

Residents pressure Cocoa to open street

BY REBECCA BASU • FLORIDA TODAY • June 18, 2010

COCOA — The battle to reopen Stone Street, a historic street in the heart of the city's black community, continued Thursday as residents put pressure on city officials to reopen the closed road and choose the street as a station stop for Amtrak.

With Stone Street a contender for an Amtrak station stop in Cocoa, residents see an opportunity to reopen the street, which was closed in 2007.

They want the street reopened and feel the station stop should be located there to bring jobs and dollars to this region of the city.

"We want justice, and we expect you to get it for us," said Oliver Muhammed, a Stone Street supporter told the council.

After several hours of discussion and public comment, Cocoa Community Development Director said the city would put together another application for reopening to Florida East Coast Railway, which owns the crossing and closed it in 2007, citing its lack of safety.

But it will be an uphill battle.

"FEC said it will not reopen the street under any circumstances," said Kim Delaney of the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, which is coordinating planning for eight stops along a proposed Jacksonville-Miami route. Delaney was present Thursday to discuss findings from two public workshops held in Cocoa last month on where to best locate a stop in Cocoa.

Sites being considered for possible Amtrak stops are at Rosa L. Jones Boulevard and Stone Street. The city council and the city's redevelopment agency are expected to make a decision and pass a resolution on Wednesday. That resolution will be folded into a federal stimulus application that state transportation officials are putting together by July for money to bring passenger rail back to Florida's East Coast.

Delaney said Rosa L. Jones is the better site because

it has an existing station, a lighted intersection and is less expensive to locate a station there. Also, it's difficult for buses to get in and out of Stone Street and wouldn't be safe, Delaney said. Buses may operate out of the station frequently because Cocoa, unlike other stops in Brevard County, would be full-time station and a transfer point for people taking cruises from Port Canaveral.

"One appears to work more, in our professional opinion," she told residents. "Our analysis has to do neither with the opening or closing of Stone Street."

Purvette Bryant, a Stone Street supporter, said the city has the power and needs to show FEC this is something the city really wants.

Stone Street is a better site, she said, because it's closer to the Port and there's vacant land to accommodate a large station and its platform.

If Stone Street were reopened, that would eliminate the problem with the buses, she said. It's possible a "land swap" can be done with FEC, Bryant said, where other stations or property goes to FEC and Stone Street could reopen at no cost.

Deputy Mayor Jim McCarthy banged the gavel several times and called for order as discussion at times got heated, both from residents and council members.

"Some of the statements being made here are without

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merit," said Councilman Clarence Whipple. "Don't sit there and say that we didn't do anything. We did and continue to act. I see none of you until there's a problem. . . . you're more professional than, that so act accordingly."

Even though the council makes a decision about the stop next week for the stimulus application, ultimately Amtrak and state transportation officials will decide where stations along the proposed route will be located, renovated or built.

Afterward the stations will be turned over to the cities.

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