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Stone St. owners lament Cocoa's Amtrak station choice

Cocoa should take care of poor community, some say

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Most people won't understand the attention over proposing an Amtrak station on a street that was once the main street of the black community in Cocoa.

But to people like Carol Butler, a Stone Street property owner, it meant a chance to breathe new life into her business in a part of town that struggles to prosper. Butler envisioned tourists stepping off an Amtrak train on Stone Street and visiting her barbecue restaurant, which has been shuttered since 2007.

"They did what they wanted to do and pushed us back in the corner," Butler said of the Cocoa City Council's decision to choose Rosa L. Jones Boulevard as a station stop over Stone.

Though Rosa L. Jones is less than a mile from Stone, it's a missed opportunity to bring jobs and dollars to the city's poorest area and develop an existing business infrastructure, Butler and others say. They also say city officials missed a chance to mend a rift with residents after years of neglect in the area, known as Diamond Square, which resides on both sides of State Road 520 west of Cocoa Village.

For their part, Cocoa officials said they would heal the rift and stressed that residents and property owners would reap the economic benefits of a station stop at Rosa L. Jones, at the end of the city limits bordering Rockledge and the poor community.

"We will continue to work and develop that area," Mayor Michael Blake said. "Over time that will heal."

Many people who live in Diamond Square tie their roots back to some of the city's pioneer families. They have memories or stories of the area's history when neighborhoods thrived and Stone Street housed a taxi business, a restaurant, boarding houses, clothing stores and other businesses. Business owners such as Butler and Purvette Bryant, who is refurbishing a building on Stone, hope to reclaim that heritage.

"It's not one street over," Bryant said. "It's just not right and it's not feasible to the residents and business community."

City officials acknowledge that historically the Diamond Square area has been underserved and Community Development Director John Titkanich asked council to consider this, among other factors, when choosing the station stop location.

Locating the stop at Stone would bring social and economic benefits that would likely extend to the State Road 520 corridor, which also has suffered from blight and vacant buildings, Titkanich said. Studies show development with the location of the train station can be expected to extend up to a half-mile radius, he said.

Oliver Muhammed, president of Concerned Citizens Association, an activist group, said the council

failed to listen to Titkanich's assessment and that federal stimulus money by law should target disadvantaged communities.

"If you have an opportunity to address some ills, I would think you would do that," Muhammed said. "It's business as usual for them: Maximize profits. But in our eyes it goes beyond pure profit consideration."

The close 3-2 vote, with the mayor and Councilman Clarence Whipple supporting Stone Street and council members Jim McCarthy, Jake Williams and Don Boisvert voting for Rosa L. Jones, was largely along racial lines, Muhammed said. Boisvert and McCarthy are white; Williams, Whipple and Blake are black. "Our community has never asked black members to vote on issues just because they are black," he said. "All we ever wanted was empathy and fairness."

Williams said he voted for Rosa L. Jones because it was safer and the less costly of the two choices.

"It just made sense. We were basically told (by state transportation and railway officials) if Stone Street was chosen, it would be a dead issue for the city, it wouldn't get a station in Cocoa. It would be Titusville and Melbourne," he said. "Individuals in Stone Street area even told me they don't care where an Amtrak station is, just as long as we get it. I'm African-American. It's not a racial issue."

Even though Cocoa, Titusville and Melbourne councils passed resolutions supporting stations stop to be included in the stimulus application, ultimately Amtrak and state transportation officials will decide where stations along the proposed Jacksonville-Miami route will be located, renovated or built. The stimulus application is due in July.

Titkanich, with the city, has offered to put together a special task force to address revitalization issues in Diamond Square.

"If the city of Cocoa wanted to build ties with the community, they should have done that a long time ago," Bryant said.

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