

City in a Garden

LAKE WALES



2024 ANNUAL REPORT



CRA
COMMUNITY
REDEVELOPMENT
AGENCY

REDEVELOP • REVITALIZE • RESTORE • LAKE WALES

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City in a Garden

The City of Lake Wales, “The Crown Jewel of the Ridge”, is one of the most special places in Florida. With a historic downtown set amongst picturesque rural landscapes and rolling citrus groves, Lake Wales is a city rich in natural beauty, history, and community.

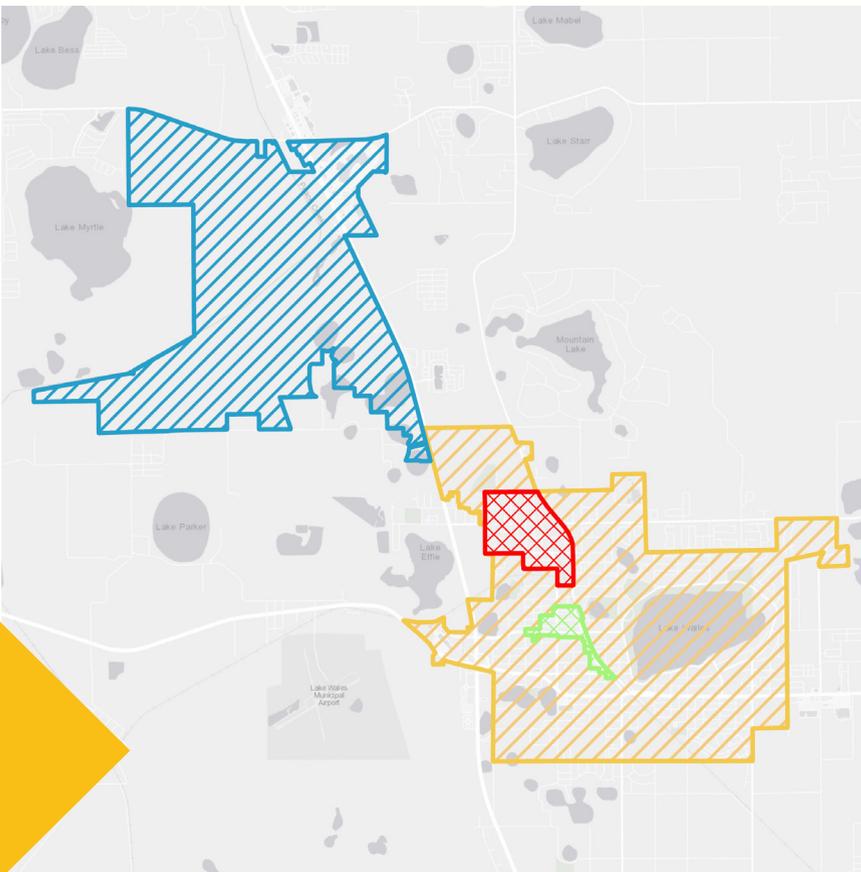
Lake Wales was originally intended to be a “City in a Garden.” This concept pays homage to the visionaries and landscape architects led by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. known for designing the landscape for Bok Tower Gardens, among other famous projects.

About the Lake Wales CRA

The Lake Wales CRA area spans over 5,600 acres, including public right-of-way and lakes. CRA Area I, historic downtown, was established in 1987 and first expanded in 1990 to include Lincoln Avenue and the surrounding neighborhood. The CRA was further expanded in 1999 and 2023.

Community Development Areas I, II, and III are primarily residential. CRA IV was recently added and is in its infancy stage. It is largely agricultural land and it is likely to be developed as a mixed use with residential and commercial uses. The CRA Plan highlights the need for further connectivity between the CRA areas, opportunity sites, and community assets.





Lake Wales District Map

-  CRA Area 1 (1987)
-  CRA Area 3 (1990)
-  CRA Area 2 (1999)
-  CRA Area 4 (2023)

Strategic Goals & 3-Point Action Plan

The Vision for the Lake Wales CRA is to become a cultural and economic hub that is a vibrant, active destination for visitors and residents of all ages. We want to celebrate our historic roots, safe neighborhoods, life-long learning opportunities, and unique natural resources while growing local businesses, providing job opportunities for our residents, and encouraging quality in-fill residential and non-residential development.

For 2024, the Lake Wales CRA set out an Action Plan with 3 priorities:



ACTIVATE DOWNTOWN LAKE WALES

Re-establish a vibrant Downtown Lake Wales, an entrepreneurial destination that offers dining, art, and experiences beyond 5pm and every day of the week.



IMPROVE CONNECTIVITY & MOBILITY

Establish Lake Wales as a Pedestrian and Bicycle Friendly City, one with dedicated trails connecting Downtown, Lake Wales, the Depot Museum, and Bok Tower.



SUPPORT QUALITY HOUSING

Develop quality, affordable, and attainable housing for all income levels.

CRA Board of Directors



Mayor Hilligoss



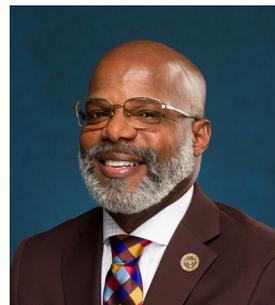
Chairman Gibson



Commissioner Gillespie



Commissioner Thompson

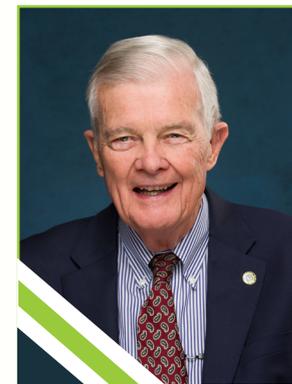


Commissioner Williams



Regular meetings are held on the 2nd Tuesday of each month at 2PM in the Commission Chambers.

Message from the Chair



On behalf of Lake Wales Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), I am pleased to reflect on the past year. This was a year of big accomplishments as the CRA achieved many goals through our revitalization efforts. This report provides greater insight into these accomplishments and projects transforming our community.

I am most proud of the Park Avenue & Market Plaza Streetscape Project. This project highlights why they call us the “Crown Jewel of the Ridge”. With regard to transportation and connectivity, we have partnered with a local area transit provider to connect people to food distribution points and health services.

We have continued to increase property values in both our Downtown and Northwest Neighborhood. We have taken aggressive strides with economic development efforts to help replenish the CRA Trust Fund, creating incentive programs for businesses and target industries.

I am excited about the upcoming work set forth by the CRA Board for another extraordinary year ahead for our residents, businesses, and all who visit Lake Wales.



JAMES SLATON City Manager

The goal of the Lake Wales Community Redevelopment Agency is to spur redevelopment. Ultimately, redevelopment is about making our City a “bit better and more beautiful” by improving the quality of life for our citizens, businesses, and visitors.

Over the past year, we have placed a big emphasis on economic development to make us a vibrant and healthy community. Our citizens no longer have to travel outside of Lake Wales to find dining options they want – they can spend money locally.

The revitalization of Park Avenue and Market Plaza has created a botanical-rich environment in our core area. Enlarged sidewalks, brick pavers, and a garden-like backdrop have made this a popular destination for the entire community. Also, our affordable housing programs (Developer Incentive Program, Homebuyer Down Payment Assistance Program, and Legacy Housing Rehabilitation Program) continue to ensure housing is attainable for all citizens.

Moving forward, we will continue to aggressively recruit new businesses to create more jobs in the area. Lake Wales is the Crown Jewel of the Ridge.

We may be small, but we are mighty!



DEENA DRUMGO Assistant City Manager

I am excited to present this year’s CRA Annual Report because it’s an opportunity to not only showcase the work we have accomplished, but it is an opportunity to connect with the community. There is much success to share since last year to include streetscapes, housing rehabilitation, and economic diversity.

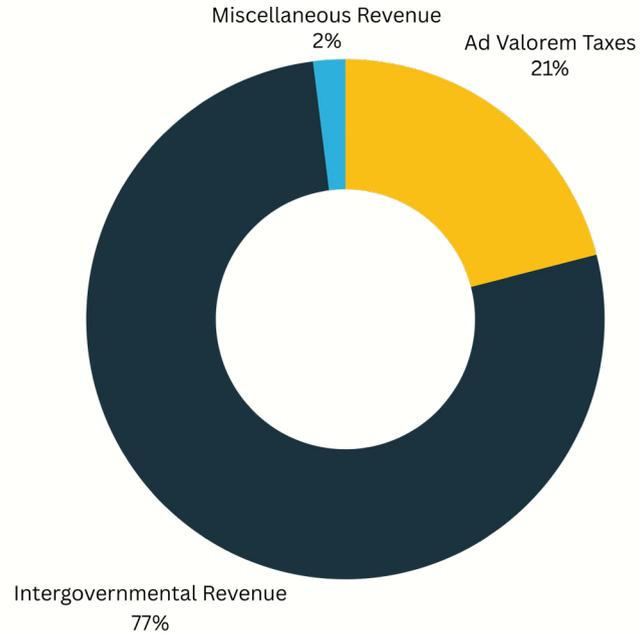
We introduced The Squeeze to our historic core to provide a transit option and drive patrons towards our growing business district. In addition, our Northwest Neighborhood has access to new and enhanced sidewalks to improve pedestrian safety and increase connectivity.

The Lake Wales CRA strives to Activate, Support, and Improve every project we undertake. We will continue to create an inclusive, transparent, and engaging environment where collaboration and creativity are nurtured in our community.

We hope that our City in a Garden efforts will inspire you to cultivate your own garden.

Financial Summary

CRA Sources of Revenue



Ad Valorem Taxes	\$2,091,371	21.52%
Intergovernmental Revenue (Interest and sale of 1919 Building)	\$7,446,152	76.64%
Miscellaneous Revenues	\$178,750	1.84%
Total Revenues & Sources Before Transfers	\$9,716,273	100%
Transfers In		
Transfers In	\$1,500,000	
Fund Balances/Reservers/Net Assets	\$9,739,971	
Total Revenues, Sources, & Transfers	\$20,956,244	

INCREMENT REVENUE

Fiscal Year	City	County	Total	% Change
FY 2022/2023	\$1,362,546	\$1,477,416	\$2,839,962	↑18%
FY 2023/2024	\$1,845,194	\$3,573,436	\$3,573,436	↑26%
FY 2024/2025	\$2,078,477	\$1,971,991	\$4,050,468	↑13%

LAKE WALES CRA PROPERTY VALUES

CRA District	Taxable Value (Base Year)	Current Taxable Value	% Change
CRA I	\$8,891,265 (1985)	\$29,342,985	↑230%
CRA II	\$109,080,851 (1998)	\$375,325,512	↑244%
CRA III	\$8,894,367 (1989)	\$30,224,573	↑240%

Featured Project:

Park Avenue & Market Streetscape

Cathedral live oak trees, rain gardens, and hanging flower baskets line the newly reconstructed Park Avenue. Other enhancements include enlarged sidewalks, clay-brick street pavers, and on-street parking.

\$13M+ Invested

120+ Oak trees

20+ Palm trees

50+ Flowering and fragrant trees

2000+ Florida natives and pollinator attractants



“ The goal was to incorporate a wide variety of plants to build upon our City in a Garden concept while keeping true to our historic downtown charm. ”

- Deena Drumgo



Activate Downtown



Historic Restoration Facade Program

2:1 Private to Public Match

Scenic West, LLC - 122 N First Street



Yeoman's Feed & Farm Supply
201 E Orange Avenue



Historic Preservation
Repairs Program
The GFWC Woman's Club
of Lake Wales
275 E Park Avenue

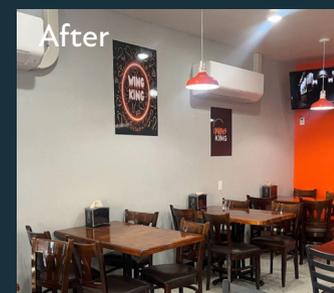
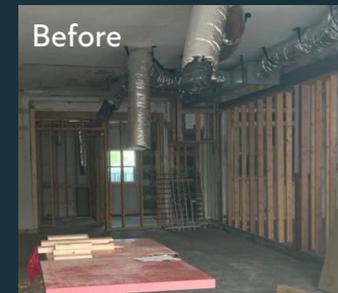
\$19K
Invested



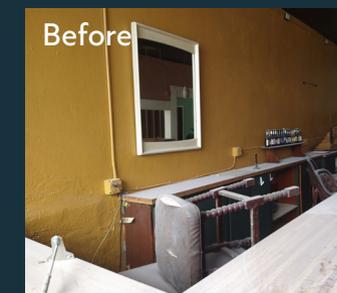
Restaurant/Food-Related Incentive Program

\$50K
Invested

Smokin' DJ's - 122 N First Street



The Thirsty Dragon - 126 N First Street



Improve Connectivity and Mobility



The CRA has focused on the Northwest Neighborhood with sidewalks and mobility improvements. In 2024, thirteen streets received new and rehabilitated sidewalks, many with new landscaping. The corners of E Street and G Street were updated with ADA accessibility features. “Pedestrian safety is a big priority for the city,” said City Manager James Slaton.

Lake Wales received funding for these upgrades from the Rural Infrastructure Fund and the Community Development Block Grant – CV program, administered by the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity.



The Squeeze

In the downtown historic district, Lake Wales introduced a new micro-transit golf cart service, “The Squeeze,” powered by the Citrus Connection. The eight-person golf cart offers a free, convenient and safe method of transportation to get citizens where they want to go downtown. The service is available Monday through Friday from 11am to 2pm, stopping at eleven pick-up locations every twelve minutes.

200+ Monthly Riders

Northwest Neighborhood Sidewalk Project



Jackson Avenue



Florida Avenue



Harding Avenue



Park Avenue Connector Trail

A new 3,000 ft. multi-use trail was constructed with new vegetation and enhanced lighting to create a botanical-rich environment to easily commute between Lake Wailes Park Trail and the historic core.





Support Quality Housing

Legacy Housing Program

The CRA's Legacy Housing Rehabilitation Program benefits seniors living in the Northwest Neighborhood of Lake Wales through free home improvements. The program helps eligible homeowners 60 and older, who are not physically capable or financially able, to tackle big projects at home.

In 2024, 15 homeowners received such services as new windows and doors, exterior painting, and lawn cleanup. Program recipient and homeowner Maxine Isom said, "This program enhances the neighborhood. It lifts it up." Isom received a new roof, air conditioning unit, and exterior painting, as well as a raised planter with flowers donated by Roosevelt Academy's Agriculture and Construction program.



15 Senior Citizens Impacted

\$500K+ Invested



Transitional Housing

The century-old building on Park Avenue and 3rd Street has been given new life. The CRA and Lake Wales Care Center partnered to renovate the building to provide 10 additional housing units. The Transitional Housing program provides opportunities for individuals and families to become independent and productive members of the community. Enrichment activities like on-the-job training and resume building are part of the program to promote growth.



“ This program enhances the neighborhood. It lifts it up. ”

- Maxine Isom, Homeowner

10 Affordable Housing Units Created



Other Big Projects

▶ Pollinator Garden

A pollinator garden at Linear Park, developed by City Horticulturist Kevin Polk and his team. The plants are expected to attract pollinators, such as butterflies and hummingbirds. Art sculptures and pavilions will be added. Funding for the park came from the T-Mobile Hometown Grant program and Oakley Park Transport Inc.



▶ Community Garden

A Community Garden developed at the James P. Austin Community Center in the Northwest Neighborhood, offering residents access to fresh fruits and vegetables.



Looking Ahead

RAISE GRANT FUNDING

The City of Lake Wales was awarded a \$22.9 million grant to fund the redevelopment of four road segments in historic downtown Lake Wales.

The funding was awarded by the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) program. The plan we submitted comprises a road diet, separated cycle track, expanded ADA accessible sidewalks, safety enhancements at sidewalks and railroad crossings, increased shade tree canopy cover and rain gardens, lighting, underground high-speed fiber, and streetscaping.



SOCIAL DISTRICT PLAN

The CRA also researched and developed a plan for establishing a social district in downtown Lake Wales. This is directly tied to our walkability focus.

Social, or entertainment districts are areas that attract community members and visitors to enjoy restaurants, shops, art galleries, and historic features. Cities with established social districts say they encourage visitors to spend more time in downtown, resulting in higher sales for local businesses. Social districts also increase options for event organizers to plan creative downtown events.





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Grow with us!

