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NEWS RELEASE

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Linking neighborhoods to health and well-being

Baptist Health makes strategic investment in the Emerald Trail in support of advancing wellness, belonging, walkability and community.

Jacksonville, Fla., December 6, 2023 – Work is well underway on the Emerald Trail project in Jacksonville – a vibrant 30-mile walking and biking path that will encircle the urban core and link 14 historic neighborhoods to downtown, Hogans Creek, McCoys Creek and the St. Johns River.

In alignment with its mission to advance the health of the community, Baptist Health has invested in the first phase of the Emerald Trail, the LaVilla Link, opening in early 2024. This 1.3-mile portion of the trail, designed with the input of area residents, will restore one of Jacksonville’s once most walkable neighborhoods. Opening in early 2024, the LaVilla Link will connect the Brooklyn neighborhood of downtown Jacksonville with the natural beauty of the S-Line Rail Trail.

“Building a healthier community happens one neighborhood and one individual at a time,” said Michael A. Mayo, DHA, FACHE, president and CEO of Baptist Health. “We chose to make a strategic investment in the LaVilla Link because we believe it will help people move more, connect more, learn more and enjoy more – all of which are important factors for helping foster greater health and well-being.”

Beyond health care...optimizing health

Baptist Health’s involvement in the Emerald Trail aligns closely with the health system’s significant investment in Blue Zones Project. Blue Zones focuses on influencing a person’s “life radius” – the area close to home where people spend 90% of their lives. Connecting 14 neighborhoods and 21 parks, the Emerald Trail will positively impact the life radius of so many residents by making a healthy choice, like walking or biking, an easy choice.

Beyond people having access to health care, research shows that length of life and quality of life are primarily impacted by the social determinants of health – the conditions in which we are born, grow, live, work and age. The Emerald Trail provides a platform to improve those conditions and increase the economic stability of the areas it touches by providing people with greater access to education (the trail links 16 schools and two colleges) and providing a safe, welcoming environment for physical, social and community interactions.

Activating the link

Once the LaVilla Link is open for public recreation in early 2024, Baptist Health plans to work with community partners to activate this key portion of the trail on a regular basis, for community events like:

- Walks with a doc
- Health screenings
- Stress-busting yoga
- Blue Zones activities
- Safe Kids activities

“We’re going to bring health resources into the community by using the spaces along the LaVilla Link as engagement locations for fun, educational activities for the entire family,” said Katie Ensign, vice president of community impact and investment at Baptist Health. “The vitality of this area as a gathering place will continue long beyond the opening of the trail.”

Coming together for change

Groundwork Jacksonville, Inc. is the City of Jacksonville’s partner in building the Emerald Trail. As part of the building process, community members and business owners impacted by the trail’s development have been engaged in the process from the beginning.

“Our goal has always been to establish a ‘with’ versus a ‘do for’ relationship with the residents along the trail,” said Kay Ehas, CEO of Groundwork Jacksonville. “We’ve held numerous surveys, focus groups, listening sessions and one-on-one conversations to ensure the vision of the trail aligns with the hopes and goals of those most directly impacted.”

The goal for completion of the full trail is 2030. To learn more about the Emerald Trail, visit groundworkjacksonville.org.