



Rendering of the Jackson Life Center— a multi-use center for seniors and families planned for East Jackson.

In western Tennessee, about halfway along Interstate 40 between Memphis and Nashville, lies the mid-sized city of Jackson, which earned an important place in American history books during the 1960s civil rights movement. In more recent years, however, it is unlikely that many outside the state have heard much about Jackson. But it is likely many have purchased something that was made here because, at one time or another, companies like Procter & Gamble, Quaker Oats, Pringles, Owens Corning, Black and Decker, and others have operated factories in and around Jackson.

Today, aside from working in the remaining factories—like the one that currently produces engine blocks for Toyota vehicles—many of Jackson’s approximately 65,000 residents work for West Tennessee Healthcare. The non-profit, public health system is both the largest employer and the largest provider of healthcare services in the region.

“Here in Jackson, we take our health seriously,” said Mayor Jerry Gist, whose administration, in 2007, adopted the Jumpstart Jackson effort in partnership with the city’s schools to target childhood obesity, which has since expanded it into a city-wide, comprehensive health and wellness initiative. “Having West Tennessee Healthcare as a neighbor has helped us to realize we should always be exploring opportunities to make our city healthier.”

That was certainly the goal of the city’s Jackson Walk development, which over the past four years has revitalized some long-neglected city blocks by building a new, state-of-the-art wellness center, operated by West Tennessee Healthcare, and surrounding it with new

housing units, outdoor spaces, and restaurants and other retail businesses. Today, the Lift Wellness Center has more than 5,000 members and the housing units are fully occupied, with more being built.

The city’s commitment to improving the health of its residents is why it applied for and received an Invest Health grant. Invest Health is a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Reinvestment Fund that provides opportunities for local leaders in the public and private sectors to work together in cities like Jackson on new initiatives aimed at improving health and

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well-being, especially in low-income neighborhoods that are facing the biggest barriers to better health. The mayor, a West Tennessee Healthcare representative, and several other local leaders comprise Jackson’s Invest Health team.

Given the city’s success with Jackson Walk, the team decided to use its Invest Health grant to collaborate with residents of the East Jackson neighborhood on the redevelopment of a shuttered high school campus, remaking it into a new community asset to house services the neighbors say are needed in that location.

“There is a lot of history in East Jackson,” said Tony Black, Jackson’s director of recreation and parks and a member of the Invest Health team. “Originally, there were two

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schools across the street from each other, Jackson High for white students and Merry High for black students,” said Black. “But by the 1970’s, the schools had been integrated into Jackson Central-Merry High with a an overpass built over the road so students could easily move between the buildings. But the school is not there anymore. The Jackson-Madison County School System closed it a few years ago due to declining enrollment—it went from about 2,800 black and white students when the schools were joined to about 500 mostly black students by the time it closed. One of the buildings gets a little use still from Lane College, which is just up the road, but the high school campus is really a void in the middle of a neighborhood that has seen better days, where many

people are poor, rent their homes, and many of the owners of the properties are absentee landlords.”

Current demographics support Black’s assessment. Compared to residents of more affluent areas of the city, East Jackson residents are mostly African American (85%) and mostly low-income (median household income of \$24,000). Further, nearly 44% of families here live below the federal poverty line, 28% are unemployed, and 17% are uninsured. The neighborhood also has seen most of its commercial retailers

move out and is home to only one market, with many residents relying on convenience stores for their food purchases. Such disparities mean that residents here are less healthy, with higher rates of obesity and chronic diseases, like heart disease and diabetes, than in more affluent neighborhoods.

“East Jackson is only a mile from Jackson Walk, which has been a tremendous success so far,” said Chris Alexander, a member of the Invest Health team and vice president of retail and residential development for Health Community, LLC, which was chosen by the city to develop Jackson Walk and now East Jackson. “If you saw Jackson Walk before it was redeveloped, you would never have believed it was possible. It was an eyesore. It used to be the city’s

old public works maintenance area, but the buildings were mostly demolished by a tornado in 2003. We spent a lot of time working with the city; with West Tennessee Healthcare and other partners; and with nearby residents to create a plan for the space.”

According to Gist, Black, and Alexander, Jackson Walk served as a helpful first step to inform the process for the high school redevelopment project in East Jackson. “The old high school sits in the middle of an historic community, where a lot of people have lived their entire lives and raised their families.” said Black. “It’s important to involve them in deciding what gets built in that space.” One approach to community engagement that has been helpful so far: Invest Health asked a professor at historically black Lane College—known for its students’ leadership in 1960 of a bus boycott and lunch counter sit in—to have college students survey neighborhood residents about redevelopment of the high school. The Invest Health team will continue to engage with local community members as plans for the school move forward.

“Everything in the East Jackson plan is something that the neighborhood said it wants,” said Alexander. The current plan, according to Alexander, is to use the majority of the space for a senior center to be operated by West Tennessee Healthcare. Another section will be used for a demonstration kitchen and small business incubator, where people interested in opening a catering business, for example, can have access to a commercial kitchen. Plans also call for a satellite location for the downtown farmer’s market, which is located about a mile away and is growing too large in its current space. The hope is that the market can also teach cooking and nutrition classes in the kitchen space. Also included in the redevelopment plan is space for a small museum—which will display photos and other memorabilia relevant to East Jackson’s civil rights history—where local residents can visit and reminisce, and teach others about the community’s past.

“The plan is to develop what the residents of East Jackson need to be healthy and to thrive,” said Gist. “There is so much history in that part of the city, so much for its residents to be proud of and to want to share with others. We want to help them do that.”

