



July 19, 2009

Mary Ann Lindley: On Gaines Street, let's think of the greater good

Mary Ann Lindley
Editorial Page Editor

The city's making improvements on the street where I live. The goal is less flooding, but the drainage improvements mean streets are torn up and I've had to change my routine and find some detours.

It takes a few minutes longer for me to drive to work, which is a little inconvenient. It helps me identify with people who've been in the habit of driving Gaines Street regularly and now, suddenly this summer, that habit's got to change.

Few people embrace change. It's a wonder Obama was elected on a ticket for change — though things had gotten bad enough to think, "What's the alternative?"

Here on the local scene, though, the changing face of Gaines Street, an 18-month project for the first phase, is so distressing to some folks that you'd think the city was asking them to give up their first born.

The reality is that this long-awaited, \$15 million south-side redevelopment means drivers will have to find alternate routes and take a different approach from the dart-and-brake, pass-and-curse mode of Gaines Street travel.

It's long been one of the least scenic, most perilous four-lane streets in town, so you'd think this change would be embraced rather than perpetuate a steady drumbeat of complaints. Gaines will become two lanes only, with on-street parking, wide sidewalks, landscaping and much-slower traffic that's safer for motorists, cyclists and pedestrians.

Big picture, folks. Keep your eye on the idea of an increasingly interesting, attractive and economically viable destination for arts, cafes, commerce, sports and living spaces — and an area that also will be about 1,000 percent more welcoming to visitors than the current Gaines Street corridor.

Maybe some of us who have lived here for years no longer see the underbelly of Gaines. Its grubbiness is invisible, like that torn screen door we've been meaning to fix, the peeling paint, the countless examples of turning a blind eye to what we don't want to deal with.

But scruffy lots and abandoned warehouses are what visitors see on this southern entry to the city when they come downtown from the airport on business, or for game days at the stadiums.

They don't see the potential for Gaines through the loving eyes of community leaders and visionaries dating back to, as City Commissioner Mark Mustian put it Tuesday, "four score and seven years ago."

More literally, Mustian was referring to 1994 — the year *Time* magazine's July 25 cover story proclaimed "The Strange New World of the Internet" — when the dream of redeveloping Gaines began.

City Commissioner Debbie Lightsey, at Tuesday's celebratory event at Doug Burnette Park — a beautiful, year-old city park at Gaines and M.L. King Jr., Blvd. — gave generous credit to the Leon

County Commission as a partner in the project from the start. She especially saluted former county commissioner Bruce Host for always having "a very urban thought process that made the Gaines Street vision stick" and for keeping it going when the naysayers came out.

Indeed some showed up Tuesday, including cyclists who long for bike lanes instead of slower traffic they can ride along with. Given that Gaines links FAMU and FSU, it is reasonable to want to accommodate and encourage student cyclists, but the plan does include sidewalks of almost plaza-width, and the whole traffic concept is to *slow* traffic dramatically — which is the key to Gaines' becoming a humanized, people-friendly destination.

The greater good is what this project is about, and this is something testy football fans need to remember, too, when this fall they find themselves, as Mayor John Marks said, needing "to plan on 45 minutes to leave the stadium instead of 30 minutes."

From the earliest Gaines Vitalization committees to the recent Get Gaines Going group emanating out of the Knight Creative Communities Institute, this redevelopment has been a reflection of the city and its values. An ideal verbalized perhaps first by Plato — as city redevelopment director Roxanne Manning eloquently mentioned — cities bespeak a concept greater than self, yet strive to enhance life for all citizens living in them.

The greater goal on Gaines is to invigorate an entire district that will attract new businesses, new jobs, entertainment and arts, such as FSU's master craftsman studio on the western end of Gaines. It will help fulfill the potential for Railroad Square to expand into the public-private Arts Exchange, which Tallahassee Council on Culture and Arts director Peggy Brady said may be up and running by 2012.

And this new corridor should, in time, include the piece de resistance, a performing arts center championed by tireless civic leader Paula Smith, and a project that really can change the dynamic and personality of the capital city.

Change is hard-won. As County Commissioner Brian Desloge noted, we fought for years over whether to build the Blair Stone Road extension, and now it's one of the nicest areas of the city and has eased traffic congestion considerably. It took us nearly 20 years to agree to build a public library.

Giving up the known for the unknown — no matter how inefficient, grubby, unsafe or unproductive the status quo — takes persuasive, visionary and persistent leadership. I'm proud of our local political and civic leaders for staying the course, and being willing to change this particular course, old Gaines Street, for the better.

- Contact Mary Ann Lindley, editorial page editor of the *Tallahassee Democrat*, at 850-599-2178, at mlindley@tallahassee.com and on Facebook and Twitter.
-