

# ***MASTER PLAN***

*for*

## ***Mobile's Civil Rights & Cultural Heritage District***

Prepared for:

**Mobile County  
Commission**



**February 28, 2025**







# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND

It is Mobile County's goal to prepare a community-driven Master Plan for Mobile County's Civil Rights and Cultural Heritage District ("The District"). Key goals for the area include:

- Preservation of historic sites
- Interpretation of the district's stories
- Heritage tourism resulting in the area's revitalization (without gentrification)

## HISTORY

The Avenue started as a dirt trail circa 1800 to connect Downtown Mobile to destinations to the northwest. During the 1830s, the trail was named Stone Street Road, and it was renamed Davis Avenue in 1861. From the late-19th century through the first half of the 20th century, The Avenue became a thriving mixed-use corridor for the African American community flanked on either side by a neighborhood of small lots with modest houses. During the 1960s, the area became a focal point for the Civil Rights movement. While the desegregation achieved was clearly a blessing

overall, it harmed the area economically over time. The displacement and demolition of buildings during the 1970s as part of the federal Urban Renewal program served as another blow to the area, and it has struggled ever since. Revitalization is critical.

### ***What is a Heritage District?***

*It is a cohesive and discernible area with a set of themes, stories and sites to be preserved, enhanced, interpreted and promoted.*

## STUDY AREA

As delineated in this Master Plan, the study area's main spine is a nearly two-mile segment of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue extending from the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Hall on the east end to just shy of Three Mile Creek on the west end. The area also extends for several blocks to the north and south of that corridor. Although a finite area was necessary for planning purposes, many of this plan's interpretation and tourism strategies are linked to external sites such as Africatown, Oaklawn Cemetery, and the Hank Aaron boyhood home.

## PLANNING METHODOLOGY

This Master Plan was prepared for Mobile County through a process that engaged the public in a robust and hands-on manner throughout the life of the project. As the County's Request for Proposals (RFP) document for this plan stated, a key goal was to:

*"ensure widespread support, we want to empower various stakeholders and community members to participate in all stages of the process. Community engagement and participation are crucial in this process."*

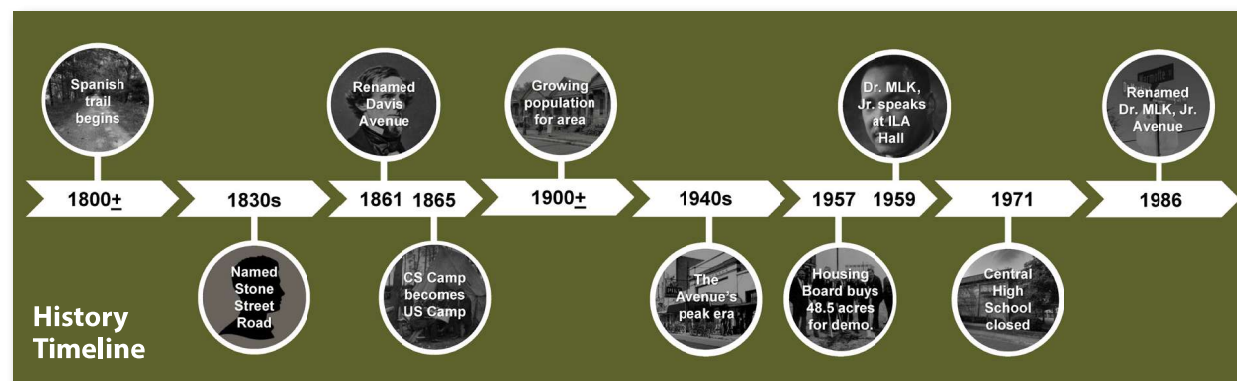


*One of this project's numerous public engagement opportunities was the Open House held at the County's Historic Avenue Cultural Center (HACC) on February 21, 2024.*

The planning project's five-step process included:

- Task 1.0: Project Kick-Off & Research
- Task 2.0: Public Engagement Events
- Task 3.0: Charrette & Concept Plan
- Task 4.0: Draft Master Plan Preparation
- Task 5.0: Plan Presentations & Revisions

The charrette was an intensive five-day process that heavily engaged stakeholders in a hands-on manner.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## FRAMEWORK PLAN & AREA CONCEPTS

The Framework Plan at right provides an overview of the key physical concepts for this master plan. The dashed circles represent a roughly quarter mile radius, which equates to an approximate five-minute walk for the average pedestrian (from the center to the periphery). Each of the three distinct places is considered an “Area.” The map’s color-coded Place Types are based upon land uses, density, development, form and character. They are aspirational as part of a plan, but existing conditions are factored into their designations. This is not a parcel-specific proposed land use map, but instead reflects proposed primary uses. Key physical components of the Framework Plan include the following:

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue serves as the main spine for the overall District.
- Single-family housing dominates the balance of the District beyond the three Areas, in addition to churches and other land uses.

## AREAS OVERVIEW

The three planned Areas are summarized below:

### A. Gateway Area

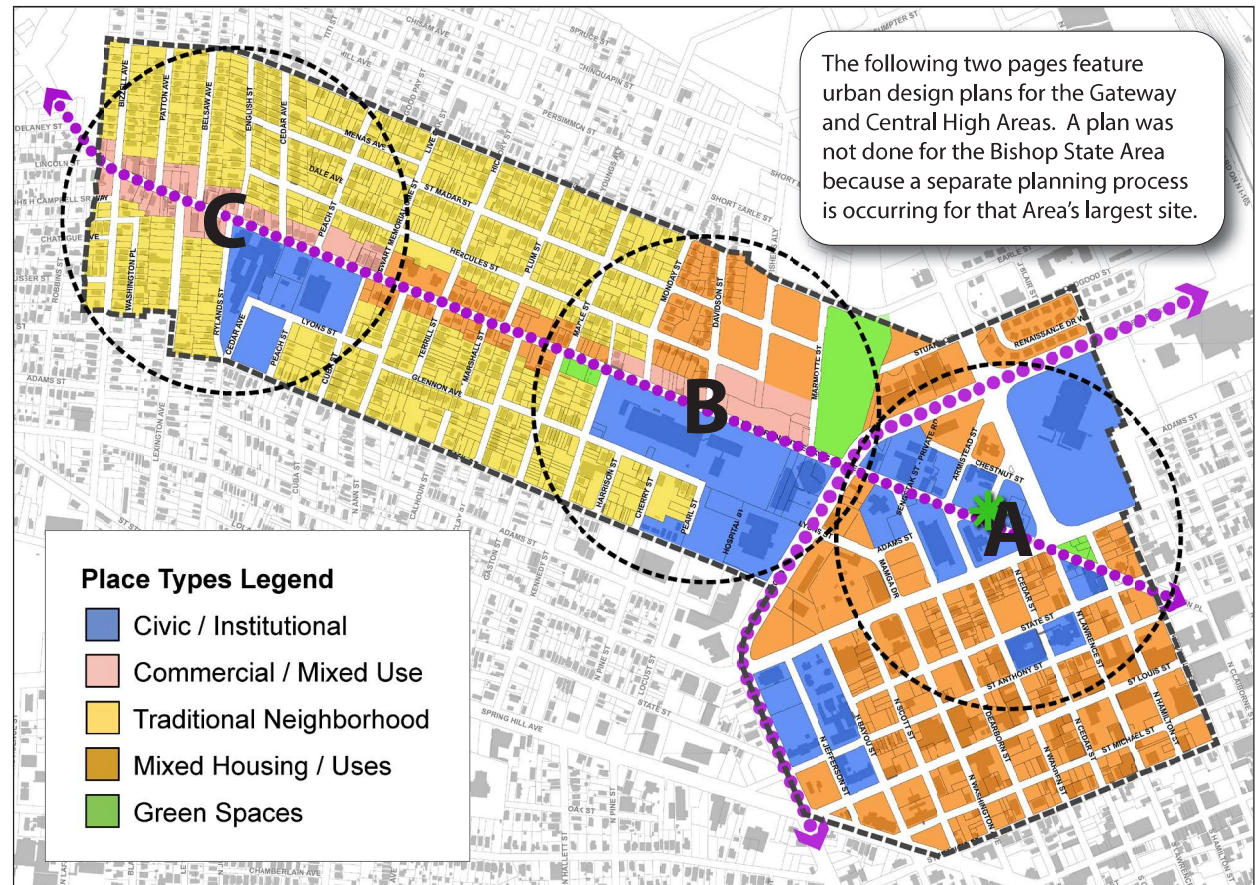
This Area anchors The District’s east end adjacent to Downtown. It has several landmarks such as the County’s Historic Avenue Cultural Center, historic churches, and the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) Hall. New anchors such as the Interpretive Center and Gateway Park will make this Area The District’s “jumping off point.”

### B. Bishop State Area

The main existing anchors here are Bishop State Community College (BSCC) and Florence Howard Elementary, and there is also a small park. The institutional anchors will eventually be joined by a large mixed-use development planned for the north side of MLK Avenue as a partnership between BSCC, the Mobile Housing Authority, and the Fuse Project. It will include a substantial amount of affordable and student housing.

### C. Central High Area

Serving as The District’s westerly bookend, this area will be more focused on the needs of the surrounding residents, although it will still be a destination for heritage tourists to better understand the stories of The Avenue. Important sites include Central High School, White’s Barber College, the Vernon Z. Crawford Law Firm Office, and multiple historic churches. Central High’s impending reopening as a special school is anticipated.





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## GATEWAY AREA URBAN DESIGN PLAN

Primary concepts for this Area include the following.

### INTERPRETIVE CENTER

#### District Hub

The interpretive center will serve as the main anchor for the Gateway Area and the “jumping off point” for visitors to explore the broader District. Being located at The District’s closest point to the Downtown will make it more appealing to visitors.

#### Building Space Allocation

The center’s approximately 10,000 square feet of building space will be allocated roughly as follows:

- 7,500 square feet of exhibition space
- 2,500 square feet of event venue, gift shop, offices, and other support space

### AMENITIES & BUSINESSES

**Park & Special Events:** The proposed park by the proposed interpretive center will be an important new amenity for passive recreational purposes and special events.

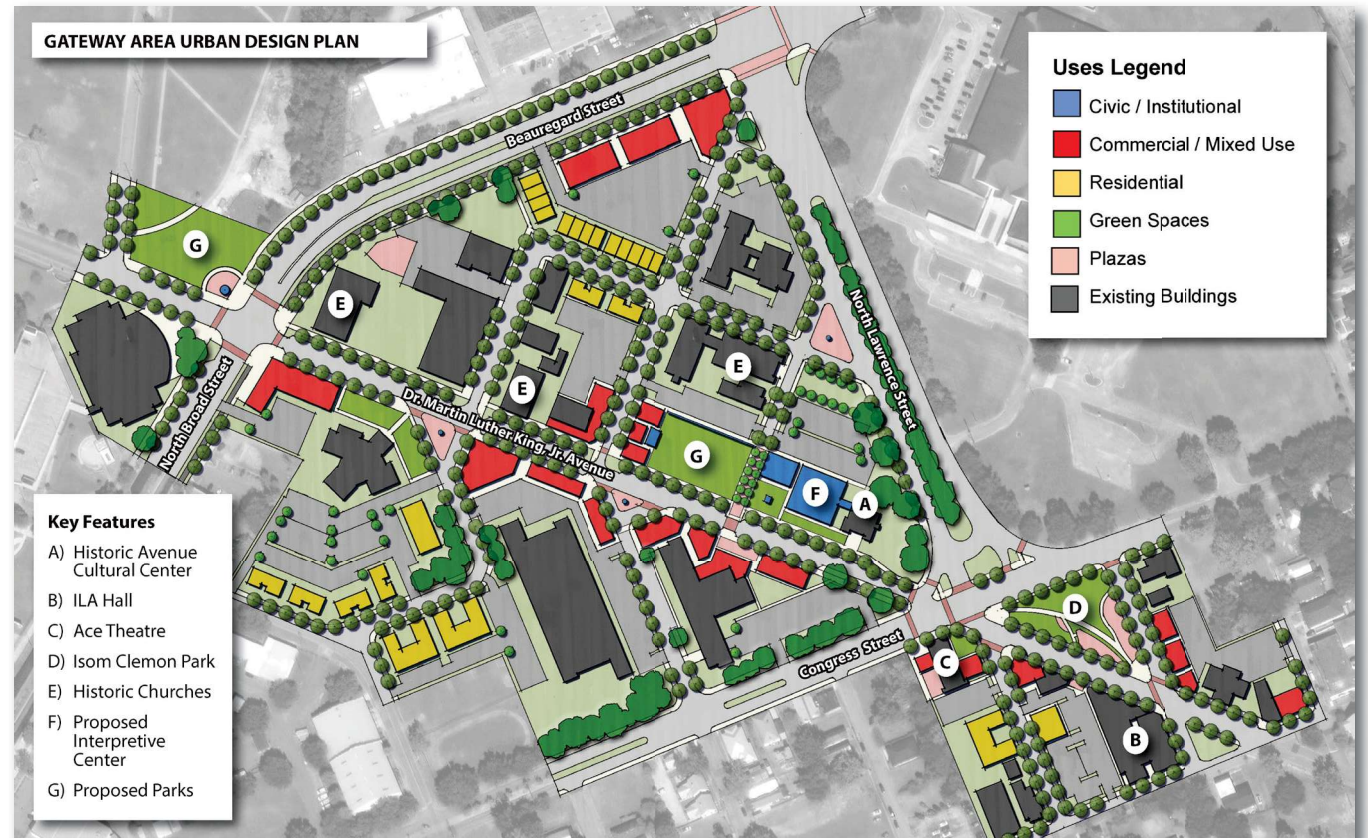
**Public Art:** Public art will be important to activate, brand, and interpret The District.

**Tour Operators:** Although most visitors to

The District will likely take self-guided tours tied to brochures and digital interpretation (phone apps, GPS technology, etc.), there will still be a market for guided tours.

**Commercial Development:** The potential 34,000 sq. ft. of business space includes:

- Destination Restaurants: 10,000 sq. ft.
- Entertainment Venue: 18,000 sq. ft.
- Retail: 6,000 sq. ft.





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## CENTRAL HIGH AREA URBAN DESIGN PLAN

Primary concepts for this Area include the following.

### CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

#### Current Use & Condition

The 1924 Dunbar school became Central High School in 1955. A more contemporary-looking addition was later made to the front, but the school closed in 1970. The property was later used by Bishop State Community College, but it is now owned by Mobile County Public Schools. A major theme from stakeholders has been the importance of the school for community pride, and alum still remain organized.

#### Potential Future Uses

Any future uses will depend upon the school district, but it is recommended that it be used for some community-oriented use, such as educational purposes, a community center, business incubator, daycare, special events, and/or cultural programs venue.

#### Potential Future Design

Facade changes made prior to 1970 created a blank wall along MLK. It is recommended that a study occur to explore opening up the facade walls to provide visual interest to the adjacent streetscape, even if the openings are not functional as storefronts.

### OTHER KEY SITES TO INTERPRET

In addition to Central High, other key walkable sites for interpretation include:

- White's Barber College
- Vernon Z. Crawford Law Firm Office
- Historic Churches (Grace & Truth Christian Fellowship Church, Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church, Stewart Memorial Christian Church, Martin Luther Lutheran Church, etc.).



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## OTHER PHYSICAL PLANNING IDEAS

In addition to the physical planning issues associated with the three specific Areas delineated for this plan, this plan contains numerous other such recommendations throughout The District. Below is a brief summary of the key topics addressed:

### BUILDINGS

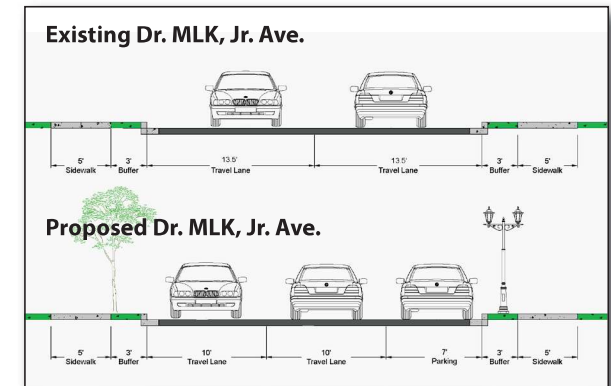
**Prioritize Existing Buildings:** Existing historic buildings that can be rehabilitated in way that restores their original character should be given priority over

new buildings. They are important for interpretation.

**New Building:** Because of so many buildings lost via Urban Renewal and decay, new compatible buildings are needed. Several example designs are in this plan.

### STREETS, STREETSCAPES & MOBILITY

The City of Mobile has planned a rebuild for Dr. MLK, Jr. Ave. west of Broad Street. This plan features the east segment's redesign (see at right). Other issues addressed are eliminating unnecessary curb cuts, ADA compliance, side-street sidewalks, and greenways. A new One Mile Creek greenway is suggested.



Above are existing and proposed designs for the segment of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue. It is proposed that a parallel parking lane would be added to one side of the street.

### PUBLIC SPACES & ART

**Public Spaces:** Improvements are recommended for the existing MLK Park, Isom Clemon Civil Rights Memorial Park was just developed, and this plan proposes One Mile Creek Park and Gateway Park.

**Art:** Locations have been identified for sculptures and recommendations for murals area also provided.

### OTHER ISSUES

Wayfinding and infrastructure are the other physical planning issues also addressed in this plan.



Example mural on a building in Tulsa's Greenwood District.

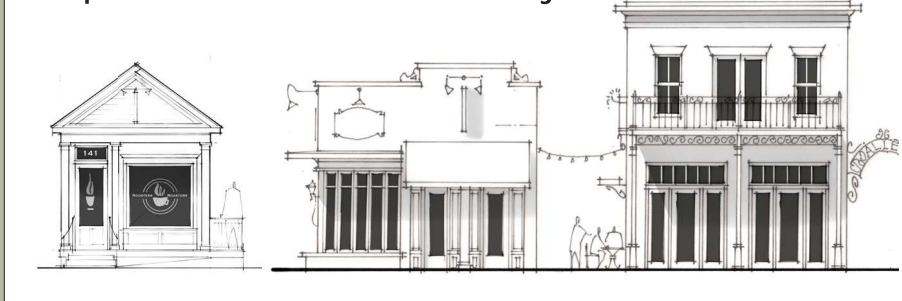
Located on Congress Street in The District's Gateway Area, the Ace Theatre closed in 1971 and is currently vacant. While there is a range of potential uses, one might be an entertainment venue with dining and live music.

Proposed adaptive reuse of the Ace Theatre



There are numerous sites in The District available for new infill buildings. At right are just a few of this plan's many examples of commercial and mixed-use buildings that could be compatible with The District.

Example new commercial and mixed-use buildings





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## ECONOMIC, MARKET, POLICY & PROGRAM STRATEGIES

### MARKETING STRATEGY

**Target Markets:** These groups will be targeted:

- Mobile residents, family and friends
- Heritage visitors/international: general, African-American, Civil Rights, labor movement
- Mardi Gras, beaches, cruises, eco-tourists

**Targeted Business Mix:** The optimal mix is below:

- Destination restaurants
- Specialty food stores (bakery, ice cream, fish market, etc.)
- Live entertainment
- African-American cultural experiences
- Pharmacy, personal goods and general merchandise store honoring historic businesses
- Gifts, toys, apparel and accessories



*Tulsa's Greenwood District has recruited retail and dining businesses consistent with the district's identity and themes.*



*New compatible housing such as this in New Orleans' Central City neighborhood might be built in The District.*

### FINANCING & LEVERAGING

**Interpretive Center:** This proposed facility for The District's Gateway Area would be developed and operated by a private, non-profit entity. Potential financial support might be from an endowment fund, Mobile County and the City of Mobile, foundations, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the State, unions, and corporations. Partnerships with property owners would also be beneficial. Revenues would be from memberships, admissions, and earned income.

**Private Property & Business Owners:** Proposed financing programs for property and business owners include: zero-interest or low-interest loans; building rehabilitation grants; and technical assistance. Also, an entrepreneur incubator might be established to support the culinary and hospitality industries.

### DISPLACEMENT PREVENTION

This plan's primary strategies to avoid the displacement of residents and businesses as The District revitalizes fall into the following three categories:

- Housing Rehab & Accessibility Programs
- Community Land Trust
- Infill Affordable Housing Development

Each of these categories is detailed in the full plan.

### POLICIES

**Zoning:** Zoning is an important plan implementation tool. It is recommended that new zoning districts be established that reflect this plan's Framework Plan. This may require the City's adoption of that part of this plan or their own consistent new land use plan.

**Design Guidelines:** It is not recommended that a regulatory historic district be designated that controls development. However, the City's existing Historic District Design Guidelines should be promoted for voluntary use and perhaps tied to any future incentive programs.

### PROGRAMS

Various financial programs being recommended are found in this plan's Economic & Market-Based Strategy and the Policies & Programs Strategy. The proposed program not previously addressed is the creation of a community garden somewhere in The District on an available City- or County-owned parcel. The most likely organization to spearhead that effort would be the Mobile Urban Growers, a local non-profit organization.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTERPRETATION & COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

### INTERPRETATION STRATEGY

Below is a summary of the key facets of this strategy.

#### Interpretive Themes

- The Avenue's history is rooted in a Civil War camp and has links to Africatown.
- The Avenue was a vibrant "Main Street" for Mobile's African American community prior to desegregation.
- The Avenue served as the backdrop for Mobile's boycott-driven approach to the Civil Rights movement.
- Urban Renewal and other governmental programs combined to devastate The Avenue.

#### District-Wide Interpretation

Interpretation of The District's themes and stories should occur using a range of methods, including the following:

- Wayside interpretive exhibits
- Building markers
- Wall-mounted panels
- Digital interpretation

#### App-Based Interpretation

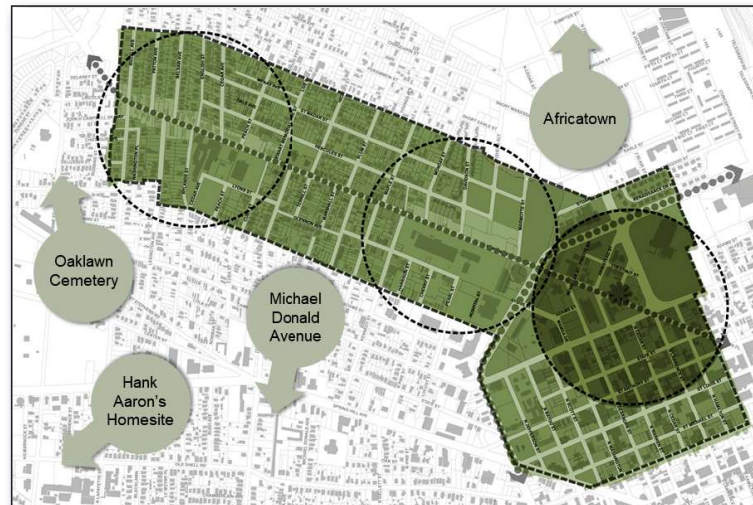
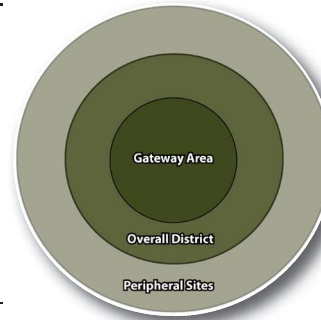
The following recommendations are offered for digital interpretation of The District via smartphone apps:

- Develop a smartphone app that accommodates selfguided tours of The District.
- Utilize QR codes as one means for accessing digital interpretation.
- Explore the use of augmented reality (AR) as a long-term low-priority goal should funding become available.

### Geographic Concept

It is proposed that the following three-tiered approach be used to interpretation of The District:

- *Gateway Area* – example sites: Historic Avenue Cultural Center, ILA Hall, new Interpretive Center
- *Overall District* – example sites: Central HS, Dave Patton Home, White's Barbering College
- *Peripheral Sites* – example sites (see map below):



## COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

### Overall Strategy

A three-phase strategy is proposed, as follows:

Launch Phase I: "INFORM" (near term)

Launch Phase II: "ACTIVATE" (mid term)

Launch Phase III: "EMPOWER" (mid and long term)

Phase I features four primary components:

- Share Mobile's Untold Civil Rights Story
- Engage and Cultivate the Next Generation
- Build Connections to Heritage Tourism
- Bring the District's Core Themes to Life

### Branding

*District Name:*

Historic Name - "The Avenue"

Full Name - "Mobile County's Civil Rights and Cultural Heritage District"

Short Name - "The District"

*District Color Palette & Logo:* See below

