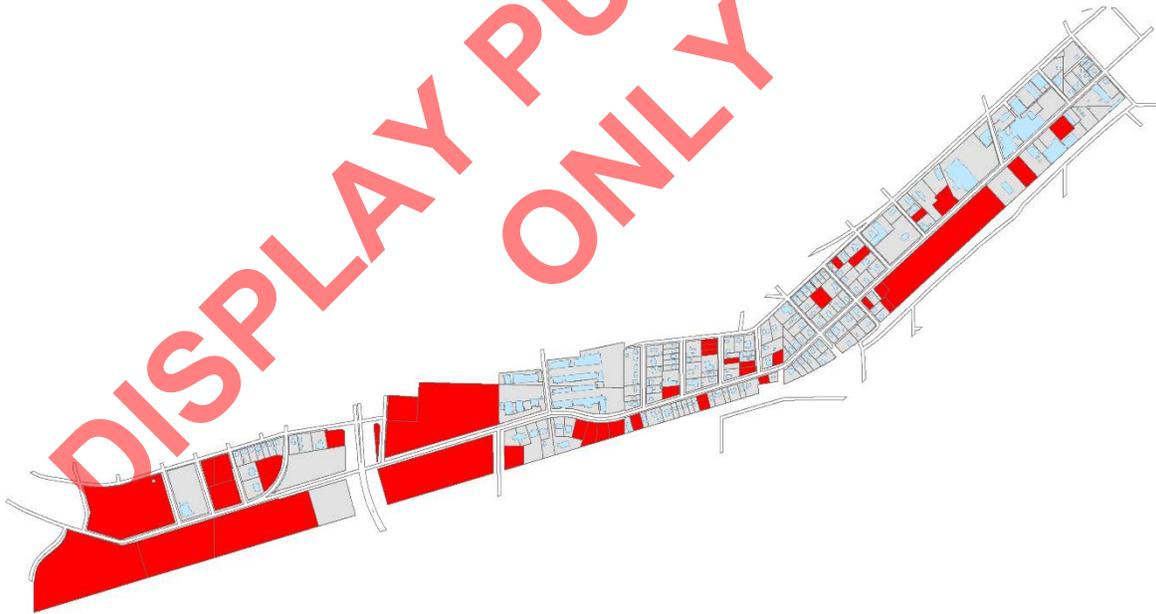
**Strategy:** Increase collaboration with public-private partners. Partnering with the Opelika Community Development Corporation and others will provide additional planning and development resources. Opelika is already well integrated with adjacent cities and regional governments. Its partnerships with the City of Auburn and the Lee Russell Council of Governments have produced coordinated economic and regional

transportation plans. Public-Private partnerships have also benefitted community development. Successful regional examples of community development corporations include Tuskegee-Macon County Community Development Corporation; Uptown Columbus in Columbus, Georgia; and the Downtown LaGrange Development Authority of LaGrange, Georgia. These organizations facilitate marketing, funding, partnership collaboration, and others.

**Strategy:** Promote increased use of Gig-City resources among commercial businesses. The business owner questionnaire revealed little reliance on internet marketing. Further research should be conducted to confirm or deny this trend. If confirmed, effort should be made to provide education regarding the benefits of its use and how it could be tailored to specific businesses. This could include coordinating media-marketing workshops, workforce skills development, or others.

**Objective 1.2: Utilize land with development potential.**

**Strategy:** Reduce vacant property (*shared with OBJ 2.2*). Vacant property detracts from the urban environment in many ways through dereliction. However, significant opportunity exists for new development that utilizes this available resource. There are currently 77 acres of vacant land in the project area and 11.5 acres of land with vacant buildings on them<sup>1</sup>. Large lot sizes along the southern side of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue at both ends of the corridor provide developers the advantage of maximizing floor area ratios and promoting density.



*Project Area Vacant Lots*

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<sup>1</sup> Vacant buildings defined as structures with no visible evidence of occupancy or usage as determined by author assessment.



*Project Area Vacant Buildings*

**Strategy:** Designate areas immediately around Gateway Drive overpass for mixed use development. Take advantage of views provided by the elevated roadway to develop a mixed-use area that draws from Gateway Drive traffic and utilizes the large amount of vacant land in that immediate vicinity. This would include the former Pepperell Mill site and supplemental sites. Development height should be limited to 24-36 feet (2 to 3 floors), with above first floor housing, to complement the scale of the adjacent Pepperell Village.



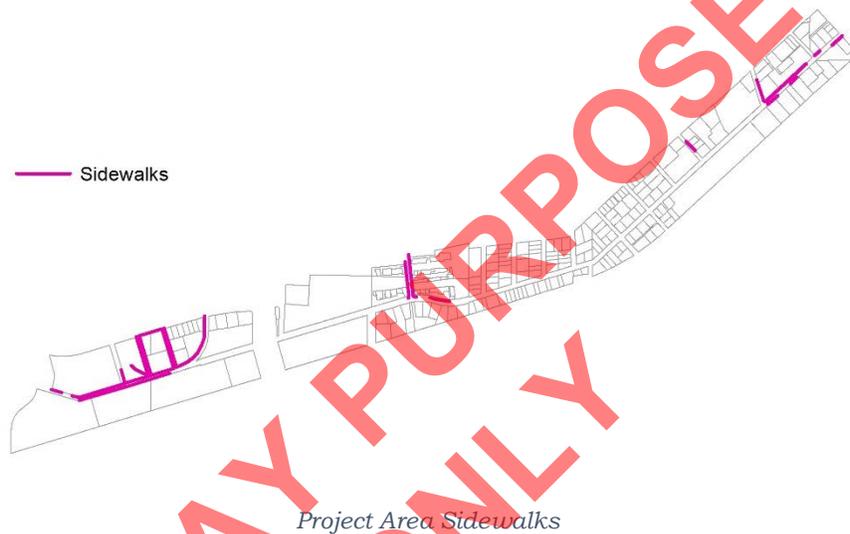
*View from Guy Thompson Bridge*

Goal 2.

**Goal 2: Make 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue a desirable place to live.** This goal promotes residential vitality of the area that provides for a mix of housing options, public amenities, and effective safety. Improving area residences and developments creates more options for families and fosters economic growth, particularly in immediate vicinity industries and the service sector.

**Objective 2.1: Improve interior and exterior connection to corridors and destinations.**

**Strategy:** Expand sidewalk and bicycle lane network (*shared with OBJ 2.3*). The total length of all sidewalks in the project area equal 9,490 feet.



By comparison, the roughly two-square mile area of downtown Opelika contains a total of approximately 64,000 feet, nearly seven times that of the project area. In addition, a combination of vacant land and the Gateway Drive overpass isolates 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West, to include Pepperell Village and Shady Park, from the medical district and residential areas to the east.



Gateway Drive underpass & potential sidewalks



Introducing sidewalks through this area will improve connectivity and promote development.

A total of 0.7 miles of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue has existing 4 to 5 foot bicycle lanes on both sides of the road. These lanes stretch from North 24<sup>th</sup> Street to just before North 19<sup>th</sup> Place, on the eastern edge of the Medical District and cover over a quarter of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue's length in the project area. However, no part of these bike lanes enter into residential or commercial areas, with the exception of two establishments in 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West.

Extending these lanes a quarter mile in both directions would connect Pepperell Village with 16<sup>th</sup> Place. Farther east and the lanes would also connect Westend as well as future development near Parkway Village. In constricted areas with no sidewalk, such as between North 19<sup>th</sup> Place and North 17<sup>th</sup> Place, a separated bicycle and pedestrian path should be considered.

**Strategy:** Design improved connections to Gateway Drive. 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue's primary access to this designated gateway corridor is via Thomason Drive which intersects Gateway Drive almost a half-mile away from 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and well before it is in view. Any development, commercial or otherwise, seen from the overpass is perceived to be inaccessible if drivers are unaware of the indirect access provided by 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. At a minimum, signs indicating 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue access should be installed on either side of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue – Gateway Drive intersection. Ideally, this intersection should be considered for redesign to allow easier traffic flow to 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue.



Gateway & 2nd Ave traffic light



Gateway & 2nd Ave median

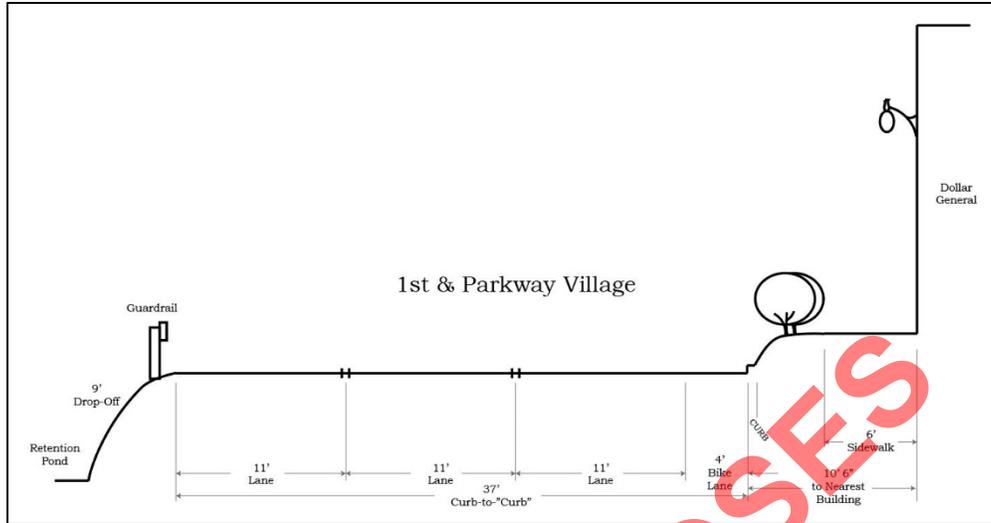
**Strategy:** Reopen Cunningham Road rail crossing. Connecting 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West, and Pepperell Village by extension, to Frederick Road will provide greater access options. It will also reduce traffic at Pepperell Parkway and North 30<sup>th</sup> Street, Gateway Drive and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, and Gateway Drive and Thomason Drive. Consequently, it will produce more thru traffic for growing neighborhood commercial in this section of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue. Thru traffic speed should be mitigated with speed bumps or other speed control measures along residential sections of North 30<sup>th</sup> Street.

**Strategy:** Extend three-lane section in 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue East from North 14<sup>th</sup> Street to North 16<sup>th</sup> Place.



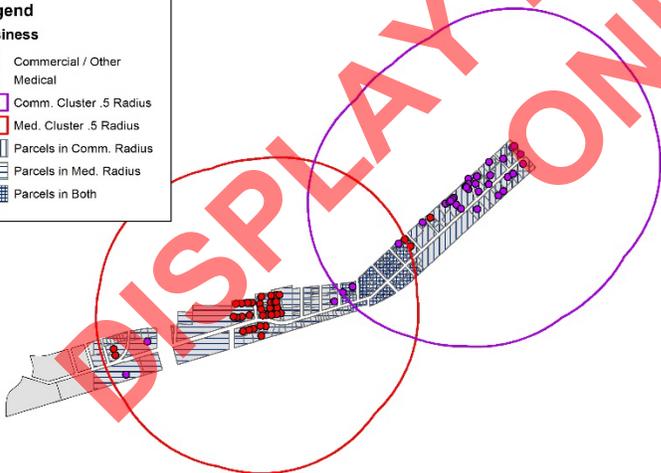
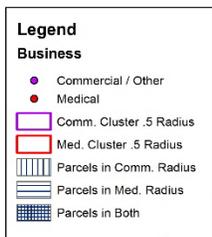
1<sup>st</sup> Avenue Right of Way is approximately 60 feet across throughout this section. East of Simmons Street, the road already consists of three lanes and a sidewalk on one side, adjoining the building face.

Continuing this design west will improve traffic flow entering and exiting Parkway Village and provide secondary freight access. It will also enable greater resident access to any future high-density development on the Leshner Mill site.

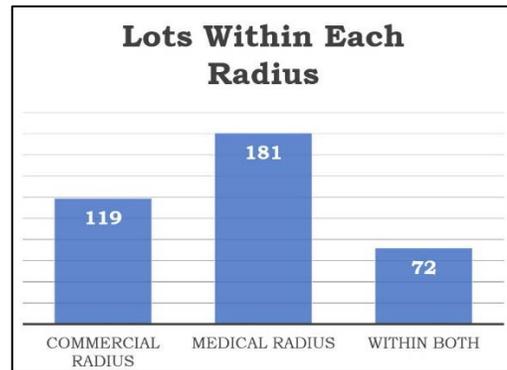


Lane widened at 1st Ave & Parkway Village

**Objective 2.2: Improve and increase housing stock.** Housing stock within the corridor primarily consists of single-family low-density houses. They are situated alongside designated gateway corridors and near regional employment hubs such as EAMC. The commercial node in 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue East and, farther east, downtown Opelika provide additional nearby destination for working and retail.



Parcels near business nodes



**Strategy:** Reduce vacant property (*shared with OBJ 1.2*). As previously stated, vacant lots detract from existing communities but also provide an opportunity for growth. New developments should be focused on these lots and consider if housing can be effectively integrated into their design.

**Strategy:** Invest in Shady Park. Shady Park provides a public focal point in 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West and any development anchoring this end of the project area should leverage it. It presently consists of bench swings and a pavilion on approximately 5 acres, centrally located within Pepperell Village. Consider adding playground equipment, grill stands, and other amenities. Connect the park into 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue’s future sidewalk growth.

**Strategy:** Consider feasibility of pocket parks in 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue Central.

Pocket parks provide small areas of greenspace for its immediate area. These miniature parks provide unique spaces in neighborhoods making it more appealing to potential residents. They also help decrease the amount of vacant property.



*Pocket Park on 2nd Ave*

**Strategy:** Designate Leshner Mill site for high density residential development.



*Leshner Lofts*

This site is located approximately one mile from downtown Opelika to its east and approximately the same distance from EAMC to its west. A grocery store and other retail are only a few hundred feet away from the center of the lot.

Vacant property across 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue could be included to complement the site.

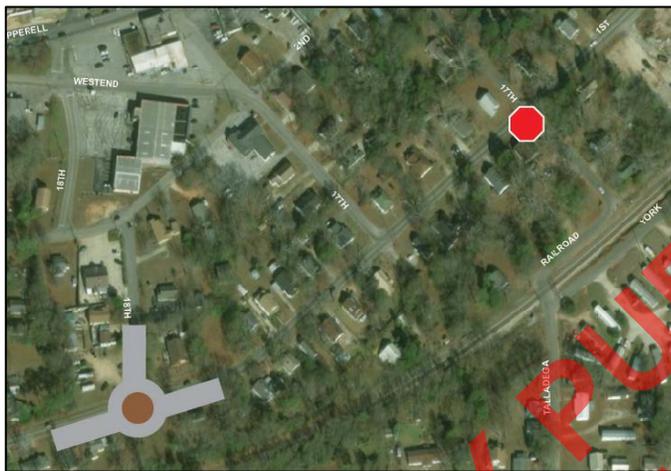
**Strategy:** Ensure housing diversity in new developments. A variety of housing types and affordability will enable community social networks to remain intact while introducing new residents. Preserving a mix of housing options will also ensure multiple markets are accessible to developers.

**Objective 2.3: Improve safety.**

**Strategy:** Implement *Complete Streets* policies (shared with OBJ 3.1). Complete Streets policies include practices designed to make streets viable for more than just cars, but pedestrians and bicyclists as well. This includes measures taken to safeguard people on foot and bicycles. It also integrates the street into the larger network to provide options for travelers and prevent isolation.

**Strategy:** Expand sidewalk and bicycle lane network (*shared with OBJ 2.1*). As discussed previously, sidewalks connect neighborhoods together. They also separate vehicles and pedestrians safely while allowing them to share the street. Sidewalks should be installed in all residential areas of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue with priority given to eastern Central and western East sections where no safeguards or shoulders exist.

**Strategy:** Add speed mitigation measures in low density areas. During the questionnaire, 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue was referred to as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue Bypass. Traffic spikes occur during commuting hours and promote excessive speeds in the areas specified in the previous strategy. Stop signs, traffic circles, or other speed control measures should be installed on either end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue bend located between 18<sup>th</sup> Street and 17<sup>th</sup> Place.



*Speed Mitigation on 1st Ave*

A four-way stop at 17<sup>th</sup> Street and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue provides vehicles from the railroad crossing of Talladega Street a safer way to merge into traffic. Positioned one block west from the proposed three-lane extension, it further slows traffic before entering the residential area.

A traffic circle at 18<sup>th</sup> Street and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue slows traffic moving into the bend while maintaining flow.

### Goal 3.

**Goal 3: Support City of Opelika sustainability.** This goal promotes the sustainable growth of Opelika and integrates 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue development into the broader community.

#### **Objective 3.1: Promote shorter commutes.**

**Strategy:** Implement *Complete Streets* policies (*shared with OBJ 2.3*). Complete Streets policies encourage a variety of traveling options. As more options become available, residents will feel that living closer to their employment could produce less commuting costs through viable alternatives.

**Strategy:** Promote more multi-modal options. Incorporate bicycle and pedestrian considerations in all future road redevelopment. Also consider proposing a service expansion of the Lee Russell Transit System to provide dedicated routes. Another option would be partnering with the City of Auburn's Tiger Transit system to serve the municipal area. Incorporating dedicated public bus transit stops into new development designs will encourage residents to utilize services more routinely.

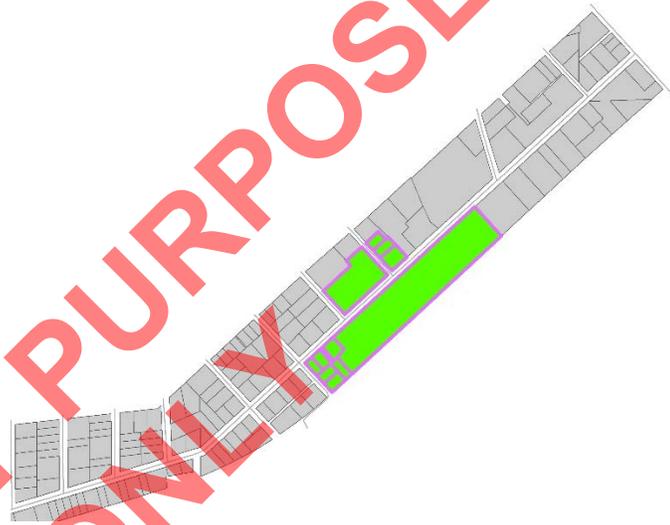
## Implementation.

**Steps.** Complete Streets Policies recommends the below four-step process for successful implementation.

1. Restructure or revise related procedures, plans, regulations, and other processes to accommodate all users on every project.

For 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, this includes making specific zoning changes.

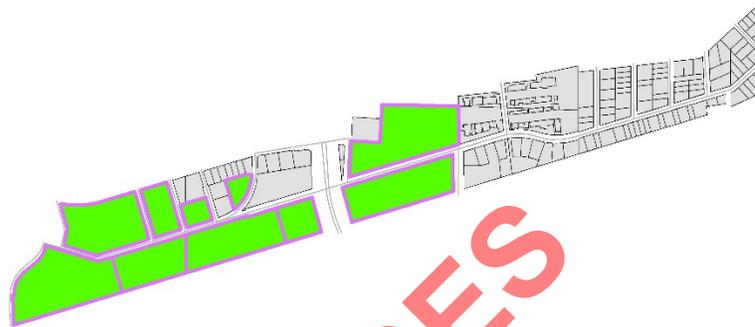
First, the Leshner Mill site is currently zoned *Industrial M-1* (the M-1 indicating private ownership). To allow the housing development recommended in this plan, a *High Density Residential R-5* zoning is needed. This will allow up to 16 dwelling units per acre.



*Leshner Mill Area Zoning Changes*

The proposed mixed-use area in 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue West presents some challenges. Foremost, its proposed intended use most closely resembles the city's *Retail/Entertainment* district. However, its 60 acres is far below the 500-acre minimum required for the *Retail/Entertainment* designation. Neither is it contiguous with Interstate 85 as the ordinance stipulates.

This plan recommends introducing a *Modified Office/Retail* district which bears similarities to the *R/E* district in its mixed-use nature. It should also allow residential use similar to *Medium Density R-4* in order to accommodate above ground floor apartments. Parking and height allowances should be less than *R/E* districts to keep these smaller developments more on scale with surrounding communities.



Pepperell Mill Area Zoning Changes

Finally, financial incentive structures are put in place. These aspects are described with greater detail in subsequent sections.

2. Develop new design policies and guides or revise existing to reflect the current state of best practices in transportation design. Communities may also elect to adopt national or state-level recognized design guidance.

Reimagining 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue has recommended the use of *Complete Streets* policies toward building a more safe and sustainable streetscape. These policies are implemented in this step with the support of Opelika's Planning Commission. This step also identifies development priorities. Street and sidewalk improvements should be conducted first which includes such projects as the Gateway Drive – 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue intersection redesign, lane widening, and speed mitigation between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Streets. This enables residents to take advantage of improvements in safety and transportation choice more readily. It also signifies the city's commitment to the plan by implementing improvements already on public property. This should be followed by strategies impacting multiple objectives, such as vacant property reduction strategies.

3. Offer workshops and other training opportunities to transportation staff, community leaders, and the general public so that everyone understands the importance of the Complete Streets vision.

Working with Opelika Planning Commission, the City Planning Department must make any education efforts necessary to inform officials of the need for zoning changes and satisfy any concerns regarding changes to the current environment of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue. This is especially the case regarding the proposed *Modified Office/Retail* district as it represents a new usage code.

Public engagement should also be conducted to promote the use of multi-modal transportation and address any concerns related to Reimagining 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue recommendations. This will be essential to the long-term acceptance and success of this corridor plan.

4. Develop and institute better ways to measure performance and collect data on how well the streets are serving all users.

Measuring the success of implementing Reimagining 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue policies should center around the three established goals: making 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue a successful place for businesses, desirable to live in, and supporting Opelika’s sustainability.

Goal	Performance Measure	Achieve
<b>Goal 1: Make 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue a successful place for businesses</b>	Number of new business licenses approved inside the project area, less number of business closures in the project area	Year 1: 0 Year 2 & 3: 1-2 Year 4 & 5: 2-4 Year 6 & 7: 4-6 Year 8 & 9: 6-8 Year 10: 8-10
<b>Goal 2: Make 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue a desirable place to live</b>	Feet of new sidewalk constructed in the project area	Sidewalk build-out within five years
	New dwelling units constructed in the project area	Equitable distribution of housing market categories
	Occupancy rate of all dwelling units in the project area	Total vacancy rate is at, or below, 5% <sup>2</sup>
	Percentage of vacant property in the project area	Vacant property declines 10% each year
<b>Goal 3: Support City of Opelika sustainability</b>	Usage of Lee-Russell Public Transit	Dedicated route establishment within five years
	Periodic business questionnaires of employee commute trends	Prevalence of sub-10 mile commutes grows to 60% of workforce by Year 10

<sup>2</sup> Derived from U.S. 20-year vacancy average determined by Urban Land Institute

**Stakeholders.** Below is a list of organizations that should be part of Reimagining 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue implementation.

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Justification</b>
<b>Opelika Planning Department</b>	Manages the orderly growth and land development of the City of Opelika.
<b>Opelika Community Development Office</b>	Improves the well-being of Opelika's low-and moderate-income persons and encourages development that benefits the community as a whole. Manages city Community Development Block Grants.
<b>Opelika Chamber of Commerce</b>	Promotes and fosters economic and business success, maximizes member investment, while enhancing the community.
<b>Opelika Economic Development</b>	Facilitates industrial recruitment and workforce development.
<b>Lee Russell Council of Governments</b>	Serves member governments by managing programs, promoting collaborative efforts, and serving as a clearinghouse for federal, state, and local funds. Provides financial support to small businesses through their Revolving Loan Fund.
<b>Opelika Parks and Recreation</b>	Manages, maintains, and develops city parks.
<b>Opelika Police Department</b>	Promotes and enforces public safety, can provide critical planning considerations for new community development.
<b>Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs</b>	Manages state Community Development Block Grants as well as the State Small Business Credit Initiative.

**Financing.** Funding a reimagined 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue will require a mix of fiscal strategies. They include public grants for city projects and incentives packages for promoting development. They also include promoting credit access programs for small businesses and residents. In this way, residents who have a vested interest in their community may become active participants in its development.

**Strategy:** Establish project area as a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district. TIF districts pledge the projected increases in a designated area's property tax revenue to finance municipal improvements to the area. These improvements directly contribute to greater business activity which increase property values. Many of the public infrastructure improvements discussed in the above recommendations could be funded through this means.

**Strategy:** Federal and State financial incentives. Government incentives can include Small Business Administration 504 and 7a Programs, Alabama's State Small Business Credit Initiative, Alabama Reinvestment and Abatements Act, Growing Alabama Credit, and Lee Russell Council of Governments Revolving Loan.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Business Questionnaire

**1st Avenue Business Owners**

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Q1 From your understanding, how do new customers first learn about you?

- Established marketing (TV/Radio ads, Social Media, etc.)
- Internet search
- Noticed from the street
- Recommendation
- Other

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Q2 On average, how far away do your employees live?

- 1 mile or less
- 1 to 5 miles
- 6 to 10 miles
- 11 miles or more

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Q3 How do most of your employees get to work?

- Walk/Bike
- Personal Vehicle
- Carpool
- Lee County Transit
- Other

Page 1 of 2

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Q4 Would any of the below help your business meet its goals?

- More pedestrians
- Less pedestrians
- More businesses nearby
- Fewer businesses nearby
- Larger traffic lanes
- Better street appearance
- More police presence
- Less police presence
- More people living nearby
- Something else
- None of these

End of Question Block

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## Appendix 2: References

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