Rails To Renaissance

February 1924. IBM forms, riding high on its mechanized time clocks and punch-in cards. Calvin Coolidge becomes the first U.S. president to deliver a radio broadcast from the White House. And thousands of excited Fort Myers citizens welcome a sparkling new community hub – the Atlantic Coast Line (ACL) Railway Depot near the Caloosahatchee River, where the thundering Gulf Coast Special #316 delivers passengers, cargo and a new era to Southwest Florida.

Nearly a century later, the Community Foundation of Southwest Florida and the City of Fort Myers’ public-private partnership has reinvented the historic depot and added a 13,160-square-foot, state-of-the-art addition to transform the site into the regional Collaboratory.

Just as the depot’s parallel iron rails once helped redefine the region’s trajectory, its renaissance rides converging rails of innovative thinking powered by advanced technology, dedicated community stakeholders and impactful philanthropy. The initiative represents a unifying regional effort designed to advance sustainable social, economic and environmental vitality for generations to come.

Innovating Physical & Virtual

From its inception, the Collaboratory has been about more than bricks and mortar or, in this case, rough-hewn stucco and barrel tile roofing. In fact, the very notion of Collaboratory is as much a mindset as it is a geographic location, serving as an organizing principle that extends far beyond its physical walls. Yes, the Collaboratory has a regional home base in midtown Fort Myers but, just as importantly, the Collaboratory model is portable and packs the potential to
foster complementary synergies among regional stakeholders in order to build a better tomorrow for all of Southwest Florida.

“We were very intentional with the concept of the Collaboratory as a space rather than a place,” said Sarah Owen, president and CEO of the Southwest Florida Community Foundation. “We’ll be taking Collaboratory ideas and energy and events all over the region, and people will be able to connect to us digitally in what is a virtual hub that’s geographically unbound. In fact, Collaboratory work was already underway before the building was even completed.”

In a very real sense, the Collaboratory can be thought of as a living laboratory for community crowd-sourcing, as it seeks to fuel diverse ideas and strategies that achieve long-lasting solutions to the most pressing challenges facing the region.

**Funding Forward: New Market Tax Credit**

As with many trailblazing projects, funding is typically one of the most difficult and complicated obstacles to overcome. That challenge was met with the Community Foundation’s $10 million New Market Tax Credit (NMTC) deal, a financing vehicle that encourages economic development in distressed neighborhoods. Florida Community Loan Fund provided the NMTC allocation and U.S. Bancorp Community Development Corporation is an investor on the project. Whitney Hancock Bank provided additional financing.

Ms. Owen hopes the use of the NMTC program will encourage other regional nonprofits to take advantage of the financial tool. “As we learned more about other communities that had utilized it, we became more committed to making it work, because – not only did we wanted it to underpin our financing – we wanted to reach out to others in the region to show them it can be done here, and we’ll be a support system.”
In the same spirit of collaboration that energizes the Collaboratory, the project was a case of community need meeting opportunity. “This is a true public-private partnership in which the city is not funding the entire infrastructure,” Ms. Owen said. “It’s a perfect example of impact investing by getting everyone at the table.”

History in the Re-Making

The Atlantic Coast Line Railway Depot opened in February 1924, a point where Fort Myers was poised for growth during the state’s land boom of the 1920s. The station ceased operations and became vacant without fanfare in 1971, the victim of dwindling ridership after the growth of automobile and air travel in the decades following World War II.

Determined to preserve the historic station and avoid the wrecking ball that leveled countless other shuttered depots around the country, a group of citizens teamed with the city to spearhead its reawakening after more than a decade, and in 1982 the Southwest Florida Museum of History opened in the depot. It remained there until 2015, when the museum merged with the Imaginarium Science Center and relocated to the Imaginarium’s site to form the IMAG History & Science Center.

Jim Powers, who served as the museum’s historian and now fills the same role at the IMAG, explained that Atlantic Coast Line operated tracks across the Caloosahatchee River going back as far as 1904, complete with a wooden depot located on Monroe Street for both passenger and freight. “In fact,” he said, “the railroad tracks went right down the middle of Monroe.”

The former depot’s Spanish Mission-influenced design exemplifies a classic architectural style of the era. Originally designed by ACL staff architect A.M. Griffin for use in Florida locales, the original arched arcade – which was preserved and is now partially enclosed as a
public gathering space – is where people boarded the train, its design intended to promote airflow in the Florida climate.

The rail company had a number of depot configurations, and the Fort Myers station was one designed for areas of the state with a population of no more than 30,000 – it had a twin depot in Sarasota, which was demolished in 1986, leaving the local station the last of its class-size and design in the state. The original building diagram has been locally preserved as well.

As other decaying train stations around the country are lost to history, Mr. Powers said the community is fortunate that the partnership between the Community Foundation and the city saved the depot. “How lucky we are to preserve this. It’s a teaching instrument.”

Collaboratory: Interactive. Unifying. Sustainable.

Construction on the Collaboratory, which includes the rejuvenated train depot and a 13,160-square-foot addition, began in January 2017. It has been designed to support the vital work of the region’s nonprofit organizations and community members as it plays a key role in the city’s revitalization of the midtown section of downtown Fort Myers.

The Collaboratory features vibrant spaces for work, gatherings and special events. In addition, state-of-the-art technology encourages regional collaboration. By establishing its regional offices at the Collaboratory through a long-term lease with the city, the Community Foundation is providing stewardship of a valuable community resource and providing leadership in gathering and galvanizing people, ideas and philanthropy.

“We presented a solution to the city for one of their strategic locations to spur future development in the midtown corridor,” said Will Prather, Community Foundation board member and building committee chair. “Through the Collaboratory, we also hope to bring together
partners from throughout the region to begin the hard work needed to diversify our economy, forge a united identity for our community and solve regional challenges.”

The Community Foundation’s decision to move its offices to the renovated train depot was an extension of its long-standing commitment to community engagement and advancing positive economic momentum.

Mr. Prather said, “After more than a year of due diligence and many options reviewed, being bold in our relocation and stimulating community change became the driving factors for the decision.”

The Community Foundation’s mission of cultivating a thriving community intersected with a pressing municipal need, creating a win-win opportunity.

Fort Myers City Manager Saeed Kazemi said, “It’s our hope that our partnership in the Collaboratory will activate a previously underutilized area of the city and foster economic growth in the greater downtown-midtown area. Having the Collaboratory as an anchor in an historically significant building sets the stage for future development and gives citizens a sense of what is possible for Fort Myers: a forward-looking smart city serviced by the latest technologies and cultural amenities.”

**Taking the LEED**

The focus on community well-being and sustainability at the heart of the Community Foundation’s mission is embodied in the Collaboratory, which will undergo a rigorous certification process with the goal to earn one of the highest designations in environmentally responsible building: LEED Gold. Administered by the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is among the world’s most widely
respected green-building rating systems. A key overarching benefit of achieving LEED Gold status is that it will reduce operating costs, allowing the Community Foundation to focus funds on achieving its regional mission.

To earn LEED Gold, buildings must achieve thresholds in categories that measure environmental impacts and human benefits. “Meeting the requirements of LEED Gold is a very high achievement,” said Dave Dale, president of Owens-Ames-Kimball (OAK), the project’s general contractor. “And it’s more than just construction and design. It also takes into consideration building-operation functions, so it’s a holistic approach.”

Such building-operation components span a range of factors, from the efficiencies of the HVAC and related air-quality control systems, to smart lighting and daylight harvesting, to a focus on storm water runoff and even the environmental impacts of the cleaning products.

“The most recent designation of LEED Gold considerably increased the air-quality and energy-efficiency requirements,” Mr. Dale added. “It’s an effort the Community Foundation should be proud of.”

One of the primary components to LEED certification is water management, an especially crucial issue given that Southwest Florida’s water resources are an essential element supporting the economic engine of tourism. The campus site is designed so that 99.45 percent of potential storm water runoff – up to a 30-year storm event – will be retained on-site rather than flow off campus and into the storm water system. Additionally, water-efficient plumbing features will result in a 45 percent reduction in indoor potable water use.

The project’s architectural firm, Parker-Mudgett-Smith, has extensive experience with the LEED standards. “The Community Foundation thought it was important to demonstrate leadership in the community and help showcase the best way forward,” said company principal
Jeff Mudgett. “Basic LEED certification wasn’t going to be enough. LEED Silver wasn’t going to be enough. They are really focused on achieving LEED Gold, and they went that extra mile.”

Such a focus on environmental best practices is a value shared by the City of Fort Myers. “All current building projects in the city, like the Collaboratory, are being designed and built with sustainability in mind,” said Mr. Kazemi, the city manager. “The city has implemented forward-reaching changes to become a smart city to ensure the region’s future vitality.”

**Transformation From the Ground Up**

Located between Jackson Street and Central Avenue, the 2.4-acre campus was designed to reflect the Community Foundation’s focus on cultivating a sustainable future with an emphasis on technology.

EnSite, a local multidisciplinary firm with campus-planning, engineering and design among its specialties, deployed an array of environmentally sustainable strategies. These include re-created wetlands in the form of rain gardens fed by a roof-mounted water capture and dispersal system, native and drought-tolerant landscaping, and visually arresting solar-power-generating “trees,” which will reduce the carbon footprint by producing clean, emissions-free energy.

Additionally, while traditional hardscaping models rely on asphalt that creates a range of negative environmental impacts from storm water runoff, the campus deploys permeable hardscaping that allows for water capture in on-site storage basins.

“With asphalt, storm water sheet-flows into a pipe that can feed various surface contaminants into the storm water system,” pointed out EnSite’s Jonathan Romine. But the
campus features a 10 percent permeable paver surface. “Below the site we have 12-inch and 20-inch columns of compacted rock that serve as a huge storage tank,” he said.

A part of the permeable paver system re-creates the path of the original train track that serves to guide visitors and tenants into the former boarding platform area, where the historic depot meets the new addition. Once inside, the track is visually echoed by stainless steel rails inlaid in polished concrete floors in what was an open-air arcade, where historical features have been preserved.

The site’s water-retention structure was designed to accommodate up to a 100-year storm event. “And in a 30-year storm event, which is essentially a hurricane, only a half inch of water would leave the site,” Mr. Romine said. “Being able to maintain the water on the site, instead of just piping it all out into the river and, ultimately, into our estuaries and harming wildlife, is extremely important as we struggle with events such as red tide and algae issues.”

Underscoring the Community Foundation’s long-term commitment to providing leadership on issues of regional impact, the campus was designed from the ground up to be a model of sustainability best practices.

“This is a living example of what a public-private partnership can accomplish,” Mr. Romine pointed out. “Hopefully, it’s a conversation starter, because people tend to get stuck on the notion that we can’t afford to do it.”

However, he emphasized, given the critical importance of the region’s fragile water resources to the economic engine of tourism, utilizing building-site designs that proactively protect that vital resource has become more important than ever. In fact, the traditional methods from past decades threaten the long-term sustainability of one of Southwest Florida’s most vital assets.
“If you look at not being proactive in our design approaches over the last 50 years and see what that’s done to our number one economic engine of tourism, how can we afford not to do it?” he said.

**Architecture and Construction: Decades Past Meets Decades Future**

The Collaboratory is a unique blend of the depot’s storied past and a bold vision of the future. One the most interesting intersections of past and present is brought to life up an old, rebuilt wooden staircase, in a small second-floor room.

Way back when, it housed the “technology” of the day: human fingers click-clacking on the depot’s teletype machine, communicating with the outside world. Today, it hums with some of the most advanced technology in the region.

The notion raises a chuckle from Mr. Mudgett, the architect at Parker-Mudgett-Smith. “The fact that it’s up an old staircase in the room where telegraphs would’ve been sent back in the day is really amazing.”

The technology, however, wasn’t the only aspect in need of an upgrade. Parker-Mudgett-Smith and OAK had to ensure it met modern building codes, particularly construction methods and materials, along with hurricane strengthening.

OAK’s Mr. Dale said, “A lot of the elements in historic structures, even though they may be very durable and strong, typically don’t have any proof of engineering. So, trying to springboard off of that construction becomes a bit of a challenge because we rely on engineering-based approaches today that must satisfy today’s building code requirements.”

The goal was to assimilate the depot’s original use into its modern-day reimagining. Mr. Mudgett said, “We wanted to maintain the building’s character to the degree possible, so we kept
old tile and stucco, old wooden windows and doors, and the old wrought iron as close to original as possible. Not only did this preserve some of the historic character of the building, but it was also cost-effective.”

Part of the unique challenge in integrating the train station into a multi-use facility was how to best locate public space among private office areas in a way that would stimulate interaction. The depot’s former passenger loading platform proved to be the ticket.

“What used to be the outdoor arcade of the train station is where the old and the new meet with that original archway going right down the middle,” Mr. Mudgett said. “It’s a very public, interactive area for folks to mingle.”

The renovated public areas took on personal significance for John Tobler, president of Tobler Construction. As a subcontractor, his company was responsible for concrete work, as well as the oftentimes painstaking demolition work needed to preserve historic elements. Born and raised in the Dunbar community, Mr. Tobler recognized a turning point in the depot’s history.

“It was humbling and an honor to work on such an historic project,” he said. “I stood on the shoulders of those who came before me, during the segregation era. To be a part of walls coming down during demo – for me, that represented the demoing of that time and looking forward.”

The Collaboratory’s unifying mission was further captured on the day his company poured concrete floors. “We poured on the side that was once whites-only and the side that was once blacks-only, and that concrete came together beautifully.”

Mr. Mudgett believes preserving the depot was important because it represents the region’s character, especially in an area of the country whose history is relatively short when compared to the Northeast or Mid-Atlantic states.
“I think preservation is even more important here because we have so many fewer historic buildings and they have fewer protections,” he said. “We preserved and protected the ‘old’ while making the ‘new’ obviously of its time.”

Like Parker-Mudgett-Smith, which counts the Ford-Edison Estate restoration among its historic preservation projects, OAK has been involved with such work for many years.

Mr. Dale said, “We’re students of the architecture and construction techniques of the past, and we really enjoy working on historic buildings. We were proud to be a part of it.”

**Interior Design: Purposeful Work, Purposeful Space**

Inspired, purposeful work is cultivated by inspired, purposeful space. The driving force behind the design of the Collaboratory’s interior space was to spark interaction and collaboration, guiding principles that informed the concept developed by Dwayne Bergmann Interiors.

“We used urban revitalization imagery as the inspiration for the design concept,” said Mr. Bergmann, who describes the design as minimal, simplistic, contemporary, collaborative and comfortable.

“Every design decision ultimately reflected the mission and intent for the Collaboratory. Each space was given a function or purpose first and then we designed toward that exact purpose.” It was an approach that allowed the firm to dually focus on both function and form.

When thoughts turned to how best to support the collaborative activities and interaction among various nonprofit tenants and other community stakeholders, flexibility was key.

“The layout of furnishings was designed to allow for mixing and matching throughout the spaces, for mobility and versatility,” Mr. Bergmann noted. “Additionally, the connection
between the exterior and interior spaces encourages the community to participate in all aspects of the property.”

Maintaining and reflecting a connection to the building’s historic past was also key. Beyond blending old and new with color tone choices in both finishes and fabrics, the Collaboratory design features a complementary visual reference to play off the modernized rails in the floor.

“We mimicked that historical interpretation within the wood beams of the ceiling and linear light fixtures that carry that theme to another level, not only in the ceiling fixtures but also the wall sconces.”

Mr. Bergmann noted that the initial purpose of the building as a railway station was to help connect new ideas, new information and people to the community. Similarly, he said, “The Collaboratory will be a hub that brings people and ideas together in our modern society. Consciously making this deliberate connection in our design was very important.”

**Technology: Iron Trail to Fiber Rail**

The Collaboratory will be connected to the Florida Lambda Rail (FLR), an ultra-high-speed fiber optic network spanning some 1,500 miles in the state. With data speeds of up to 100 gigabits per second, it greatly surpasses even the fastest everyday consumer and business broadband and provides a gateway to supplementary domestic and international networks.

For example, FLR is a springboard to a worldwide network called Internet2, a preeminent community of U.S. research and educational organizations that works collaboratively to develop solutions in support of their educational, research and community-service missions.
Jake Spanberger, president of Entech, the Collaboratory’s technology management partner, said, “Subject matter experts, researchers, university professors and others whose entities or institutions are members of Internet2 will be able to come into the Collaboratory from virtually anywhere in the world and present materials from their home location.”

The opportunity to access FLR brings to life the power of collective community action that energizes the Collaboratory. It resulted from collaboration between Florida Gulf Coast University, which is providing access to its existing FLR connectivity, as well as Lee County and the City of Fort Myers, which are providing access to their existing fiber networks to route FLR to the Collaboratory.

Mr. Spanberger said, “The Collaboratory will have high-speed access – and “high-speed” doesn’t do it justice – to all the participating institutions, from universities to other nonprofits and government entities that are members of the network.”

This allows the sharing of data and information as well as access to off-site content at speeds that open up new opportunities such as virtual HD classrooms and other remote learning resources.

“If a college or university wanted to host an interactive class in the Collaboratory, they could do that and have access to materials and resources stored at other colleges and universities or any other member of the Lambda Rail Network,” he said.

Additionally, a touchscreen collaboration system will power face-to-face interaction with people anywhere in the world, while supporting HD videoconferencing, interactive whiteboards and more.
The overarching goal of the technology is to foster the exchange of ideas and information in a way that is most user-friendly. “The technology investment needed to result in an experience that encourages people to use it to its full capability. Ease-of-use was a major component.”

**Taking the Long View**

Like the venerable Atlantic Coast Line Rail Depot, the regional Collaboratory opens a new door of opportunity for Southwest Florida. And like any transformative moment, it promises to be as evolutionary as it is revolutionary. In fact, the very nature of innovation entails a disruption to the status quo and a degree of “what if?” – the answer to which evolves from today to tomorrow and beyond.

And that’s already happening: sparked by the Collaboratory, other regional entities have begun to ask their own “what ifs,” prompting conversations with the Community Foundation about how they might be able to finance other impactful projects through the New Market Tax Credit program.

“We plan to present meetings and seminars with speakers who can more fully explain and share how the program works,” said Ms. Owen of the Community Foundation.

A concept that takes root and propagates throughout the region holds the promise of a harvest no one could’ve predicted, as innovation feeds innovation in a cycle of momentum.

“We talk about how the Collaboratory can bring people together from many different communities and points of view to create change,” Ms. Owen said. “I think the vision of what’s possible is going to come into sharper focus as more people are at the table to help create that vision. It’s going to emerge through the very act of bringing people, ideas and resources together.
What we’ve created is the container for that emergence, both physical and virtual. We’re here with the framework to partake in the experience that will create the vision.”

About the Southwest Florida Community Foundation
The Southwest Florida Community Foundation, founded in 1976, cultivates regional change for the common good through collective leadership, social innovation and philanthropy to address the evolving community needs in Lee, Collier, Charlotte, Hendry and Glades counties. The Foundation partners with individuals, families and corporations who have created more than 400 philanthropic funds. Thanks to them, the Foundation invested $6.3 million in grants and programs to the community. With assets of more than $126 million, it has provided $79.9 million in grants and scholarships to the communities it serves since inception. The Foundation is the backbone organization for the regional FutureMakers Coalition and Lee County’s Sustainability Plan. The Southwest Florida Community Foundation’s regional headquarters are located in the historic ACL Train Depot at Collaboratory in downtown Fort Myers, with satellite offices located on Sanibel Island and in LaBelle (Hendry County). For more information, call 239-274-5900 or visit www.floridacommunity.com

For additional information, please contact Carolyn Rogers at the Southwest Florida Community Foundation. She can be reached at 239-274-5900, or by email at crogers@floridacommunity.com

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