

Harnessing Strategic Partnerships to Increase Equitable Access to Homeownership

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In the wake of natural disasters, barriers to equitable housing access are exacerbated in under-resourced rural communities. This paper will describe a disaster recovery pilot project that 1) is developed in partnership with local organizations, 2) leverages the hidden value of nonstandard lots, 3) increases the inventory of high-performance homes,¹ and 4) cultivates the local workforce necessary to build them. This project is made possible by a strategic partnership between a housing provider (Chipola Area Habitat for Humanity), a workforce development program (Chipola College Building Construction Technology), and a university research team focused on housing affordability (Auburn University Rural Studio Front Porch Initiative). Borne of necessity and limited shared resources, this partnership embodies a particularly rural response: cooperative innovation generates greater success than can be achieved individually. The local community benefits from development of a skilled local workforce; increased access to resilient, energy efficient, and healthy housing; and economic stability generated by homeownership. This case study aims to demonstrate how—through the sharing of knowledge and resources—strategic partnerships can address complex issues such as housing affordability and demonstrate how to increase access to high-performance homes and reduce post-disaster displacement, closing the economic and social opportunity gap.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Chipola Area Habitat for Humanity's (CAHFH's) service area consists of the rural, non-coastal Florida panhandle region of Jackson and Washington Counties, as shown in Figure 1. Many of the area's largest employers are state agencies, including the Department of Corrections, Agency for Persons with Disabilities, and the Department of Transportation. The area is also largely agrarian. The median income of Jackson County is \$35,470.² According to data compiled by the Housing Assistance Council, 26.4% of homeowners and a staggering 48% of renters in the county are cost burdened.² This pilot project focuses specifically on the City of Marianna, located in Jackson County. With a population of around 5,800, it is the largest city in CAHFH's

service area. Through a pilot project, the partnership aims to address three primary impediments to local housing affordability and access: 1) a shortage of affordable housing units, 2) the residual effects of inequitable land use and ownership systems, and 3) a dearth of skilled workforce needed to both maintain and further develop the local housing stock. In Marianna, these challenges have been exacerbated by the dual disasters of Hurricane Michael and the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHALLENGES AND OBJECTIVES

In urban areas, cost burden is frequently driven by increases in property value outpacing household income. However, even in rural areas—where land value is considered affordable—cost burden can still remain a persistent challenge. With a limited number of housing units, lack of inventory in rural areas can increase rental costs and drive up this burden. With an aging and increasingly substandard housing stock, deferred maintenance can leave structures more vulnerable to damage from natural disasters, further decreasing the available inventory. According to data from the Housing Assistance Council, 68% of houses in Jackson County are 30+ years old and over 30% of housing units are considered “inadequate,”² so the quality of existing inventory will continue to present a challenge as the local housing stock continues to age.

In Marianna, challenges of zoning and land ownership can also impede access to and maintenance of homeownership. Vestiges of exclusionary zoning and lending practices are still evident in local neighborhoods. In historically Black areas of town, parcels are smaller, and current zoning requirements devalue individual lots and stifle new construction. For example, the parcels selected for the pilot project do not conform with current zoning requirements and, therefore, necessitated additional processing prior to development. The mandated setbacks and minimum square footage requirements effectively make the city's smaller parcels unbuildable. Homeownership has long been a tool for building both equity and generational wealth, but landowners with smaller properties are forced to either relocate or aggregate multiple lots for development. Furthermore, as with many rural areas—particularly in the Southeast—Jackson County, Florida, has a substantial amount of residential heirs' property, or property inherited by the descendants of previous owner

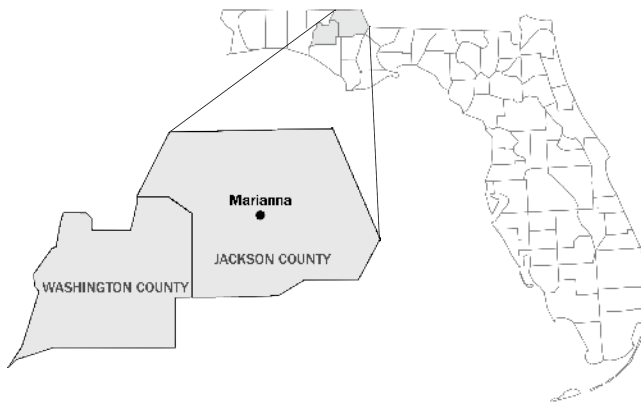


Figure 1. CAHFH Service Area. Image credit Auburn University Rural Studio.

either informally or without a legally-recognized will.³ When owners of heirs' property apply for financial assistance through current systems such as conventional lending or disaster recovery assistance, applications are frequently rejected on the basis of "title issues." While the State of Florida and federal entities such as FEMA have taken steps to provide additional avenues for recognizing ownership of heirs' property, it remains a barrier to equitable access to financial resources and assistance.

When Hurricane Michael hit in October 2018, it damaged 70 - 75% of the area's residential structures, amplifying the crisis in housing inventory. But the recovery has been uneven between populated coastal areas and rural inland ones. Post-disaster, demand has far exceeded capacity of the region's construction workforce. Therefore, much of the recovery work was performed by an out-of-state workforce that prioritized adequately-insured businesses and homeowners, many of whom were located in coastal communities. However, recovery in rural areas has lagged. Three years later, under- and un-insured inland households are still in recovery mode, blue tarp roofs still dotting the landscape. Local labor challenges are on trend with what has been observed nationally. A report by AGC and Sage reports that 72% of contractors cite workforce shortage as their most pressing concern, and 81% have trouble hiring skilled labor.⁴

Another kind of disaster, the pandemic, has specifically impacted Chipola Area Habitat for Humanity's ability to develop and deliver homes in two distinct ways. First, as a rural affiliate, CAHFH's construction volunteer base largely relies on non-local individuals and groups who travel to Marianna with the specific purpose of building homes. Restrictions on group activities and travel have hampered their ability to utilize this crucial labor resource. Second, due to the lack of volunteers, CAHFH, as with many Habitat for Humanity affiliates, pivoted to performing more work utilizing subcontractors in lieu of volunteers. The lack of a local construction workforce drove up costs for these services and extended construction schedules.

But, out of this nexus of needs emerged a series of primary objectives that the project team aims to address through the collective work of the partnership. First, the partners aim to increase equitable housing access by providing efficient, durable, and healthy homes which strengthen their communities. Second, the pilot project will contribute to the ongoing efforts of disaster recovery, which has been particularly under-capitalized in rural, inland locations. Third, the partnership aims to cultivate a skilled, local workforce that is trained to build back better, mitigating damage from potential future disasters. The team is taking a "housing first" approach: before the broader challenges faced by under-resourced rural communities can be addressed, everyone must first be decently housed.

We understand the critical role adequate housing plays in being a catalyst that ignites transformation in communities.

—Carmen Smith, Executive Director, CAHFH

PARTNERS

In response to these challenges, Chipola Area Habitat for Humanity; Auburn University Rural Studio, through the Front Porch Initiative; and Chipola College, through their Building Construction Technology program have formed a partnership to address the three objectives of disaster recovery and resilience, increasing housing stock, and developing the local workforce. Each partner is integral to meeting the project objectives. The resultant project is grown out of its place but informs and is informed by a coalition of allied regional and national partners. Collectively, the partners aim to develop local and particular

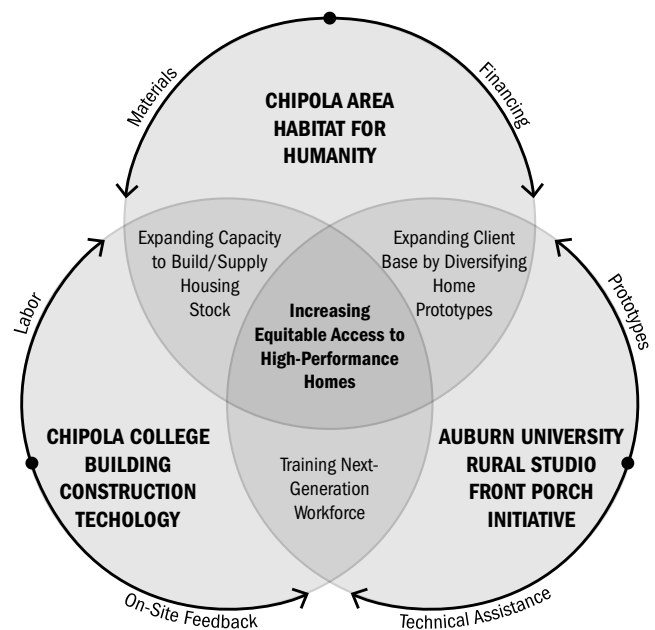


Figure 2. Partner relationships and goals. Image credit Auburn University Rural Studio.

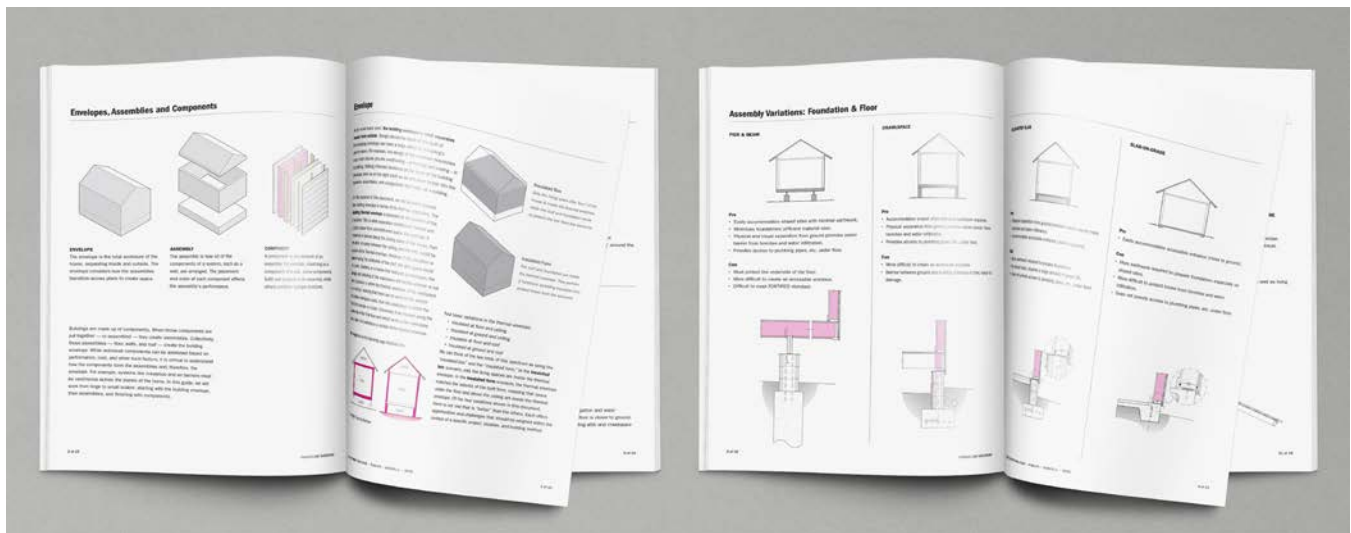


Figure 3. Selections from Front Porch Initiative Variations Workbook. Image credit Auburn University Rural Studio.

responses while contributing to a larger dialogue around housing affordability.

Chipola Area Habitat for Humanity, around whom this partnership is built, provides stability and fosters self-reliance for families in their service area, with an overarching goal of building a sustainable community. Working in the typical Habitat for Humanity model, the affiliate leverages contributions of land, labor, and materials to reduce home development costs. By originating, holding, and servicing mortgages internally, CAHFH finances homes in an “equitable but not equal” manner, considering a homeowner’s income in the terms of the mortgage while setting a sales price that maintains the value of neighboring properties.

Chipola Area Habitat for Humanity recognizes that providing affordable permanent housing allows families to thrive, which ignites transformation across the wider community. CAHFH actively works to foster a robust and resilient community, hosting community events and house builds to engage volunteers alongside homeowners. Through shared involvement and commitment, homeowners become active and engaged members of their community. Moreover, affordable homeownership builds stability, generates equity, and allows families to become active contributors to their community. In 2020 alone, CAHFH’s homeowners contributed over \$25,000 to the local tax base.⁵

The second member of the partnership is Chipola College, a local state college with a robust workforce development program. In response to a regional workforce needs assessment,⁶ which found a significant demand for construction jobs—particularly heightened by Hurricane Michael recovery—Chipola College launched a Building Construction Technologies program in fall 2020, boosted by a \$1.7M Rebuild Florida Workforce Recovery grant.⁷ A 1,050 clock-hour program leading to NCCER certification, the Building Construction Technology program prepares

students for employment or advanced training in the construction industry.

Timing of the launch of the Building Construction Technology program opened opportunities for collaboration with Chipola Area Habitat for Humanity. Because the pandemic interrupted access to their volunteer base, CAHFH had funding for construction but lacked labor to build. Therefore, the nascent Construction Technology program—which had limited funding for building materials—pivoted from a lab-based curriculum to a field-based program specifically designed to engage with CAHFH. In this collaboration, students provide much-needed on-site labor for Chipola Area Habitat for Humanity, and in turn, they reap the benefits of hands-on experience and service learning. Chipola College’s Building Construction Technology students log field work hours which count toward their construction certifications and gain experience locally in the means and methods of constructing energy efficient, resilient, high-performance homes, all while serving their community and increasing housing inventory.

The third member of this partnership is Auburn University Rural Studio Front Porch Initiative, a faculty-led initiative extending the impact of Rural Studio’s applied research in housing access and affordability. The Initiative offers housing products and technical assistance to housing providers working to deliver homes in their own under-resourced communities. The Front Porch Initiative utilizes a “product line” of one- and two-bedroom prototypes designed by student teams at Rural Studio and offers them to regional housing providers. The product line pairs prototype homes with climate- and client-appropriate building assemblies, shown in Figure 3, to create a design tailored to each project and partner. The Initiative provides the information, knowledge, and know-how to assist partners in making informed decisions regarding both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of building performance.

The Front Porch Initiative recognizes that cost of homeownership goes beyond initial construction cost and that investment in creating more energy efficient, resilient, and healthier homes can return tangible and intangible benefits over the life of a home. These aspects of building performance affect the total cost of homeownership through ongoing utility costs, insurance premiums, and healthcare costs, and they can improve resilience in the face of severe weather, preserving neighborhood fabric and minimizing displacement after a storm. CAHFH recognizes the value of these investments for their community member partners and has targeted multiple beyond-code performance goals.

To deliver homes that meet these goals, the Initiative employs a protocol of modeling, testing, verifying, and monitoring throughout construction and into post-occupancy. Extensive performance modeling during design optimizes details and ensures each design meets or exceeds the desired beyond-code standard. During construction, air tightness is measured at critical junctures and deficiencies remedied as needed. Third-party verification at the completion of construction confirms performance criteria have been met. Lastly, ongoing energy monitoring tracks actual consumption for comparison against predicted estimates.

Front Porch Initiative benefits from the partnership through the information returned by CAHFH and Chipola College. Feedback on pricing, material availability, constructability, and local building practices improves the technical assistance the Initiative provides and informs future partnerships. The Initiative's technical assistance to the workforce program emphasizes home performance, with the aim of teaching the students both the method for, and benefits of, building high-performance, beyond code homes. At the same time, through this work with students, the Initiative refines communication materials for a wider audience.

PILOT PROJECT

Many of the objectives that the partnership aims to address are systems challenges, not brick and mortar issues. However, the object of the house can be a tool for revealing invisible systems and demonstrating possibilities. Therefore, the pilot project that has grown out of the partnership serves as a physical manifestation of the collective work of the partnership. The project that consists of four homes on adjoining lots near downtown Marianna, illustrated in Figure 4. Leveraging an in-town parcel, the project concentrates future homeowners around opportunities for jobs, transportation, and amenities. Infilling vacant lots in an existing neighborhood, the homes aim to strengthen the fabric of the community and bring increased resources through added representation and contributions to the local tax base.

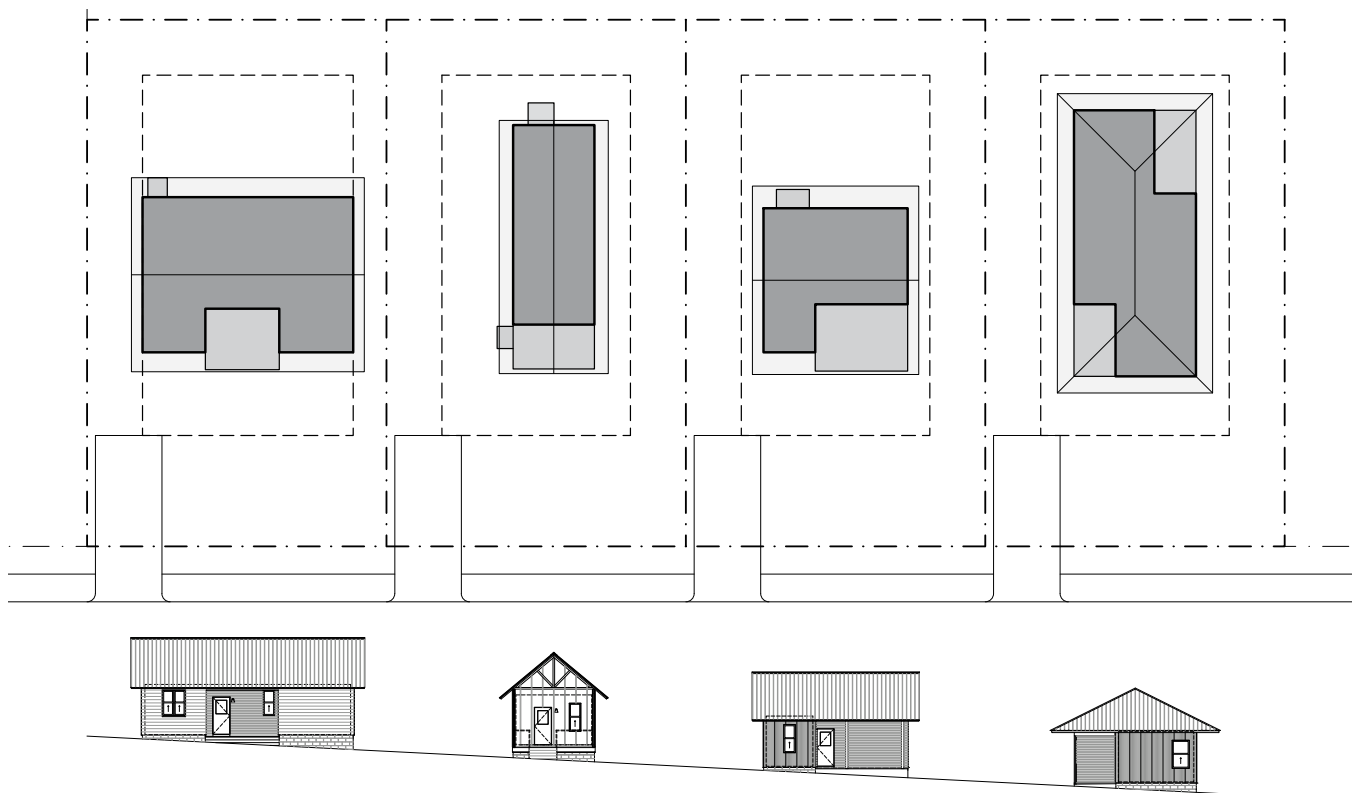


Figure 4. Pilot project site plan and street elevation. Image credit Auburn University Rural Studio.



Figure 5. Pilot project under construction. Image credit Auburn University Rural Studio.

The parcel is comprised of four dimensionally non-conforming lots, with overall areas smaller than the required minimums. Rather than re-subdivide the parcel into three larger lots that would meet zoning requirements, CAHFH successfully solicited the zoning board for a variance, thus maximizing the number of units provided and homeowners served. In addition to their small size, clearing the sites revealed a substantial cross-slope. However, the one- and two-bedroom Rural Studio houses are inherently flexible, accommodating a range of sites, both in size and topography. The affiliate has several similar lots in their portfolio, unfeasible for their typical three- or four-bedroom model. By adding the Rural Studio homes to their portfolio, CAHFH can harness these and other non-conforming lots while simultaneously expanding their client base to serve individuals or families that could benefit from the smaller homes.

As part of the design process, the Initiative studies what effects these changes will have on the energy model and how to compensate to achieve desired performance targets. Anticipating an increase in severe weather along with an uncertain energy future, CAHFH elected to pursue three beyond-code building standards to ensure the efficiency and resilience of these houses: Energy Star 3.1, Florida Green Building Coalition Green Home Certification, and FORTIFIED for Homes Hurricane Gold Certification. Building to these standards unlocks funding opportunities for the affiliate as well as tax credits and reduced insurance premiums for the homeowner. Moreover, it results in a better product for the homeowner: investment in a more resilient, energy-efficient home reduces monthly costs for

energy and insurance premiums, increasing financial stability for the homeowner.

The Chipola College students work closely with the CAHFH construction team in every aspect of construction, interacting with experienced subcontractor teams and learning from the expertise of their instructor. The students are learning more than the basics of building construction; they are learning how and why to build resilient, energy efficient construction. Once construction is complete, the Initiative's work of verifying and monitoring performance will begin. These high-performance, resilient homes will be an asset to the homeowners for many years to come.

CONCLUSION

This partnership is a community-based response to local economic, social, and environmental conditions. Through the work, the partners have targeted three outcomes: enhancing community stability, building the local workforce of the future, and sharing of tools, resources, and research. *Enhancing Community Stability*: By expanding access to homes in under-served areas, the project partners aim to create a space for diverse and inclusive neighborhoods where homeowners are safe and stable, enabling them to grow wealth and build equity for themselves and for their communities. *Building the Local Workforce of the Future*: A strong local workforce is a vital component to any community's disaster preparedness, mitigation, and recovery plan. Workforce education programs that create pathways from training through certification and into the local workforce are key to building homes and communities that are more resilient

to increasingly strong storm events, and also to building back better in the wake of future storms. *Sharing Tools, Resources, and Research*: In communities with limited access to resources, collaboration and the sharing of resources and knowledge across organizations is critical to creating shared progress. By pooling knowledge of housing access, building performance, and workforce, the partnership enhanced the collective understanding of the housing procurement process and created a shared language and value set with which to address local challenges. From increasing equitable housing access, to supporting ongoing disaster preparedness and recovery efforts, to educating the workforce necessary to deliver high-performance homes, this partnership represents a multidimensional approach to address the local issues of housing affordability.

ENDNOTES

1. "Performance" in this case is considered as a multidimensional set of issues, and includes concerns such as unaffordability, energy inefficiency, lack of durability and resilience, substandard conditions that impact occupant health and wellness, an increase in the fragility of vital community networks, and systemic structural and social inequities, particularly among populations protected by the Fair Housing Act.
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