

Community Event

On October 7th, 2026 at Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church, Dr. Phillips Charities Eatonville Initiative will host a community conversation and dinner.

Event planning was finalized in September, and invitations were sent out to every household in the historic town of Eatonville.

Click [to RSVP](#)



Legacy Stories

Eatonville Initiative ex officio committee member, Bea Hatler, wrote an OpEd in the Orlando Sentinel. She shared the family legacy that has defined the Hungerfords for generations and described her support for the Eatonville Initiative as upholding her family's commitment to good stewardship alongside the Town of Eatonville. [READ](#)

GUEST COMMENTARY LOCAL

I inherited a responsibility to Eatonville



Bea Hatler

I'm one of the few Hungerfords left, and I have come to understand that being a Hungerford is less about what my family once gave and more about what we are responsible for carrying forward. My family's connection to Eatonville began more than a

century ago. My great-great-grandparents, Edward and Anna Hungerford, donated the first 40 acres to the Robert Hungerford Charitable Trust to establish a school for African American children. Over time, our family entrusted 160 acres to the trust.

The Robert Hungerford Normal & Industrial School was named for my great-grandfather, Robert Hungerford, a doctor who brought medical care to young African American patients in Florida in the years after the Civil War. After losing their son Robert, my family chose to honor his life through education and opportunity for African American children.

But the story of this land has never been only about the Hungerfords. Eatonville was already a remarkable African American community, established and governed by resilient people determined to build a

future for themselves. The Hungerford School became part of that story.

For generations, my family had a role in stewarding the trust. And when that stewardship was threatened, members of my family stepped forward.

In 1937, my relative Elizabeth Hungerford Goodwin, along with the Rev. Richard Wright, brought concerns about the Hungerford property to the Florida attorney general. The resulting legal action ultimately affirmed the public charitable trust and protected the property from an attempted foreclosure.

My grandmother, Constance Hungerford Fenske, carried that responsibility forward. In 1951, she challenged the transfer of the property to the Orange County school system because she believed it would undermine the purpose for which the trust had been established. She fought all the way to the Florida Supreme Court.

These are stories I carry with me. They help explain why this land holds such a deep responsibility for me.

When the property was previously threatened by a private development proposal, I supported the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community in their effort to protect

it. I believed then that the land's history and purpose needed to be protected. My convictions about that 2023 lawsuit haven't changed. Today's new lawsuit, challenging Orange County Public Schools' decision to sell the property, is a different matter.

Today I see an opportunity to move forward with a nonprofit partner I believe can honor the Town of Eatonville and the people that call it home.

I serve on the Dr. Phillips Charities Eatonville Initiative Advisory Committee because I want to be part of that stewardship after the sale of the property. I have asked questions, listened, and spent time understanding the people and plans involved. Through that process, I have come to support Dr. Phillips Charities and its partnership with Orange County Public Schools.

I do not support the current lawsuit because I believe another prolonged legal battle risks keeping this land in limbo when there is an opportunity to put it to work.

The vision being developed includes a cultural museum, early childhood education, health resources, gathering spaces and opportunities to preserve and share Eatonville's remarkable history and culture. To me, that is what stewardship can look like in this next century.

Preservation does not have to mean keeping something frozen in time. We can honor Eatonville's great history while creating something that serves people today and gives future generations room to thrive.

And I want to be clear about something: I'm not here to tell Eatonville what its future should be. That belongs to the people who live, work, worship, raise families and build businesses in this community.

My responsibility is different. My family was entrusted with stewarding this land more than a century ago. I believe my responsibility now is to help honor the purpose behind that trust and to stand alongside the community as it determines what comes next.

As the proud mother of three sons, I hope one of them will eventually carry that responsibility forward. For now, the responsibility is all mine.

After decades of uncertainty surrounding this land, I believe the time to move forward is now, and we have an opportunity to do it together as a community.

Bea Hatler is the great-granddaughter of Robert Hungerford and a member of the Eatonville Initiative Advisory Committee with Dr. Phillips Charities.

Advisory Committee Meeting

The September 2026 Advisory Committee meeting focused on member updates, an overview of housing in Eatonville, and a discussion of questions community members frequently ask.

Committee Member Activities

Michelle Fort shared that at the last community meet-and-greet, a community member flagged an issue with the public tennis courts in Eatonville that was preventing youth from participating in a tennis program. After following up with the community member and Stephanie Vanos, the issue reached the right people, and youth can now access the tennis courts again. Michelle emphasized that when people come to community meetings, it creates the kind of communication that can spark action with great results.

Bruce Mount Jr. attended the Town of Eatonville's ceremony to award the Bruce and Winnie Mount Memorial Scholarship to five Eatonville students. He said it's an honor to see his parents' legacy continue in Eatonville and that education was incredibly important to both of his parents. Adding, "So, for the Town to continue that legacy by funding this scholarship in their honor is always special, and for me to be involved is always touching."

Theo McWhite shared that he attends the Supreme Seniors group, where he regularly takes his mother to activities. Theo also gave an update on donating basketballs to youth programming in Eatonville through a partnership with Rollins College.

Stephanie Vanos shared that there has been a flurry of back-to-school activities, including the first-day-of-school Clap In and an upcoming Grandparents Day breakfast at Hungerford Elementary School. She also shared updates on incoming Eatonville students attending Edgewater and the work underway to ensure all incoming high school students have the supports needed to succeed.

Simmon Reid updated on Travel & Leisure's work to advance early learning and education in the Town of Eatonville. A new class of students is arriving at the Hungerford Early Learning program supported by Travel & Leisure. The first Eatonville student to complete college after receiving a Travel & Leisure scholarship will soon graduate from UCF.

Dr. Candace Finley shared that eSteamed Learning in Eatonville, which she leads as CEO, will oversee a children's playground project that includes upgraded equipment and a butterfly garden. The first phases of the work are expected to be complete in January. In partnership with other organizations, she is also continuing to pursue opportunities to preserve the historic Thomas House in Eatonville.

Joyce Irby shared highlights from her regular attendance at the Town of Eatonville Historic Preservation Committee. She gave an overview of preservation priorities and topics.

Housing Topic

A core value of the Eatonville Initiative is prioritizing decision-making with an emphasis on not displacing current residents. As new projects develop from the Heritage campus to the healthcare hub, understanding their potential impacts requires understanding Eatonville's existing housing market. To support long-term planning, it's critical to clearly understand the current state of housing, the desired state of housing, and community voices on housing issues before finalizing any decisions about housing developments on the Hungerford site.



The housing discussion began with a short presentation providing background on homeownership rates and the overall state of the housing stock. The committee heard about approaches to resolving specific issues, such as heirs' property challenges and homesteads in need of expensive repairs. The committee discussed work by Help CDC to address heirs' property and by Habitat for Humanity Orange & Osceola County to assist homeowners with free-to-low-cost repairs such as roof replacement.

FAQs Discussion



Committee members are regularly asked questions by community members seeking to understand the Eatonville Initiative. To ensure answers are accurate and transparent, members reviewed the most frequently asked questions and shared their understanding of each answer.

Based on the questions most frequently asked by the community, a new FAQ document is being finalized for the public.

Attendance: Committee - Michelle Fort (Member), Theo McWhite (Member), Bruce Mount Jr. (Member), Simmon Reed (Member), Joyce Irby (Member), Dr. Candace Finley (Member), Bahiyyah Maroon (Committee Chair), Bea Hatler (Ex officio), Stephanie Vanos (Ex officio). Dr. Phillips Charities - Thomas Williams (Dr. Phillips Charities), Terry Prather (Board Chair).

Eatonville Initiative

Mission, Vision & Values

VISION:

The Eatonville Initiative is a catalyst for resident-centered preservation & limitless opportunity.

MISSION: To honor and safeguard Eatonville's legacy and Black Culture. We support a thriving, empowered community and promote economic vitality for all generations.

Our Values WHAT GUIDES EVERY DECISION

Protecting History & Legacy: Honoring Eatonville's rich past & bright future.

Trust, Integrity, & Accountability: Honoring our commitments, being transparent, and holding ourselves responsible to the community.

Listening & Engagement: Centering community voices through open, ongoing dialogue.

Collaborative Stewardship: Consistently engaging community voices and being responsible to collaborative stewardship.

Prioritizing the prevention of displacement: Eatonville Initiative Projects are evaluated through the lens of not displacing existing residents.

Five Pillars FOUNDATIONS OF A THRIVING FUTURE

Economic Opportunity

Pathways to long-term stability & opportunity

Workforce Growth

Creating job opportunities & training pathways

Education

Supporting education & opportunities for residents to succeed

Attainable Housing

Homeownership Affordable Housing & Mixed Income

Health & Wellness

Community opportunity for health & wellness