

# Leveraging Community Feedback to Shape a Suburban Property's Future

Transforming a mid-century shopping center into a dynamic, mixed-use project



In 2017, Keane Enterprises, a local Virginia-based developer, purchased Virginia Village, a 1950s-era strip mall outside of Leesburg, Virginia's historic downtown.

After observing how the community interacted with the property for nearly two years, Keane Enterprises began a community engagement process to get feedback about how local residents would improve the sprawling, nearly 18-acre shopping center.

Keane Enterprises revealed its initial plans for Virginia Village after four months of community engagement. Those plans included 490 apartments, 160 townhouses and condos, 105,000 square feet of office space, and 70,000 square feet of retail on the Virginia Village property - all with the input of the existing community. 25% of the project included public greenspace and the project also added important community benefits including new pedestrian access to Virginia Village from the downtown area.

Here's how the team at Keane Enterprises shaped these initial plans and used community engagement to refine them in the months that followed for their ultimately successful application to the Town of Leesburg.





# Established 1957. Reimagined for the 21st century.

Keane Enterprises leveraged coUrbanize early on in the project to proactively engage the community, listen to their ideas, and showcase their expertise in revitalizing a successful mixed-use development that reflected the community's wishes. Initially, the team was expecting to face opposition to the project, particularly in regard to the proposed scale of housing.

"In the past, we would have blanketed the neighborhood with postcards inviting people to meetings," says Brian Cullen, Founder of Keane Enterprises. "But doing that you reach the same group of people who consistently oppose development projects of all types. Getting other people involved was our challenge. How do you get the word out on social media? How do you reach people who don't live in the downtown area but would like to if housing were available? That's where coUrbanize came in."

Keane Enterprises rolled out a sweeping community engagement strategy using the coUrbanize platform to understand how to make the redevelopment of this shopping center more vibrant, dynamic, and connected to the historical downtown. Engaging early, responding to comments, and incorporating the feedback into revised plans allowed residents to more deeply connect with their community. Overwhelmingly, respondents were excited that the older shopping center could be revitalized - as long as the development team could provide ample green space and allow the Saturday Farmer's Market to continue.



# Engagement as a tool for long-term success



**1201** COMMENTS TOTAL

**56%** POSITIVE SENTIMENT

**37%** NEUTRAL SENTIMENT

**10,070** USERS

**13,959** SESSIONS

**2.5** YEARS FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT LAUNCH TO TOWN COUNCIL APPROVAL

**57%** APPROVAL BY LEESBURG TOWN COUNCIL

Over the course of nearly two years as the project team refined their plans, they asked for continued thoughts and input to understand how Virginia Village could become a vibrant and accessible destination for the Town of Leesburg.

“coUrbanize gave us the ability to talk to people,” says Cullen. “You can get a lot of input if you ask the right questions. We had the ability to gather a network and communicate back and forth, as well as address inaccurate comments and engage with those commenters.”

The Town of Leesburg voiced their wish to maintain the well-known Virginia Village Farmer’s Market, activate and improve the streetscape through outdoor dining options and live performance space, and increase connectivity to downtown. Keane Enterprises subsequently incorporated these features into the plan, including a pedestrian/bike bridge to Harrison Street and the W&OD trail. Virginia Village has always been home to some local favorite businesses, but given the input

received, the project team was able to include more local favorites in the project plans.

The Keane Enterprises team showcased that actively promoting community engagement early on in the process is crucial for driving community engagement. Being responsive to that feedback and incorporating it in a meaningful way helped the project stay on track and ensured the end result was something both the community and the project team were proud of.

“We were able to tap into segments of the community that normally wouldn’t participate,” says Cullen. “Historically everything goes through 30-50 people who speak the loudest and have time to make their points. Using coUrbanize gave us a broader segment to work with, especially the 35 and under demographic. Planning by nature implies we are looking forward, so why should a small segment of society dictate how we will live in the future?”



# Meaningful and equitable engagement pays off

The Keane Enterprises team's commitment to engaging and listening to the community paid off tremendously. In January 2022, the Leesburg Town Council approved the plans to redevelop the Virginia Village center into a mixed-use development, with 643 planned residential units, office, retail, and restaurant space, several parking facilities, and more greenspace than the property has seen in its 60-plus years.

"We got people to speak at the public hearing, and they came out and spoke very clearly about what they wanted; without coUrbanize, we wouldn't have reached even a third of those people," says Cullen.

Using coUrbanize, the Keane Enterprises team:

- Embarked on the entitlement and approval process with transparency, eliminating costly project delays often caused by community concern
- Incorporated residents' thoughts and ideas to build a more successful and sustainable project that both the project team and community were excited about
- Built trust and confidence with the community that this project would not only be built right but managed successfully



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Founder of Keane Enterprises