

CHANGES FERGUSON CAN SEE



A GRIM ARTERIAL ROAD WAS UP FOR REDESIGN WHEN TROUBLE BROKE OUT AND CHANGED EVERYTHING.

BY MIRIAM MOYNIHAN

TOP

West Florissant Avenue is a pedestrian-heavy corridor, but much of it lacks clear and safe sidewalks.

BOTTOM

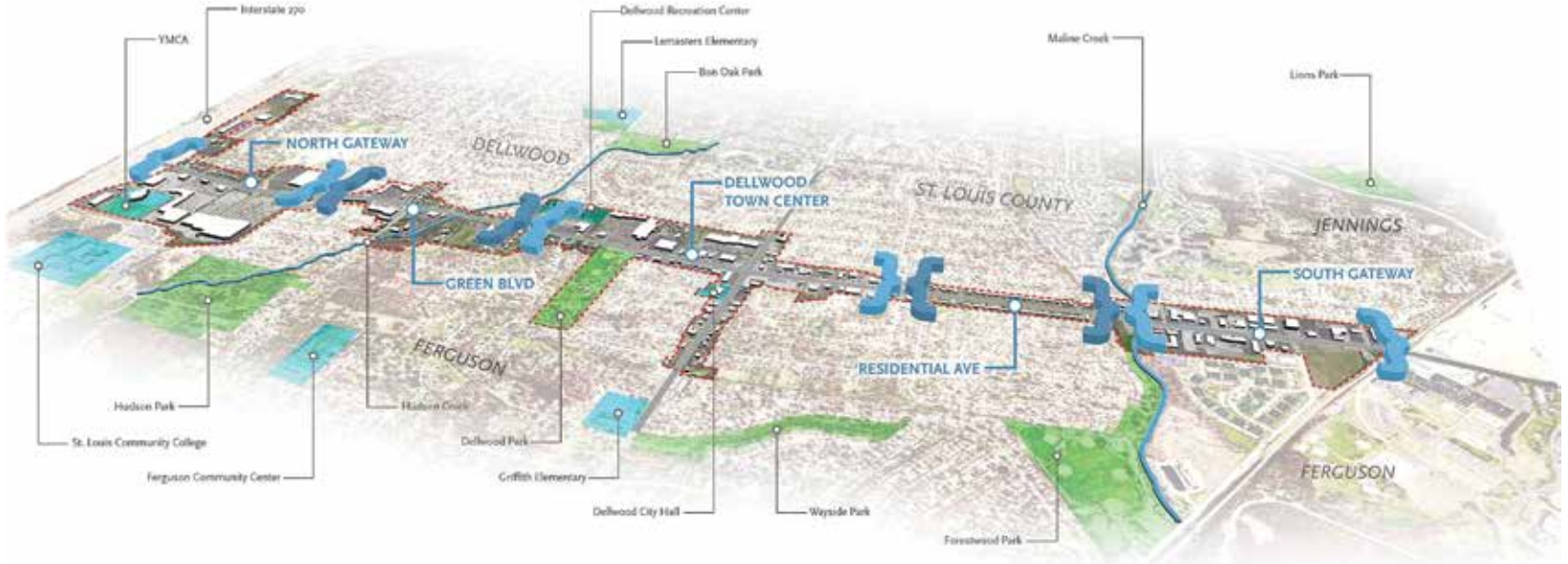
The Great Streets master plan will incorporate needs of pedestrians and cyclists by creating a wide path and better designed crossings.

Bonnie Roy, ASLA, describes her master planning project for West Florissant Avenue in Ferguson, Missouri, as a lesson in endurance. West Florissant is one of the main arteries through Ferguson. The project began in 2013 when the city of Ferguson and neighboring Dellwood started work with St. Louis County and the East-West Gateway Council of Governments, a regional planning organization, on the West Florissant Avenue Great Streets Master Plan. The plan is one of more than a dozen in the metropolitan area to improve mobility, infrastructure, and visual quality on major roadways and to cut through

the competing priorities and zoning issues of multiple small municipalities. In this case, it involves a four- to five-lane roadway through several somewhat faded older suburbs. In June 2014, the groups finalized the roadway design portion of the plan.



Two months later, Michael Brown, 18, was fatally shot by a Ferguson police officer on Canfield Drive, just off West Florissant. Brown, who was suspected of theft at a nearby convenience store, was African American. The officer, Darren Wilson, was white. Brown's death sparked intense anger in the community. Protests, at times violent, erupted along West Florissant Avenue and cascaded into arson, looting, and numerous arrests. The episode bared long-building tensions between a majority African American population in Ferguson and a city government and police force that remained



almost entirely run by whites. The avenue appeared nearly nonstop on news programs worldwide that showed police in riot gear deploying tear gas against protestors, and the burning of several businesses.

With the community in shock and recovery mode, the Great Streets project was shelved.

“The vision was set, most of the work was complete, but some of the capacity-building within the agencies that would push that vision forward had not been completed,” says Roy, a partner of SWT Design, a landscape architecture and planning firm in St. Louis. “They still had a document to guide them, but they lost a lot of that momentum.”

ABOVE
Major nodes identified in the master plan help focus the priorities of the different sections.

BELOW
Bonnie Roy, ASLA, right, reviews proposed alternatives with community members.



Cordaryl Patrick, the economic recovery coordinator at the St. Louis Economic Development Partnership and, as a former Dellwood city administrator, a major supporter of the master plan, says: “Uncertainty kills projects.”

Nearly five years after the unrest, there is less uncertainty. Law enforcement and civil rights reforms are under way in Ferguson under the terms of a federal consent decree. There has been turnover in the municipalities along West Florissant Avenue, including the election of two additional African American members, for a total of three, to the six-member Ferguson city council (the city is 68 percent African American). (One of those new members, Wesley Bell, was elected in an upset victory to the position of St. Louis County prosecutor.) And some employees in the departments of planning and public works who had been on the job during the initial planning process remain and are still behind the project.

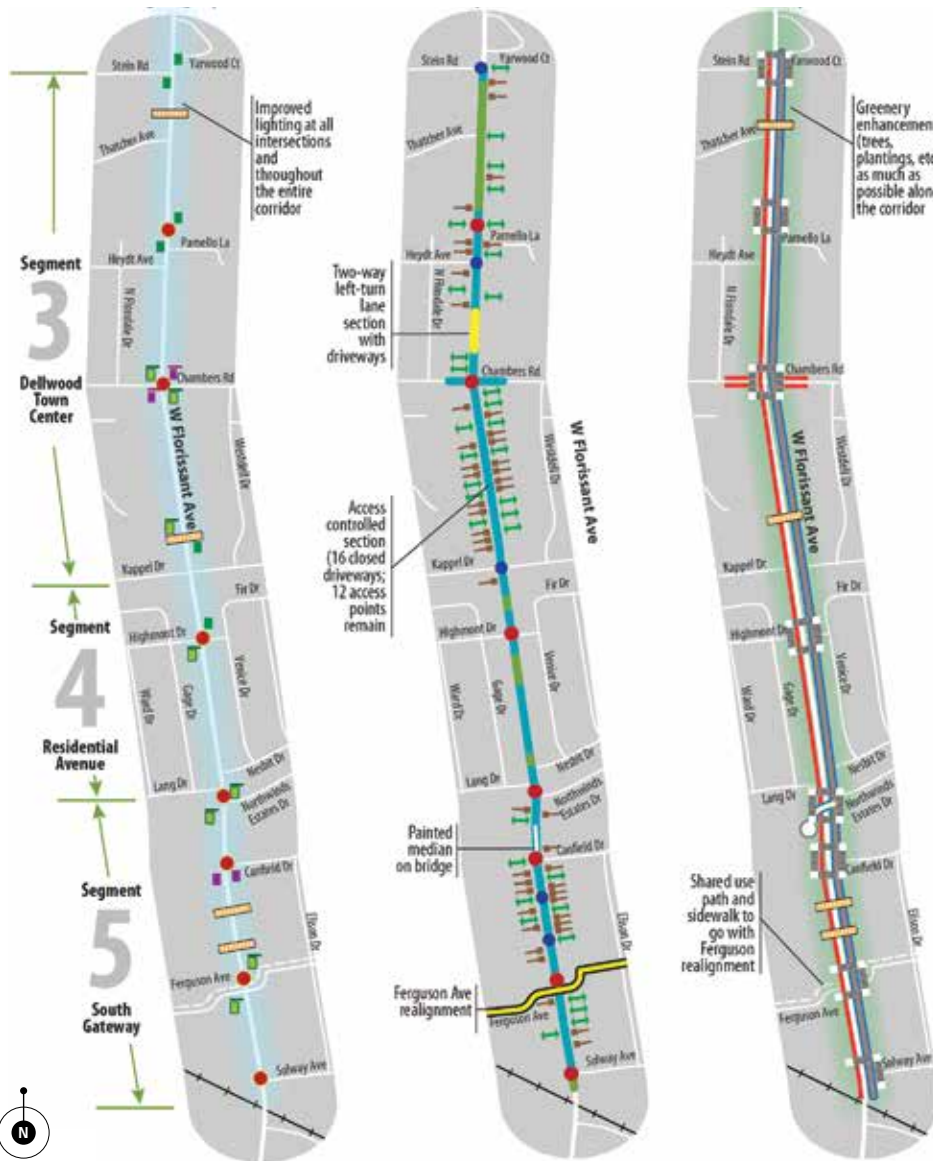
“We’ve hit a little bit of a reset button,” Roy says. “We’ve met with over 50 organizations. Obviously, lots of things

had changed in that interim, so we didn’t just pick up where we left off.”

About a year after the protests, St. Louis County and East-West Gateway funded and selected Crawford, Murphy & Tilly to move forward and engineer the transportation infrastructure piece. The firm subcontracted with SWT for the 30 percent preliminary engineering work, which is still in progress, Roy says.

The project will cost around \$30 million. About \$10 million in local grants has been identified, including funds to create a community development corporation or business improvement district in the corridor, to fund maintenance and other improvements. The groups are pursuing federal funding to pay for the rest.

“What you see on West Florissant is an eyesore,” says Ella Jones, a city council member in Ferguson. “Right now, it’s not a good feeling.” The roadway and surroundings are built almost solely for vehicles, with few pedestrian crossings and a lot of accidents, including with pedestrians. Between 2010 and 2016, 24 people



Transit and Lighting Improvements

- Traffic signal, crosswalks, and potential transit signal priority equipment
- Bus stop (no shelter)
- Bus stop (with shelter)
- Future BRT stop (with shelter)
- Midblock crosswalk
- Lighting throughout corridor

Street Improvements

- Signalized intersection
- Unsignalized intersection w/left turns
- Center raised median
- Center raised median, landscaped
- Closed driveway or street
- New, modified, or maintained driveway
- Ferguson Ave realignment

Pedestrian/Bike Improvements

- Sidewalk
- Shared-use path
- GRG Maline Trailhead
- Signalized intersection crosswalk
- Midblock crosswalk
- Landscape/streetscape enhancements

BELOW

A pop-up midblock crossing helped the designers note where jaywalkers crossed.



were injured in pedestrian and bicycle crashes along West Florissant Avenue. Residents along the West Florissant corridor rely heavily on public transit; 17 percent of working residents in the southern portion of the project zone have no access to a car. The poverty level in Ferguson was 22.5 percent in 2017, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, which is more than twice the overall rate in St. Louis County. There are 16 empty storefronts along the 1.7 miles of the zone. The sidewalks, where they exist, are inconsistent and poorly maintained.

In the summer of 2017, in an effort to bring the project to the residents in a more concrete way, SWT partnered with the St. Louis County Department of Transportation, the Missouri chapter of the American Planning Association, and Trailnet to use a tactical urbanism strategy and hold a pop-up midblock crossing.

With inexpensive and easily transportable materials—painted tires, plastic cones, temporary paint, and stencils—the team created a median island, defined the edges of the roadway, closed several vehicle



ABOVE AND RIGHT
Pulling buildings closer to the street will transform the public realm experience.

BELOW
The illustrative site plan shows proposed improvements in lane configurations, medians, and intersections.

OPPOSITE
The plan adds plantings to a gray streetscape and better defines lanes and street crossings.

entrances, and striped a midblock crosswalk, says Larry Welty, the improvement programs manager for the St. Louis County Department of Highways and Traffic.

“The fact that we did a pop-up demonstration on a major arterial within St. Louis County is huge and sets a new precedent for what other organizations like ours can do to help communities envision

transforming the public spaces, and having the county as a partner in that,” Roy says.

In a four-hour window, the team surveyed around 50 people for real-time feedback. There still were hesitant pedestrians who, without someone walking with them or without putting on an orange safety vest, “felt like there’s no way they were getting across this road,” Roy says. “We

could really understand how much of a deterrent five lanes of asphalt can be to pedestrian circulation.”

They witnessed a lot of jaywalking. Although some pedestrians probably just wanted to avoid interacting with the team, SWT took note of the locations where the residents chose to cross and have used that information to inform and evolve the plan.



SWT DESIGN, TOP; SWT DESIGN AND MIG, BOTTOM



“WE COULD REALLY UNDERSTAND HOW MUCH OF A DETERRENT FIVE LANES OF ASPHALT CAN BE.”

—BONNIE ROY, ASLA

of the traffic signals will save area commuters a projected 59 hours annually, a savings that is expected to increase to 70 hours by 2050.

Spatial justice is an important element of the plans moving forward. “We’re shifting space within the public right-of-way for a better distribution of users,” Roy says. “We have a few diagrams actually from the master plan where we show how much of that physical space was dedicated to automobiles and how much of that was shifted to other users, since a large portion of those community members don’t even own an automobile.”

Janet Wilding, the vice president of major projects at the St. Louis Economic Development Partnership, cited West Florissant as a “great example” of a community that will turn a transportation project into a catalyst for the community. “It’s a

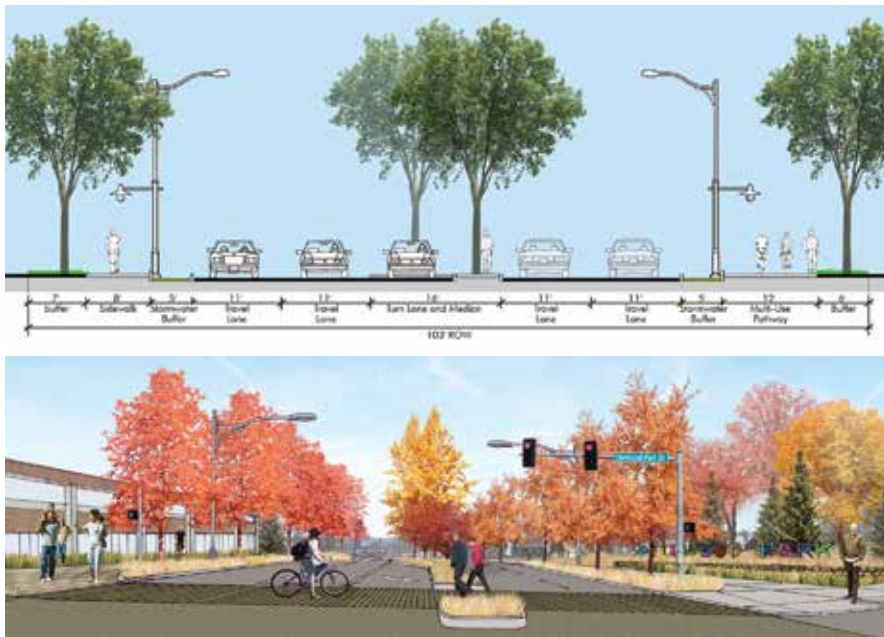
The upgrades in the built and green space of the corridor will include a continuous, multiuse pathway wide enough for both pedestrians and bikes; a raised green median with pocket turn lanes; wider, Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant sidewalks and buffers; pedestrian-scale lighting and street trees; improved

and additional signal crosswalks and midblock crossings; and bike racks, benches, and trash receptacles.

The various nodes will have other lane-calming features, improved and additional bus stops, larger canopy trees, and drainage and signage improvements. Adjusting the timing

SWT DESIGN





difficult conundrum when you're trying to do community development and trying to get some quality of life around these corridors that are moving 30,000 cars a day," she says.

A new transit center opened nearby in 2016, which will help serve the 19 percent of metro-area bus riders who originate in north St. Louis County. It has an indoor waiting room, restrooms, and concessions. With 10 bus bays, it provides nine direct routes to destinations such as Clayton, the county seat, and downtown St. Louis. New bus stops also have been added in many area communities.

There are a number of other positive developments in or near the West Florissant Avenue corridor. In 2016, Centene Corporation, a managed health care company, built a new service center on the location of an abandoned used-car lot in Ferguson and now employs more than 200 people. The QuikTrip Corporation removed the underground tanks from its station that was burned during the unrest and donated the land to the

Urban League, which built the Ferguson Community Empowerment Center to offer workforce development to residents. In this food desert, some residents miss the QuikTrip, but Jones sees hope in the Urban League's programs. "They're not selling you a hot dog, but they're giving you skills to get a job, get a car, and go buy yourself a package of hot dogs and some buns," she said.

The Great Rivers Greenway, a regional parks and trails organization, is building a new trail along Maline Creek with a trailhead at West Florissant. A new \$12.4 million Boys & Girls Club teen center is scheduled to open this year. And the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources are conducting site assessments to redevelop six brownfield sites along the route.

The federal government named the area a Promise Zone, a designation created for high-poverty communities to partner with government leaders to improve economic and educational

opportunities, investment, crime prevention, and public health. Thirteen government agencies offer preferential access to grants and technical assistance in Promise Zones. West Florissant also lies in a federal Opportunity Zone, created in the 2018 tax reform bill to promote investment in depressed areas by delaying capital gains taxes for up to seven years.

"There are a lot of vacant commercial sites along the corridor," Patrick says. His group is working with owners to redevelop these sites or sell them to new owners who are willing to conform with the Great Streets master plan. So far, they have created redevelopment plans for five commercial sites along this corridor, Patrick says.

Though the Great Streets plan for West Florissant began as a way to target a community in need of physical change, it has become part of a larger mission since the upheaval of 2014. "I think we've learned how important it is to make sure that we're engaging all aspects of the community in a process like this, to really understand what they need and what the desire is," Roy says. "It's more than just an engineering effort—it's amenities, branding it as a destination."

Over time, she says, the residents understood that the process would provide opportunities for economic return to the community and brought their ideas and concerns to the planning meetings.

"Ferguson led the change," Roy says. ●

MIRIAM MOYNIHAN IS A WRITER AND EDITOR BASED IN ST. LOUIS.

TOP
A street diagram shows a proposed transformation of West Florissant Avenue at Dellwood Park.

BOTTOM
The city of Dellwood embraced this suggested signage concept for its park and followed through with the fabrication and installation.