

## THE CORNER AT DEBS STORE:

How *reviving* a neighborhood grocery became a *catalyst* for community revitalization





## Executive Summary

In 2020, [Goodwill Industries of North Florida](#) joined a bold, forward-thinking public-private-philanthropic partnership to confront a deeply rooted challenge in Jacksonville’s Historic Eastside: the community’s lack of access to fresh, healthy food. Since the closure of the beloved neighborhood market, Debs Store, in 2011, the Eastside had been classified as a “food desert.” Residents were left with limited choices—forced to travel long distances or rely on fast food and convenience stores—intensifying health disparities and economic hardship.

The call for transformation began with Joe Debs, grandson of the original store’s founder. But he envisioned more than just reopening a family-owned market—he dreamed of restoring a cornerstone of the neighborhood’s identity.

Inspired by this vision, a larger and more transformative idea took root. With key support from partners like the [City of Jacksonville](#), [LIFT JAX](#), [Goodwill](#) and [VyStar Credit Union](#)—and generous funding from [Florida Blue](#), the [Jacksonville Jaguars](#) and public sources at the city and state levels—the project evolved far beyond addressing food insecurity alone.

Today, The Corner at Debs Store is a vibrant community hub. It includes a fresh market that brings healthy food back to local shelves, a Goodwill GoodCareers Center that offers career coaching and workforce development, and a VyStar Financial Fitness Center that provides financial services and education. A flexible space hosts cooking classes and community gatherings sponsored by the Jaguars. All of this is housed in the beautifully restored and expanded historic Debs Store building—bridging the neighborhood’s storied past with its empowered future.

The Corner at Debs Store is now the centerpiece of LIFT JAX’s multimillion-dollar initiative to revitalize the surrounding neighborhood. But it is more than a physical space. It is

a living example of what’s possible when community voices, visionary leadership and cross-sector collaboration come together with purpose.

This white paper chronicles the journey behind The Corner at Debs Store—from the original inspiration and committed partners to the obstacles encountered and innovative solutions that emerged. More than just a grocery store, it is a model of inclusive, sustainable revitalization—one that empowers long-term residents, strengthens communities and redefines what neighborhood transformation can look like when it’s rooted in community, trust and collective action.

Together, these elements form “The Debs Model”—a blueprint for inclusive revitalization that others can replicate. Grounded in community voice, strengthened by cross-sector collaboration and sustained through nonprofit-led operations, the model demonstrates how co-located services, historic preservation and flexible, sustainable design can restore dignity, opportunity and vitality to underserved neighborhoods. What began with listening in Jacksonville’s Eastside now serves as a roadmap for mission-driven partners nationwide who seek to create scalable, community-centered economic infrastructure—one neighborhood at a time.

**“The store was part of a fabric in that community,” Joe said. “It was more than a grocery store—it was a hub for the community of the Eastside.”**



## Project Background

“When my father died and we brought his funeral by [the store], one of the residents asked me specifically on the day of the funeral, ‘Where do we now go to get our groceries? When are you reopening the store?’” recalled Nick’s son, Joe. “That day had a big impact on me.”

Jacksonville’s Eastside is a neighborhood steeped in rich cultural heritage and historic significance—a place where generations of families have lived, worked and built community. Yet despite its deep roots, the Eastside has long been classified as a “low-access, low-income” area. Over 27% of households lack access to a vehicle, and the closest full-service grocery store lies more than five miles away. For many, obtaining fresh food means navigating multi-leg bus rides or settling for high-priced, low-nutrition items at nearby convenience stores.

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The situation worsened in 2011 with the closure of Debs Store—a beloved institution that had anchored the neighborhood for 90 years. Founded in 1921 by Lebanese immigrants Nicolas and Rosa Debs, the store was more than a place to buy groceries. It was a gathering space, a symbol of stability, and a vital thread in the Eastside’s social fabric. Run for decades by Nicolas and Rosa’s sons, Nick and Gene Debs, the store’s legacy was one of service, tradition and deep community connection.

### Rooted in the Community

That moment stayed with him. Inspired by both the legacy of his family and the urgent, unmet needs of the community, Joe made a life-changing decision. After a 42-year career in engineering, he retired in 2017 and committed himself to reviving the store—not simply as a market, but as a beacon of neighborhood hope and renewal. He invested

his personal savings and held a community barbecue on the vacant lot adjacent to the store to ask residents what they truly needed.

What he heard was clear: The community didn’t just want a grocery store—they wanted a place that felt like home again. A place that belonged to them.

Taking the first steps, Joe approached the City of Jacksonville for guidance. The city advised him to find a **strong nonprofit partner**—an organization with the credibility and capacity to lead the project and secure the funding necessary for a full renovation and reopening. That search led him to LIFT JAX, a mission-driven nonprofit dedicated to ending generational poverty through its nationally recognized “Purpose Built Communities” model. This approach emphasizes holistic, resident-led revitalization across four key pillars: education, housing, health and economic opportunity.

From that partnership, a powerful vision began to take shape—one that honored the legacy of Debs Store while reimagining its role for the future. This wouldn’t just be a store. It would be a cornerstone of opportunity: a place where food access, economic empowerment and historic preservation converged in a single, community-rooted space.



“You have to have your intentions and why you’re doing a project like this be genuinely for the community and not for your own organization or individual return,” Joe emphasized.



## Strategic Partnerships

“Joe saw LIFT JAX as the best steward,” said Travis Williams, CEO of LIFT JAX. “He had taken the idea as far as he could and saw us as the team to take it to the finish line.”

Bringing The Corner at Debs Store to life required more than one visionary and one partner. It took a collective—an inspired network of civic-minded organizations, each contributing its own unique strengths, resources and passion to a shared mission. This was a true multi-sector collaboration—uniting philanthropy, nonprofit leadership, government support and private enterprise around a common goal. The project went beyond addressing the urgent issue of food insecurity—it tackled intersecting challenges of economic exclusion and displacement, health inequity and generational disinvestment. Together, these partners helped transform a long-vacant space into a vibrant community cornerstone that uplifts lives across multiple dimensions

### LIFT JAX: The Quarterback

The first major partner to join the effort, LIFT JAX stepped in as the project’s “quarterback”—coordinating a complex effort with care, strategy and community focus. Under the leadership of David Garfunkle, former CEO of LIFT JAX, they took ownership of the building, leading fundraising for its renovation and ensuring the project aligned with wider neighborhood revitalization initiatives. LIFT JAX helped ensure that the store would not stand alone, but as part of a broader transformation of the Eastside

With LIFT JAX’s involvement, The Corner at Debs Store became part of a coordinated, resident-centered investment strategy—alongside housing rehabilitation, park restoration and new development—all designed to uplift the community without displacing the people who call it home.

### Goodwill Industries of North Florida: The Operator

Goodwill Industries of North Florida joined the project with a powerful dual mission: to operate the fresh market and establish a GoodCareers Center on the building’s second floor. Following a post-pandemic shift toward delivering services directly into communities, Goodwill saw in the project a natural extension of its mission. With deep experience in retail logistics and workforce development, Goodwill brought both operational muscle and social purpose to the table.



“This project is about ‘nutrition with ambition,’” said David Rey, CEO of Goodwill North Florida. “By providing fresh, healthy foods at affordable prices and workforce development opportunities under oneroof, and leveraging the logistic strength of the Goodwill network, we are showing what it looks like to nourish both families and futures.”



## **VyStar Credit Union: Financial Access and Literacy**

VyStar Credit Union joined the initiative through the leadership of its CEO, Brian Wolfburg, who served on the LIFT JAX board and recognized the alignment between the project and VyStar's community investment goals. For VyStar, the partnership wasn't just about placing a branch in the neighborhood—it was about addressing a critical gap in financial access and empowerment.

## **Florida Blue: Health Equity Champion**

Florida Blue and the **Florida Blue Foundation** emerged as early champions of the project, contributing more than \$1.4 million to help bring the vision to life. Their involvement helped shape the health-centered heart of the store—not as a commercial venture, but as a public health intervention rooted in equity. Florida Blue also played a crucial connector role, helping bring in new partners—including the Jacksonville Jaguars—further weaving together a strong, collaborative network.

“This was about more than just fresh food access,” said Darnell Smith, North Florida market president for Florida Blue. “This was about community transformation.”

**“The Eastside wasn’t just a food desert—it was a financial services desert,” noted VyStar Vice President Patricia McElroy. “It became important to VyStar to be able to provide a backbone of support to the neighbors as they saw fit.”**



## **Jacksonville Jaguars: Neighborhood Champions**

The Jacksonville Jaguars were introduced to the project through Florida Blue and were immediately drawn to its authenticity and grassroots origins. The Jaguars recognized that this was not a top-down initiative, but a vision shaped by the voices of Eastside residents themselves.

With EverBank Stadium just blocks away from the Debs Store, the Jaguars are part of the Eastside community. Their support—both financial and promotional—helped shine a spotlight on the project's far-reaching impact on food access, employment, financial literacy and health.

**“We really liked how there was a lot of community input,” said Whitney Meyer of the Jaguars. “This wasn’t just a whim of an idea. There were people who lived there saying what they needed.”**

## Additional Partners and Contributors

The success of The Corner at Debs Store also rests on the contributions of many others who brought vision, expertise and heart to the table. **The Historic Eastside Community Development Corporation** played a vital role in community engagement, ensuring the project stayed closely aligned with resident priorities.

The City of Jacksonville and the **State of Florida** contributed essential public funding to support the building's renovation and expansion. Design professionals from **ALS Architects** and **Baker Design Build** donated their expertise to help translate the vision into plans for a thoughtful, community-centered space.

“When Joe originally reached out to me and told me his vision, I was like, ‘Yeah, that sounds like I would love that,’” recalled ALS architect Melody Bishop. “That’s the kind of thing that makes my heart sing.”

Tamara Baker of Baker Design Build shared a similar conviction: “I knew the neighborhood well and that it needed this type of store... There’s no place to go and get lunch. There’s no place to grab a snack or someplace you can get something healthy. I knew it would be a success.”

Together, these partners formed more than just a project team—they formed a collaborative ecosystem anchored in trust, transparency and a shared commitment to lasting impact.

“Partnership is the most important word that I could use about this project,” Joe said. “We wouldn’t be here today without Goodwill. We wouldn’t be here without LIFT JAX. We wouldn’t be here without my involvement. Any project of this type requires a partnership of public, private and not-for-profit sectors.”



Building Trust:  
The Power of  
Community Engagement

Long before a single shelf was stocked or a wall repainted, project partners focused on one essential first step: listening.

Staying true to the project's grassroots origins, the team prioritized authentic community engagement from the very beginning. Building on that foundation, LIFT JAX launched a neighborhood survey, learning that 85% of respondents would shop at a neighborhood grocery if it reopened. But this feedback wasn't just data—it was a deeper signal of something more profound. It was about trust.

“Our first year was all about building trust,” said Florida Blue’s Darnell Smith. “We really wanted to make certain that we do a really good job of earning the right for them to be able to look at us.”

For years, Eastside residents had seen well-meaning promises come and go—plans unveiled with fanfare, only to quietly disappear. Understandably, there was skepticism. Would this be another project that started with big dreams but faded without follow-through?

That trust was earned not through grand gestures, but through consistency, humility and deep listening. Community voices weren't just consulted—they were centered. Residents were invited into conversations to share their needs and help shape solutions.

Suzanne Pickett, president of the Historic Eastside Economic Development Corporation, emphasized the importance of not just involving the community, but honoring it.



“It’s a community effort, and we engaged the community at every turn,” she said. “At (the store’s) opening, we had a soft launch for the residents before we had a media opening—we wanted Eastside residents to know that this project was for them.”

That level of intentional, inclusive engagement didn't just build support—it built ownership. From that foundation emerged a collective vision: The Corner at Debs Store would be more than a place to buy fresh groceries. It would be a hub where residents could build careers, grow financially, share knowledge and gather with pride; a space created not for the Eastside, but with the Eastside.

**“I loved our approach in involving the community leading up to fundraising,” Goodwill’s David Rey said. “There were so many community conversations and huddles—‘What’s needed? What else do you need?’ That guided everything we built.”**



## Project Financing

Reviving the Debs Store was always more than a construction project—it was a community mission. But for years, that mission ran up against a common challenge: funding. Traditional lenders were wary, and early conversations with potential funders often stalled without an established organizational partner behind the effort.

That began to change with the involvement of LIFT JAX. Recognizing the vital role this project could play within its broader economic revitalization plans for the Eastside, LIFT JAX formally joined the effort by 2020, bringing both organizational credibility and a deep commitment to place-based investment. With their funding and leadership, a complex and collaborative financing strategy came together—one that blended public, private and philanthropic contributions and reflected the shared ownership of the revitalization effort.

LIFT JAX spearheaded the fundraising campaign for the building renovation and construction. Key funding milestones included a \$650,000 award from the [City of Jacksonville's Office of Economic Development](#) and a \$1 million grant from the State of Florida. Private philanthropy played a critical role in closing the gap.

Corporate partners stepped up in significant ways. Florida Blue invested \$1 million in the project and committed an additional \$400,000 to support food access initiatives and subsidize store operations. The Jacksonville Jaguars contributed \$1 million to Out East and provided additional funding and resources for a computer lab, gift cards, cooking classes and youth programs.

In parallel, VyStar provided the financial support to establish its on-site financial fitness center while Goodwill joined as the long-term store operator, leading fundraising for grocery store inventory, technology and staff training. Goodwill's investment and involvement guarantee the



store would open not only with stocked shelves, but also with systems and personnel in place to ensure that the grocery store would operate for a minimum of four years. The final funding structure was a true mosaic of partners, each contributing to a shared vision:

- **Building Renovation:** Led by LIFT JAX, funded through city state and private philanthropy
- **Store Operations:** Led by Goodwill, supported by corporate and foundation donors
- **Financial Center:** Provided by VyStar
- **Food Access & Community Programming:** Underwritten in part by Florida Blue and the Jacksonville Jaguars

In the end, financing The Corner at Debs Store became a model of collaborative investment—proof that when a community comes together, even the most challenging projects can take root and grow.



## Project Implementation: Challenges & Solutions

**Bringing The Corner at Debs Store to life was a complex endeavor marked by significant architectural, operational and relational challenges. From the restoration of a near-century-old building to navigating the realities of running a modern grocery store operation in a historically underserved area, the project demanded creativity, resilience and unwavering commitment from all involved.**

### **Navigating a Complex Stakeholder Environment**

When multiple large, successful organizations come together — each bringing valuable expertise and resources—it can be challenging to define leadership roles and build consensus. Successfully managing these relationships, while keeping the community’s priorities front and center, required deliberate, transparent communication and strong, collaborative leadership.

The project’s evolution was also shaped by its organic growth, with key partners joining the project over a span of four years. While these partnerships were essential to the project’s success, they naturally introduced layers

of complexity. For example, early architectural designs and floor plans were developed before Goodwill—which would ultimately operate the store—became a partner. Goodwill brought critical operational and logistical insights that significantly influenced the store’s layout. This expertise led to major revisions of the original plans tailored to meet the demands of a modern grocery operation.

Similarly, VyStar’s involvement introduced vital financial literacy components, requiring the creation of a secure, dedicated area for their satellite branch above the store. This iterative and collaborative process ensured the space ultimately embodied the diverse and integrated vision



of all partners—enhancing both the store’s functionality and its role as a dynamic, multifaceted community hub.

### **Renovating a Historic Structure: Balancing Preservation and Functionality**

Transforming the original 1913 building—beloved but badly deteriorated—into a modern grocery store while preserving its historic charm was one of the project’s most formidable challenges. At the start, the property was still occupied by its longtime owner, who had lived above the store for years. Staying true to a revitalization model that valued residents and honored legacy, project partners not only acquired the building but also built the former owner a new home just down the street.

Once the team gained full access to the building, they quickly discovered that the structure was in far worse shape than expected. Termite infestations, rotted flooring and sagging structural supports revealed extensive damage. In the end, only the four exterior walls could be saved; everything else had to be reconstructed from the ground up.

The building’s irregularities—non-square walls, sloping floors and the lack of a proper foundation—presented further challenges in both design and permitting. Working within a limited footprint, the team needed to meet modern code requirements – adding handicap-accessible restrooms, ADA-compliant pathways and emergency exits—all while maintaining the building’s original character. Striking that delicate balance required nearly a dozen design iterations over two years.

A key breakthrough was the addition of a “docking port”—a modern core connected to the historic structure by small

bridges. This solution allowed for the necessary expansion while protecting the architectural integrity of the original building, blending old and new into a single, functional space.

This blend of old and new extended inside as well. Original wood shelving, cherished by the community but destroyed by termites, had to be replaced. A local artisan, however, crafted replicas that captured the character of the originals—preserving the store’s nostalgic warmth while meeting today’s standards.

Originally slated to open in spring 2024, the project faced delays from permitting challenges, unforeseen structural issues and supply chain disruptions. These setbacks pushed the opening to late August—just days before the grand opening on September 4, Jacksonville’s 904 Day. To meet this crucial milestone, the team accelerated construction, employed tactical project management strategies and worked closely with project contractors to swiftly resolve last-minute hurdles.

Despite the unexpected delays and costs, the team remained steadfast in preserving the original vision. The final structure stands as a seamless marriage of historic preservation and modern functionality—an achievement forged through compromise, iteration and perseverance.

**“I’m glad that we were able to maintain the overall aesthetics...and keep the appearance of the original building,” reflected Bobby Baker of Baker Design Build. “We did a really good job of keeping that historic feel and nuances. It’s punching well above its weight, so to speak.”**

## Operational Challenges: Building a Store from the Ground Up

Once construction was underway, a new set of challenges emerged—this time around the day-to-day realities of operating a grocery store, especially one rooted in a nonprofit mission to address a food desert.

### Supply Chain and Delivery Logistics

The historic store's location on a narrow urban street ruled out deliveries by today's standard 53-foot tractor-trailers. To overcome this, the team flipped the traditional distribution model: Rather than waiting for suppliers to deliver, THE PLAYERS donated a refrigerated van to pick up inventory directly from distributors and local farms. This van not only streamlines supply but also supports a home delivery service for residents, with the potential to serve other food desert communities in the future.

In addition, large national distributors were initially hesitant to work with a small-volume, independent grocer. Goodwill staff worked tirelessly to build trusted relationships with regional vendors who shared the store's community-first values and were willing to accommodate flexible order sizes. Over time, these vendors evolved into vital partners, reinforcing the store's reliability and mission.

### Strategic Product Selection and Inventory Management

Early on, the store operations team underestimated the power of brand loyalty. Shoppers quickly voiced their desire for familiar staples—items like Kraft Mac & Cheese—when they were absent from store shelves. Listening to this feedback, Goodwill shifted its inventory strategy to prioritize recognizable brands and essential staples, with a particular focus on protein—the “center of the plate”—while carefully curating complementary products.

To address spoilage concerns, especially with fresh produce, Goodwill increased its selection of frozen foods, emphasizing flash-frozen vegetables that preserve nutrition while reducing waste. This approach ensures a steady, dependable supply of healthy options, even amid distribution challenges.



### Technology-Driven Efficiency

Inspired by Aldi's low-overhead model, The Corner at Debs Store introduced a barcode-based pricing system for all inventory, including produce. This innovation eliminated time-consuming weigh-and-tare processes at checkout, reduced staff training complexity and boosted speed and accuracy at the register. These operational efficiencies lower labor costs and enable the store to pass savings directly to customers—a crucial factor in a community where affordability is paramount.

### Hiring, Training and Community Engagement

Understanding that a truly successful neighborhood grocery must feel like it belongs to the neighborhood, Goodwill began hiring staff six months before opening day. Employees

underwent comprehensive training not only in retail operations but also in community engagement and service. Most staff were recruited from within the Eastside neighborhood, fostering a store culture grounded in personal connection and trust. This approach ensures that every interaction—from restocking shelves to checkout—is warm, welcoming and respectful.

### Loyalty system and POS

The POS system supports SNAP/ EBT and integrates **Feeding Florida's "Fresh Access Bucks" program**, effectively doubling the purchasing power of food assistance dollars. This thoughtful functionality not only expands access but also strengthens customer loyalty and retention, making The Corner at Debs Store a true community cornerstone.

# Project Timeline



- Joe Debs' father passes away, signaling the end of the neighborhood fixture Debs Store, the Eastside's only remaining grocery store. At the funeral, residents ask Joe when the store will reopen.



- The search for funding faces major obstacles as an individual developer.
- City recommends that Joe partner with a nonprofit, which will expand funding options.



- LIFT JAX formally takes on a central role in coordinating project development, financing and construction.
- Goodwill begins early involvement in long-term operations planning.



- Goodwill signs on as store operator, raising funds for inventory, technology and staff training.
- VyStar joins, committing to creating a Financial Fitness Center on the second floor.
- Goodwill visits Purposes Built Community programs at Carver Market and Lift Orlando to gain understanding of the community-based programming model.
- Goodwill team consults with regional grocery operators — including Southeast Grocers, Aldi and Carver Market — integrating design principles into the architectural planning phase.
- Technology and innovation planning begin, with initial concepts for a POS system tracking both sales and mission outcomes.
- Construction begins, with ongoing adjustments due to late-stage partner additions and the challenges of historic renovation. Design adjustments made to accommodate flexible community-use space and additional services.
- Goodwill launches pre-opening neighborhood engagement events and content campaigns to build presence within the community.



- The Corner at Debs Store wins the Jacksonville Daily Record's "Cool Construction Award" and the Florida Zoning and Planning Association's "Best Project Award."
- LIFT JAX invests more than \$5 million in the surrounding area as part of a larger Eastside transformation strategy, including developing six new houses.
- VyStar Financial Fitness Center expands services and financial literacy classes, with strong community participation.
- Goodwill conducts sustainability planning to increase foot traffic and explore expanded services and delivery options.

2011

2017-2019

2020

2022-2023

2025

2017

2019

2021-2022

2024



- Joe retires and commits to revitalizing the Debs Store.
- A community barbecue is held on the vacant lot adjacent to the store to gather resident input and identify community priorities.



- LIFT JAX becomes aware of the project and begins engagement.
- The Historic Eastside CDC joins to help navigate planning, logistics and community skepticism.



Funding commitments secured:

- \$650,000 from the City of Jacksonville's Office of Economic Development
- \$1 million grant from the State of Florida
- \$1 million from Florida Blue, plus \$400,000 over four years for food access programs
  - \$1 million from the Jacksonville Jaguars, plus supplemental investments in technology, events, and community engagement
- Significant private philanthropic gifts



- Goodwill begins candidate search and selection process for store manager. The selection process includes panel interviews with members of the neighborhood.
- Selection of wholesale distributors and local farmers begins in early spring. While the initial reception is cold, acceptance gains traction following media coverage of the store's impending opening.
- Goodwill enrolls the store into Feeding Florida programs, which enhance SNAP benefits by providing matching funds for fresh purchases ("Fresh Access Bucks").
- Goodwill hires store staff and enrolls all employees in its Academic Support Through the Education Process (A-STEP) program. Employees earn credentials from Florida State College in Safe Food Handling, Customer Service, Hospitality, CPR and First Aid.

- The Jacksonville Jaguars recognize employee Royce Fedd as an Eastside Community Champion highlighting him in an NFL Films feature on The Corner at Debs Store reopening.
- On September 4 (904 Day in Jacksonville), The Corner at Debs Store opens to the public with strong neighborhood attendance, community pride and initial program rollout.
- Jaguars begin hosting cooking classes and team player visits; VyStar launches financial literacy workshops; LIFT JAX continues block-by-block revitalization work.



## Community Impact: A Catalyst for Revival

The renaissance of The Corner at Debs Store has become a source of Eastside pride. Residents don't just shop there — they take part in its story. A large percentage of employees are Out East residents. Each one completed six months of intensive training before opening day, earning five industry credentials through Goodwill's adult education program, A-STEP. This effort reflects Goodwill's model of "positive attrition," where team members are empowered to grow, gain experience and eventually move into higher-paying roles and long-term careers.

The store is both commercial and communal — a place to buy groceries, access services and connect with the community. On the first floor, residents find fresh, affordable food. Upstairs, the Goodwill GoodCareers Center offers job coaching, enrollment into the adult education program, A-STEP, career seminars and healthy cooking classes. Youth engagement events and programs make the space feel vibrant and inclusive.

The VyStar Financial Fitness Center, also on the second floor, provides residents with banking services, financial coaching and tools to build credit, save money and plan for their future. Its free financial literacy classes are consistently well-attended, with demand growing so much that VyStar has recently expanded its offerings to reach even more families. During its first year of operation, the Financial Fitness

Center served more than 700 local residents, and more than 75 new accounts were opened.

Even more inspiring are the changes unfolding beyond the store's walls. The Corner at Debs Store has become a catalyst for broader neighborhood revitalization. With its success as a centerpiece, LIFT JAX is advancing a wave of investment across the Eastside—from new homes to green spaces and parks—each project building on the momentum.

The project's impact is also being recognized beyond the Eastside. The Corner at Debs Store has received awards for its innovative construction and commitment to historic preservation, standing as a model for how community vision, strong partnerships and place-based investment can bring lasting transformation.

**“That store absolutely has had a positive impact,” the Historic Eastside CDC’s Suzanne Pickett said. “It was a catalyst for revitalization on that entire block.”**





## Future Outlook: Building on Momentum, Achieving Sustainability

While the project has reached several key milestones, its full potential lies ahead. Sustaining the store in a neighborhood still regaining its population is a challenge, with foot traffic and store revenues currently trending higher and higher each month. Project partners remain committed, however, to growth strategies including:

### Enhanced Delivery and Outreach

Exploring delivery and mobile services to reach more residents.

### Event Activation

Using the space for more community gatherings, pop-up markets and learning events.

### Product Refinement

Adapting inventory and services to better match local preferences and demands.

### Continued Revitalization

LIFT JAX has committed more than \$5 million to the surrounding blocks, with additional homes and services on the horizon.

This momentum reflects a deeper truth: Revitalization doesn't happen overnight. It unfolds slowly, through trust, consistency and aligned vision.

As Goodwill's David Rey noted, "We were bringing a project into the neighborhood that we knew was ahead of where the neighborhood was. But now the funds and the energy are following."

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## Lessons Learned: What Other Communities Can Take Away

In reflecting on the journey of The Corner at Debs Store, project partners identified a set of key recommendations for others considering similar public-private-nonprofit initiatives. While this project’s path was not without its challenges—from unexpected renovation hurdles to questions of long-term sustainability—the outcome offers a powerful example of what becomes possible when authentic collaboration, shared leadership and deep community engagement guide every step.

### Partnerships Are Critical

Every project partner emphasized the same essential truth: No one person or partner could have successfully completed this project alone. The initial vision began with one man, but it took a collective effort to bring it to life.

LIFT JAX built on Joe Debs’ early vision by stepping in as the organizational backbone—leading project management, coordinating stakeholders, securing funding and ensuring that the mission remained front and center. North Florida Goodwill brought the logistical and operational expertise required to run a successful grocery store in a food desert, taking on risk and delivering services that honored the community’s unique needs.

Philanthropic partners like Florida Blue, VyStar Credit Union and the Jacksonville Jaguars played pivotal roles, not only through financial support but also by engaging directly with the community. And the residents of the Eastside remained the beating heart of the project. Their input shaped everything from the store layout to programming priorities, ensuring that the work stayed relevant, grounded and rooted in the community.

This was not a project that belonged to any one organization—it was a shared achievement. Built on trust, aligned values and a deep belief in collaboration, the partnership model became one of its greatest strengths.





### Involve the Community

In communities shaped by decades of disinvestment and broken promises, trust can't be assumed—it must be earned. That happens through transparency, consistency and a visible, long-term commitment to showing up.

The most impactful projects start by listening—not just once, but continually. They prioritize local hiring, reflect the culture and identity of the community and design inclusive spaces where residents feel a true sense of ownership and belonging.

### Get Everyone to the Table Early

While The Corner at Debs Store partnership evolved organically from Joe's grassroots vision, project partners noted that the design/build phase would have gone faster and more smoothly with earlier alignment across all sectors—among funders, architects, operational leaders and community stakeholders.

Bringing everyone together at the beginning can streamline decision-making, clarify goals and ensure that the design and execution reflect the full range of expertise and operational needs. Early collaboration also builds trust, reduces missteps and invites innovation—resulting in a

more unified vision and a more resilient, responsive project

### Honor History—But Plan for Surprises

Historic buildings carry immense character, pride and meaning—but also complexity. Preserving what matters while adapting to modern codes and requirements is a delicate balance. In this case, architectural plans shifted multiple times as new partners joined and operational needs came into focus. The willingness to remain flexible—while still honoring the building's legacy—allowed the team to solve problems creatively and stay responsive to real-time conditions.

### Plan for Sustainability

Opening day isn't the finish line. Sustainability requires long-term operational capacity, a viable business model and deep integration with the surrounding community.

Goodwill's role was not just about getting the store up and running. It was about long-term stewardship: hiring, training, managing inventory and building relationships with both vendors and residents. Without a partner committed to ongoing service, the long-term viability of the store would have been uncertain.

### Think Systemically

From the beginning, The Corner at Debs Store was always about more than groceries. It was designed as a community anchor within a broader place-based strategy that addresses housing, health, education and economic opportunity together.

From securing specialized retail technology to training a community-based workforce, Goodwill brought the operational backbone, partner network, and mission alignment that allowed The Corner at Debs Store to launch with confidence. By combining retail, workforce, and community services under one roof, Goodwill created a blueprint that can be replicated in other communities facing similar challenges.

True transformation doesn't happen in silos. It requires a comprehensive approach that sees the community as a whole—and invests accordingly.

The Corner at Debs Store stands as a powerful example of mission-driven innovation and community-centered progress. From the careful restoration of a historic building to the creation of entirely new supply chains and operational systems, each challenge was met with determination, creativity and a clear focus on the needs of the neighborhood. What emerged is far more than a grocery store—it's a symbol of what's possible when historic preservation, trust, and nonprofit collaboration come together around a common goal.

This project demonstrates what meaningful revitalization looks like: development that respects the past, strengthens community ties and creates opportunities that last. It serves not only as a place to buy food, but also as a space where people gather, grow and reconnect with a shared sense of pride and purpose.

What started as one person's dream came to life because a wide range of partners committed to more than just delivering a service—they committed to being part of the community. Together, they proved that with the right people, the right approach and a shared commitment to doing the work, real transformation is possible.

For those looking to build something similar, the lesson is simple: Listen to the people who live there, bring the right partners to the table early, stay committed for the long term—and never underestimate how a neighborhood grocery store can help spark lasting, meaningful change.





## Blueprint for Replication: Core Components of The Debs Model

The Corner at Debs Store revitalization was rooted in trust, sustained by collaborative partnerships and designed with dignity in mind

Here's what makes it work—and what others can adapt:



### Community-First Approach

This project didn't start with a blueprint. It started with listening. Long before breaking ground, partners held meetings, walked the streets and built trust with Eastside residents. The solution reflects what the community asked for—not what outsiders assumed they needed



### Flexible, Intentional Design

This project didn't start with a blueprint. From lighting to layout, the space is intentionally designed for flexibility and safety. Flexible interiors allow for evolving programming—from cooking demonstrations to job fairs. Staff are trained to engage with empathy, and every element is accessible, respectful and responsive to lived experience.



### Nonprofit-Led Operations

This model flips the script on traditional retail. Goodwill runs the store not for profit, but for purpose—using retail know-how to create an earned-revenue engine that also delivers workforce training, credentials and wraparound support.



### Historic Asset Reuse

The restored Debs Store isn't just a building—it's an emotional anchor for the neighborhood. Reusing this historic space preserved community memory, reduced environmental impacts and reinforced the message that Eastside residents deserve investment, not demolition.



### Co-Location of Services

The grocery store is the anchor, but not the only asset. Career services through the Goodwill GoodCareers Center, financial education through the VyStar Financial Fitness Center and a flexible gathering space for collaborative programming create a multiplier effect. The facility fulfills the tenet: Meet a basic need and then go further.



### Sustainable Operations Strategy

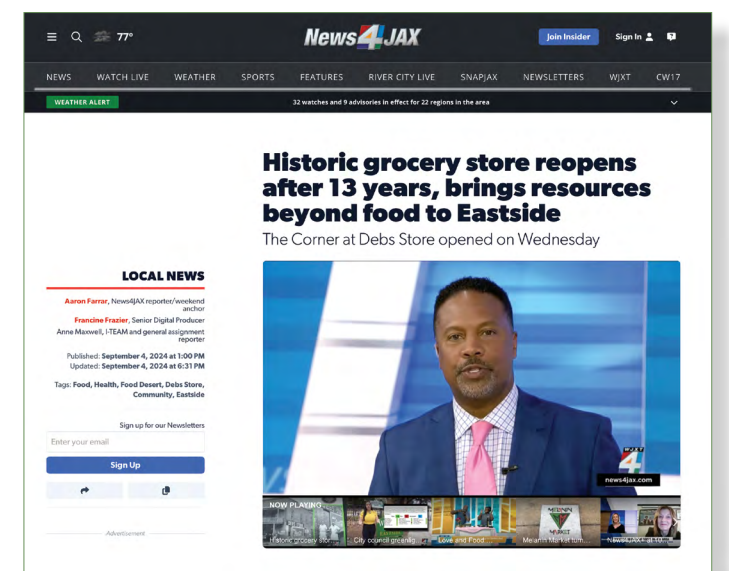
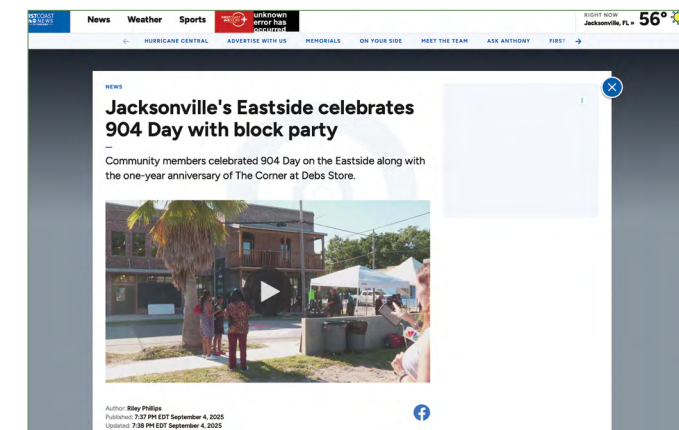
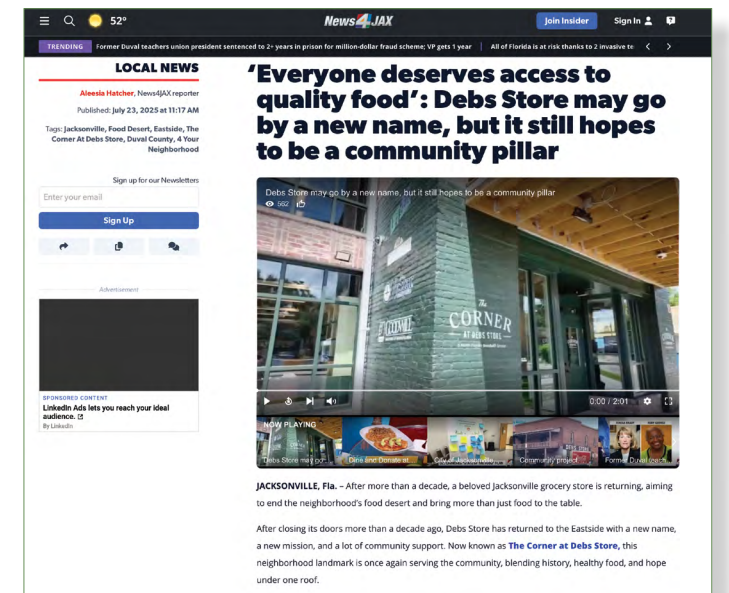
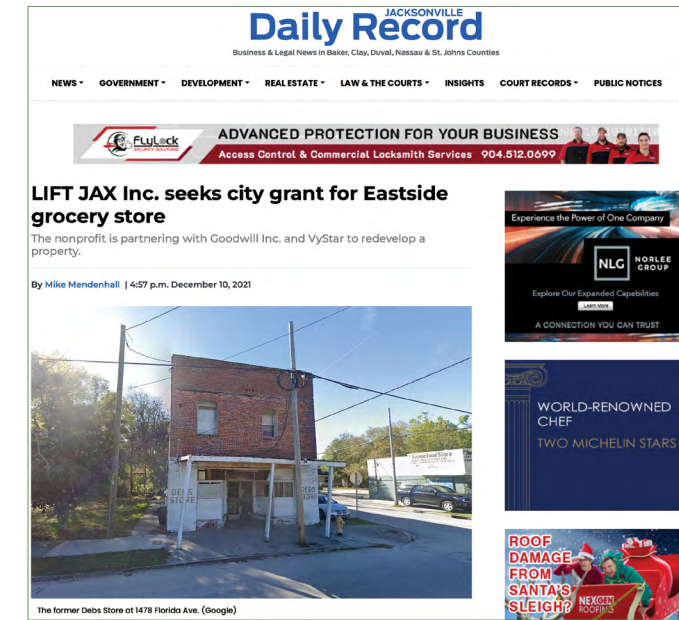
Innovation underpins long-term sustainability. A grocery delivery van expands reach for residents without transportation. A point-of-sale system tracks mission metrics alongside revenue.

**This is more than a grocery store. It's a blueprint for community-centered economic infrastructure: scalable, sustainable and built to restore one neighborhood at a time.**



The Corner at Debs Store [media.links](#)

Selected links below.



# The Corner at Debs Store Media

*The*  
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