



# Healthy Highland

Incremental Neighborhood & Site Plan

CNU 31 Legacy Charrette Report

CNU

# Acknowledgments



**Mallory Baches**, President  
**Margaret Gattis**, Executive Director  
**Desiree D. Powell**, Programs Coordinator

**Black Titan of NC, LLC**

**C. Derrick Harris**, Principal



**Donyel B. Barber**, Community Centered Health Coordinator  
**Donna Elliott**, Assistant Vice President



<b>Necole Glenn</b>	<b>Elveria Hoke</b>	<b>Sonya Brown</b>
<b>Rod Costner</b>	<b>Brandie Meeks</b>	
<b>Tammie Lindsay</b>	<b>Anthony Meeks</b>	



**Marques King**, RA, NCARB, CNU  
**Lauren Sommerville**, Architectural Associate at Moser Design Group  
**Marc Gazda**, Gazda Urban Design Studio



**Tom Goodwin**, AIA - Partner  
**Aleksandra Borisenko**, CNU-A, LEED Green Associate - Senior Associate



**Terry Shook**, FAIA



**Allana Hines**, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Manager  
**Ruffin Slater**, Founder and General Manager

Thank you to all of the residents of the Highland Neighborhood who participated in the Charrette. And to the CNU Charlotte Host Committee organizing the Legacy Projects for CNU 31.

The City of Gastonia, North Carolina reminds us of the core reasons why the legacy charrette series is so important to begin with – an opportunity to leverage the organic togetherness of a strong but under-invested community with the technical expertise of the CNU membership to produce tangible change. In particular, the Highland neighborhood of Gastonia, is strong. No more can that be seen in the operation of the R.A.M.S Kitchen (Really Amazing Meals with Soul).

Created, managed, and operated by the citizens of the Highland Neighborhood themselves, in partnership with Kintegra Health, R.A.M.S. Kitchen produces about 400 healthy meals a day, feeding the residents of Highland. This is significant because there is no grocer in the Highland Community and the nearest is miles away. R.A.M.S. Kitchen has grown tremendously in the last two years, expanding to grab-n-go meals, infused waters, healthy desserts, and even a highly successful food truck. The community has been working together in an organized manner to address barriers to good health in Highland since 2016 – seven years via the Healthy Highland Initiative & Highland Neighborhood Association, both of which fall under the umbrella of Kintegra Health. Recognizing the importance of this organic neighborhood commercial asset and in concert with local partners, the Community of Highland would now like to leverage the success of R.A.M.S. Kitchen to create a mixed-use development with housing at diverse price points. Amid common economic pressures that cities face today, the legacy charrette in Gastonia is the first step in realizing this community-driven development. Moreover, this charrette also sought to begin envisioning how the Highland Community can retain its history while also growing into a community for all Gastonians - new residents and legacy residents.



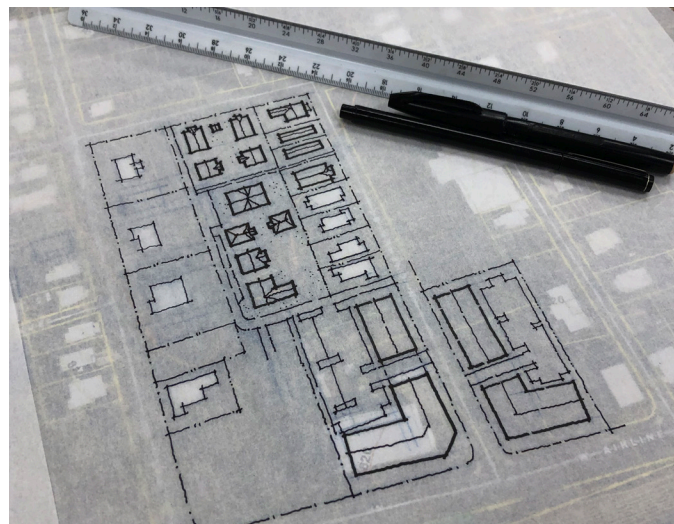
The Healthy Highland program, a public-private partnership, launched RAMS Kitchen in 2021— which serves quick, nutritious meals a day for \$5, while paying a living wage and benefits to its employees. This enterprise is key to providing a grocery store for the community, an operation that residents have long requested to decrease their reliance on corner stores that exacerbate existing health disparities.

We were originally tasked with simply designing a building on a site that is under control. But in true New Urbanist fashion, the design team knew that for any single project to be successful and have longevity, we must develop a wider neighborhood strategy. To transform a community, you must have interventions at the site, the block and the street level all working together.

The site is a slightly irregular parcel located at the corner of Airline Drive and North Pyror Street inside the Highland neighborhood of Gastonia. It sits at a critical juncture in the city, transitioning from mainstreet downtown to a residential neighborhood fairly quickly. A frequently used rail right of way separates the two districts.

Downtown Gastonia has seen significant investment and growth in the last decade. Adaptive reuse and new construction projects are underway. New restaurants and stores are opening up. Main Avenue received a massive streetscaping facelift. The most striking change is the CaroMont Health Park, the home of the Honey Hunters Baseball Team—members of the Atlantic League of Professional Baseball (ALPB)—and also concert venue.





With all of this economic development happening in the downtown, as an adjacent community, Highland is primed to be next. At the proper scale, a new construction multi-family project will serve as a catalyst for what future development in and around Highland should look like. We propose a 4-5 story mixed-use building with commercial and community space at the ground level. R.A.M.S. Kitchen will be front and center as the signature and anchor tenant. The new space will provide the local enterprise with much-needed space to work more efficiently and effectively. It will provide indoor and outdoor seating for patrons, dry and cold storage space, a larger kitchen, and most importantly, its new location will be placed in the most visible and high-traffic area. The upper floors will contain workforce housing units, accessible to a great portion of Gastonia residents making a modest wage. Finally, because the project is at least in part locally owned and operated, much of the wealth generated from the project has a great opportunity to stay right in the Highland neighborhood.

This is only one project. There are many other vacant parcels in the neighborhood. There is no guarantee that future projects proposed on these parcels will have the same stewardship towards housing, care, and support for local entrepreneurship. Therefore, a comprehensive urban strategy backed by sound local policy is necessary. The second piece of this project is laying the groundwork for that strategy. A substantial part of fostering a vibrant neighborhood is by allowing and supporting various building types and uses. This promotes walkability and provides living and working options for people from all facets of life and within a wide range of economic classes. Our infill strategy for the Highland is based on filling in existing blocks with denser building types than a single-family house but smaller than a large downtown apartment building (see Typology Plan on page 11). Chiefly, the building types we are advocating for the heart of the Highland neighborhood are called “Missing Middle” building types. These residential and mixed-use structures retain the look and feel of a traditional neighborhood while adding the necessary density to help the community sustain itself and grow. The index of “Missing Middle” buildings includes Duplexes, Triplexes, Quadplexes, Townhomes, Live Work Buildings, Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) and Guest Suites.



Ground Floor Demising Plan and Site Plan



Larger apartment, commercial and mixed-use buildings are suggested in strategic locations, mainly along the commercial corridor and larger inner block parcels. The weight of infill is tailored more toward the smaller end of the spectrum for a few reasons. First, as development moves away from the commercial street and downtown, it should naturally reduce in scale but still provide a “gentle” level of density. Second, buildings such as duplexes, triplexes, quads, and ADUs can be built by the residents, providing wealth-building opportunities for the citizens of Highland and Gastonia. The plan suggests a park/marketplace that anchors the entire neighborhood and provides a natural place for folks to meet, exchange ideas and services, or simply enjoy the fresh North Carolina atmosphere.

The principles embedded in the plan outline a framework of growth for the present and future by first tapping into existing assets and resources. The social capital of the Highland neighborhood, investments in Gastonia’s downtown, and the economic pressures on cities to provide accessible and walkable places to live put this neighborhood in a prime position to grow with legacy.



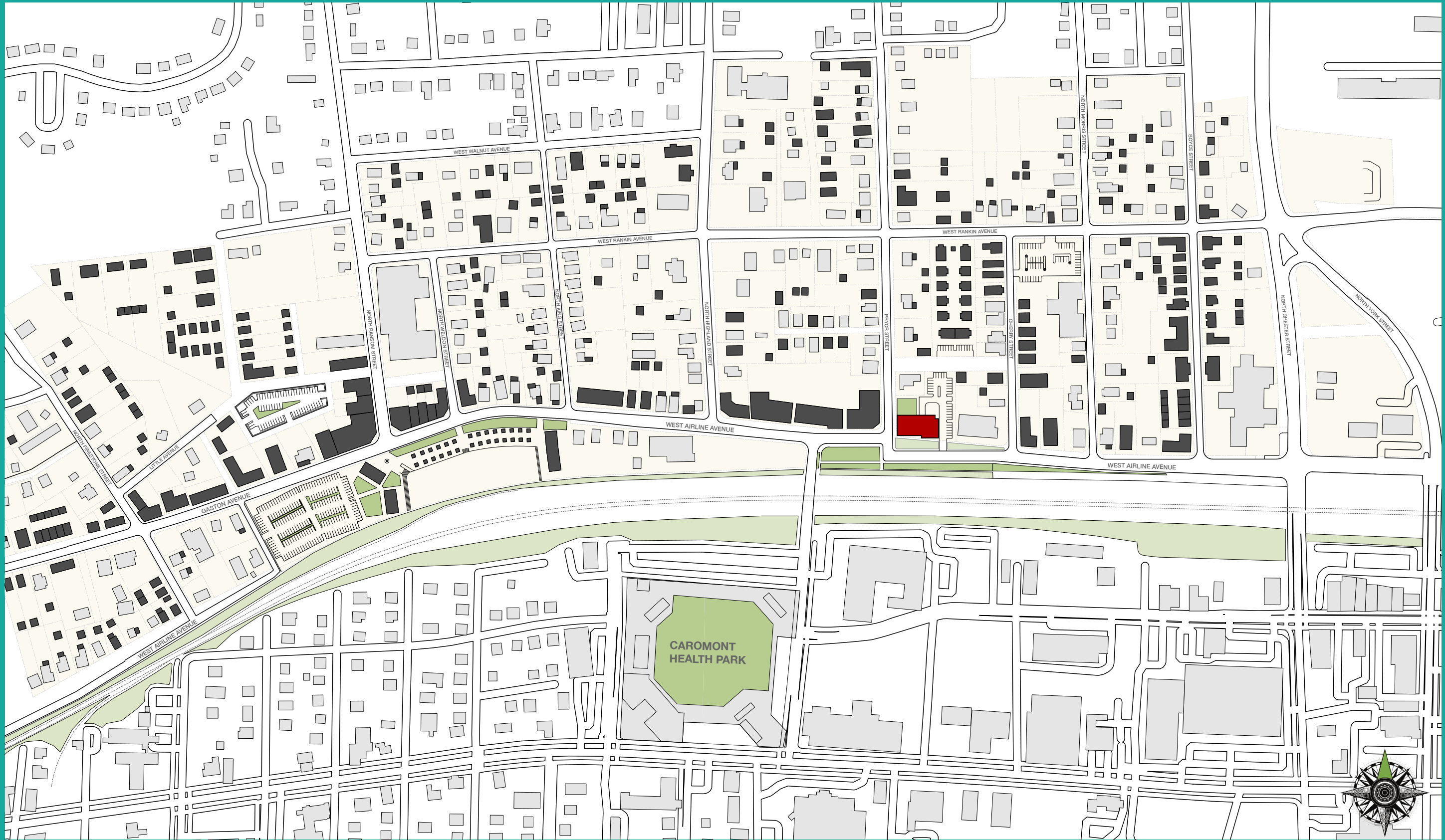
Typical Residential Floor Demising Plan





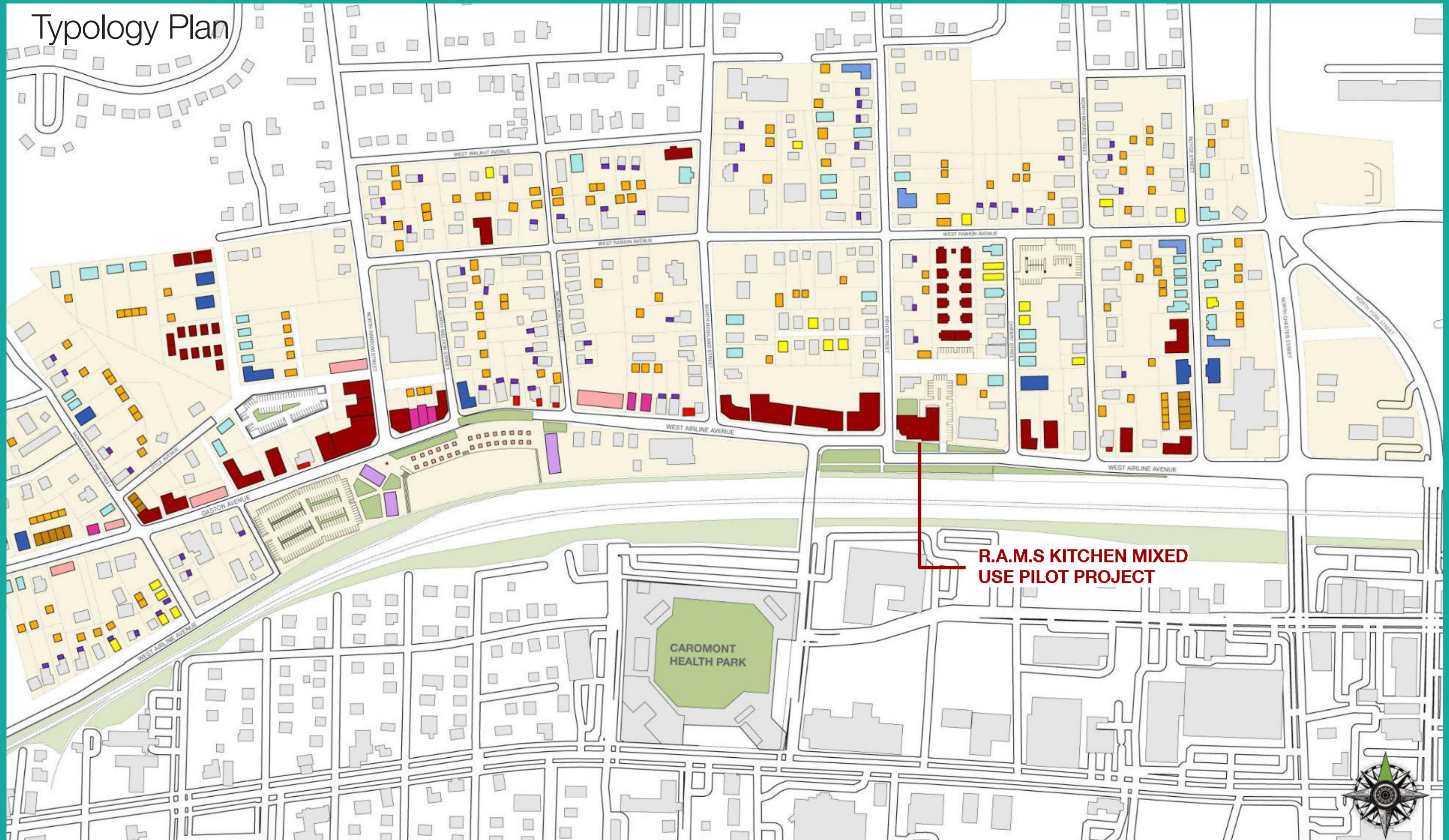
As a model study for R.A.M.S. Kitchen, the team met with and toured Weaver Street Market, a 35-year-old co-operative food store from the Triangle area of North Carolina. Founded in Carrboro, with stores in Chapel Hill, Durham, Raleigh and Hillsboro, Weaver Street is more than a grocery store. They are not a chain store, even though they are a multi-unit and sophisticated operator. As a co-operative, the important decisions are grounded in the neighborhood, not the boardroom. Their mission is to serve, support and grow the communities into which they are invited. So, in addition to the best fresh and prepared products, they recruit within the community, paying a Living Wage as well as full benefits even to part-time workers. Actually, they really are not “workers” but “partners”, in a true co-operative model owning along with community members the store itself. They teach as well as sell, conducting classes to introduce people to many techniques of preparing fresh food in new and healthy ways. And beyond good food, they host events that bring people together around known holidays and new rituals, introducing people new and old in a true neighborly way.





- Existing Building
- New Building
- R.A.M.S Kitchen / Mixed Use Development

# Typology Plan



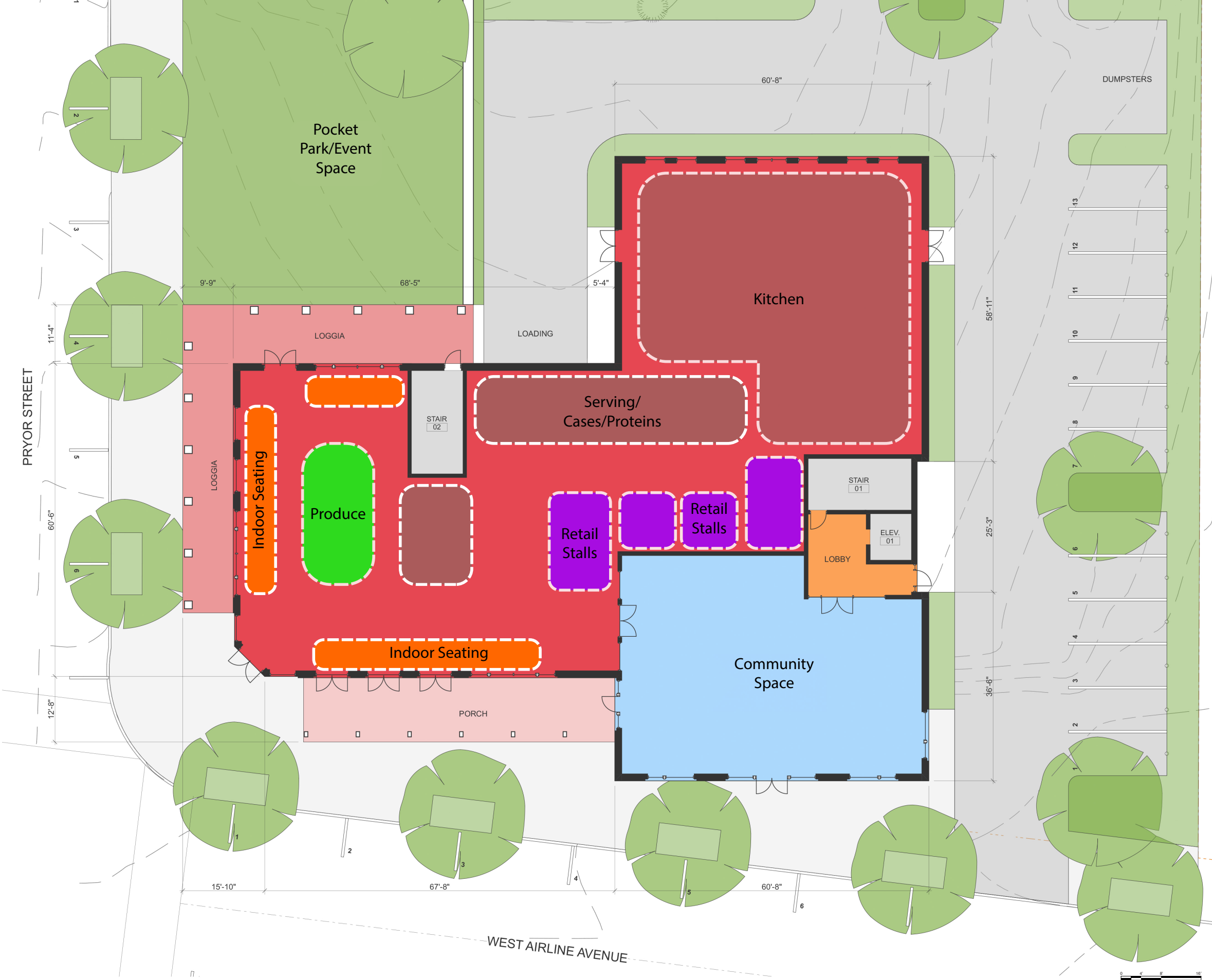
- |                     |             |                            |            |           |                            |
|---------------------|-------------|----------------------------|------------|-----------|----------------------------|
| Existing Building   | Guest Suite | Accessory Dwelling Units   | Triplexes  | Live-Work | 1-Story Commercial         |
| New Single Dwelling | Townhomes   | Accessory Commercial Units | Quadplexes | Duplexes  | Multi Dwelling / Mixed Use |

Full view of the mixed-use pilot project and R.A.M.S. Kitchen's new space. The building sits along the corridor of downtown Gastonia and the residential scale Highland Neighborhood transitioning between the two transects.





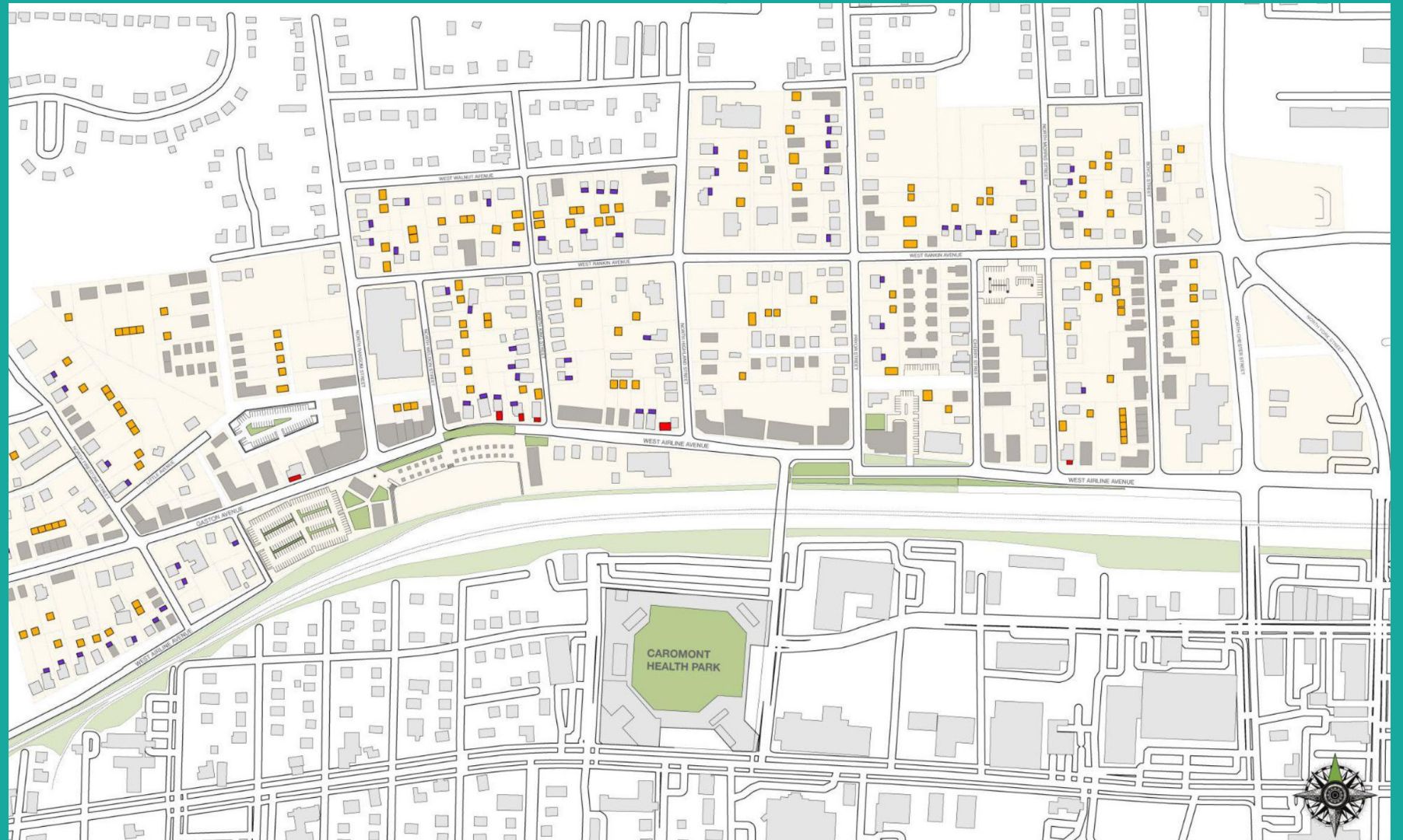
Schematic spatial programming for the ground floor and the R.A.M.S. Kitchen operations. A future proposal will expand and improve their current ability to prepare, cook, serve and store food and allow patrons various places to enjoy their food both inside and outdoors.



# “Missing Middle” Building Type Precedents



Accessory Commercial Units



■ Accessory Commercial Units    
 ■ Accessory Dwelling Units    
 ■ Guest Suites Additions



Accessory Dwelling Units



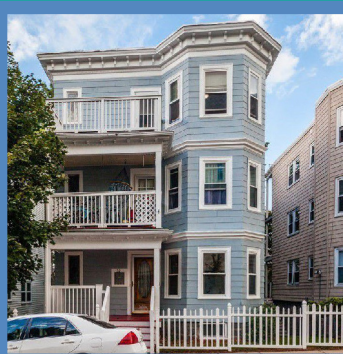
Guest Suites Additions



# “Missing Middle” Building Type Precedents



Duplexes



Triplexes



■ Duplexes   
 ■ Triplexes   
 ■ Quads   
 ■ Townhouses



Quads



Townhouses





# “Missing Middle” Building Type Precedents



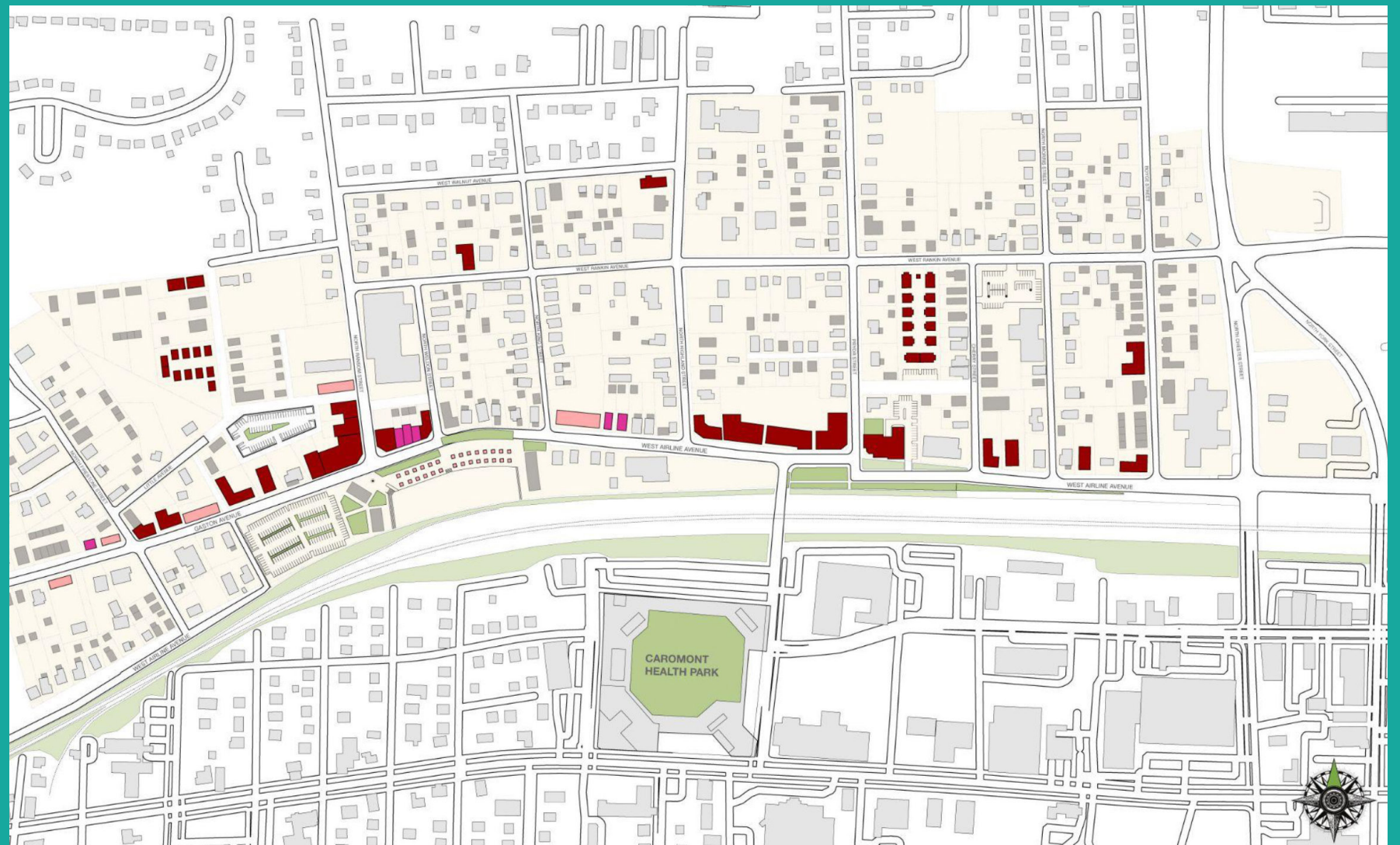
Live / Work



Commercial



Mixed-Use



Large Apartment Houses



Cottage Courts



# Getting There

## Implementation Strategies

### *For the new R.A.M.S. Kitchen and the mixed-use project*

Mixed-use development is complicated, even more so when the core retail tenant is a non-profit and when the goal for housing is one that is focused upon addressing affordability. The following are milestone events along a development and sustaining path.

- **Solidify Commitments Among the Critical Partners**

The good news is that Kintegra Health, the City of Gastonia, and Mr. Derrick Harris (the landowner of the property upon which the MXU has been designed) have been very involved in the establishment and/or the well being of R.A.M.S. Kitchen. The mere fact that this Legacy Charrette occurred is testimony to this fact. However, this undertaking will involve both high levels of mutual trust and clear documented relationships and responsibilities among the parties, for future development and sustaining protocols and procedures.

- **Seek out a Development Partner**

Neither Kintegra nor Mr. Harris are mixed-use real estate developers in the affordable space. During the charrette, Mr. Lee Cochrane of Laurel Street Residential was kind enough to provide insight into the issues that would affect both the design and development of this project. Laurel Street should be considered, as well as Astral Development, DreamKey Partners, and The Drakeford Company for this role.

- **Confirm and Vet the Development Program**

We live in an inflationary time, with construction costs being particularly problematic for the greater Charlotte area. The first act, once a development partner is secured, is to drill down into both the program for R.A.M.S. Kitchen and the sources and uses of funds to support it. The partner needs to embrace complexity and novel approaches, for the funding of the R.A.M.S. space in a market retail rent will likely not be possible. In parallel will be a determination of the type of housing to be provided and the level of subsidy required to augment the development costs. The current design is based on an elderly cohort according to definitions and supportive funding programs of the North Carolina Housing Finance Agency (NCHFA). However, other models and funding sources should be explored.

Both of the above exercises will determine the level of “gap” funding (that is, funding required beyond that which rental income from the use of the building can provide) needed to build and sustain this development.

- **Establish Commitments from Community and Governmental Entities**

Once the extent and type of gap funding is determined, then the various supporting entities—or “Process Partners”—can be identified and approached. At the top of this list is the City of Gastonia. At the time of this report, the City of Gastonia is included in the same area as the City of Charlotte for funding support from the NCHFA through the available Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) programs. Through periodic successful referendums, the City of Charlotte has substantial funds to augment those available through LIHTC, giving Charlotte an evaluation edge over Gastonia. Further, corporate and philanthropic giving within Charlotte has been robust, further providing funds to assist in this process of evaluation.

Therefore, this is a critical item for the City of Gastonia to address—not just for a Healthy Highland initiative, but to support its citizens on a citywide basis.

- **Cement Relationships with Aligned and Experience Partners in the Clean Food Space**

Weaver Street Market <https://www.weaverstreetmarket.coop/> — a 35-year-old co-operative organic food store with multiple locations in the Triangle area—was gracious with its time during the Charrette and by hosting a visit to their operations afterward. The CEO, Alina Hines, has offered the support of the organization through both guidance and relationships for purchasing for this broader vision for R.A.M.S. Kitchen. In addition, Carolinas Food Trust <https://carolinafarmtrust.org/> is a potential local vendor for organically grown produce. Others are also within the region for proteins.

Making a profit in the food space is hard work (chain supermarkets, for example, rarely make more than a 3% profit). Fortunately, in the organic/clean food arena there are a number of supportive people and groups willing to be helpful to R.A.M.S. along this new path.

- **Continue and Expand Grant Seeking for Long Term Support**

Kintegra has done wonders in securing grant support for R.A.M.S. Unfortunately, this process never stops, and must expand in order for the program to grow and expand into a true food hub for the Highland community and for Gastonia. The task before Kintegra/R.A.M.S. involves expanding upon the great story they have to tell so that this cause is one that becomes embraced by the entire city, and therefore one that others outside of Gastonia can easily see the value of within an increasingly competitive space for these dollars.

## ***For the greater Highland Community***

Gastonia is ground zero for regional gentrification. Even though the effects to date have been modest in comparison to Charlotte, the demand and therefore the impacts will become exponential in a very short time frame. The Highland neighborhood working with the City of Gastonia should act now, on a variety of fronts, to put in place mechanisms to blunt the negative impacts of gentrification; to redirect capital flows that stem from gentrification in a more community supportive manner; and to approach new capital expenditure programs of the city for roads/infrastructure and community facilities to support and encourage a variety of mobility options, and not the least walkability.

Without expressed intention good outcomes are hard to achieve. The following are key considerations for nurturing and growing the Highland community.

- **Regulating Plan Connected to a Form-Based Code**

Without a form-giving master plan grounded in the aspirations of the community, the reality on the ground is doubtful that an outcome will be achieved that is in the best interest of community building. Both of these tools—one that sets the vision and the path, and the other establishing the methods for achieving it—are mature approaches created by members of the CNU and are widely acknowledged. And, given the City of Gastonia’s prescient move to abandon its current bus system to adopt an on-demand micro-transit model, the approach to parking and development for this area certainly needs to be revisited. Doing so for the Highland community will also yield great insight for the City as it seeks to leverage this novel and hopeful approach to equitable and useful transit for all citizens.

And, it is through this process that properties—contiguous or not—can be identified as potential candidates for a community land trust.

- **Land Trust**

Land trusts are great vehicles for not only creating affordable platforms for home ownership initially and supporting the same for the long term. These mechanisms are, arguably, the most effective tool for blunting the impacts of gentrification in our time. They are now common all over the United States. Fortunately, one exists and is growing in Charlotte. See: <https://www.westsideclt.org/> The City of Gastonia, with the hopeful support of its leading citizens, should move at full speed to establish the framework for a land trust.

- **Fix the Intersections at Trenton Street, Highland Street and Airline Avenue**

This collection of intersections are... confusing. As depicted in the concept plan at right, there are other approaches to the design of both this intersection and along this stretch of Airline Avenue. Doing so will certainly improve the visual appeal of Airline Avenue, but more importantly, will establish a pedestrian framework along its length and into the Highland neighborhood.

