

Article published Jan 9, 2008

Keep Gaines going

Redevelopment requires small stuff, too

Just as a baby must learn to walk, tentatively, before the toddler learns to run, a run-down area that civic leaders hope will become a model for redevelopment has to first succeed at little but important steps if it hopes to take bigger, grander strides in the future.

That's essentially the thinking among citizen volunteers involved in Get Gaines Going, which for most of the past year has attempted to be a catalyst for stimulating Gaines Street redevelopment efforts.

GGG's members share a vision for that corridor's eventual emergence as an attractive gateway to the capital city, a vibrant hub for residential and retail activity that also serves as a bridge connecting Florida State and Florida A&M universities.

It's the same vision that city leaders have had since 2000; the same one, in fact, that impelled Tallahassee officials to make several strategic real-estate purchases along the Gaines Street corridor so they could more directly influence the direction that redevelopment takes. It has been a very aggressive — and smart — strategy.

But as GGG members point out, Gaines Street's potential is a harder sell when its current condition is, well, an embarrassment.

Gaines Street remains an eyesore, as it's been for as long as anyone can remember. Many of the properties along the industrial and commercial strip are poorly maintained. GGG members conducting their own on-site recent survey discovered a host of code violations and other problems that, for all practical purposes, publicly announce that some property owners don't care much, if at all, about outward appearances.

To the extent that it's their private property and profit potential, there's something to be said for a laissez-faire approach by city officials. Few would endorse a rigid, iron-fisted approach to code enforcement that would make City Hall the local-government version of the "Seinfeld" soup Nazi.

But GGG members say code inspectors have been so reluctant to strongly enforce local codes, which are designed to promote safety and neighborhood appearance, that they decided to take matters into their own hands. With the help of a citizen with a background in code-related work, the group surveyed properties along the street and documented problems. Then they sent letters to property owners, with copies to City Hall.

They're less interested in tattling than encouraging everyone with a stake in redeveloping Gaines what they should be doing anyway: making sure that the buildings and parcels along the corridor at least comply with code. Anything less sends the wrong signal.

This is especially important now for several reasons:

- Today city commissioners are scheduled to hear a report from the Council on Culture & Arts (COCA) that includes the results of a survey from artists and art-related businesses. One purpose was to assess demand among artists for combined live-and-work space in the Gaines area, part of a broader effort to engage Artspace Projects Inc., America's leading nonprofit developer of affordable property for the arts, in Gaines' redevelopment. COCA says Artspace is "definitely committed to moving forward" in participating, which is hopeful. For their part, property owners and city officials should show they're committed to the improvement of the corridor, too. Cleaning it up would be the most visible way to demonstrate it.
- A national economic downturn is likely to keep investors' interest down, possibly through most of 2008. In the absence of major strides in the overall redevelopment effort, upkeep is a small but important step toward the objective. If the area deteriorates further, it's likely to make investment all the more difficult when the economic picture improves.
- The GGG has been a constructive nag, nudging city officials to not allow red tape, inertia and other bureaucratic hazards to keep them from making measurable progress. But the organization, an outgrowth of the yearlong Knight Creative Communities Initiative in Tallahassee, technically ceases to exist in three months. City officials have made several promises related to razing derelict buildings, relocating utility lines, maintaining parks and landscaping, and realigning Lake Bradford Road at Stadium Drive.

GGG is hopeful that a new Gaines Street Vitalization Committee will pick up where it left off, and we are, too. But it's important that other community watchdogs keep an eye on the progress, or lack of it, if Gaines Street is ever to become what so many envision: an eclectic, economically vibrant neighborhood to which Tallahasseeans are drawn and proud to show off to visitors.