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THOUGHT OF THE DAY

■ *"Courage without conscience is a wild beast."*
— Robert G. Ingersoll,
American lawyer and politician (1833-1899)

EDITORIAL

Move quickly on Dunbar renewal plan

Community can feed off downtown renaissance

Dunbar, the predominantly low-income community east of downtown Fort Myers, has been on the verge of a turnaround, it seems, for decades.

Now, the stars seem aligned as never before. But it's going to take community spirit, government stimulation and some adventurous investors eager to do well while doing good.

The success of this dream is important to everyone in Lee County.

Poverty and the social ills it causes are paid for in one way or another by all of society: in crime, health costs, educational failure and the absence of a part of the community from creating wealth and happiness.

Communities across the country — Bonita Springs is one example — are realizing that even boom towns suffer if their old cores are unhealthy.

An ambitious, imaginative framework for Dunbar rebirth has been created over the past year by lead consultants Dover, Kohi & Partners, several other consultants and city staff.

Hundreds of Dunbar residents assisted their efforts.

This public enthusiasm is perhaps the most hopeful sign. The people of Dunbar are ready for change, and already moving forward.

New and refurbished schools have restored a sense of identity and community.

Some of the worst slums have been replaced with attractive affordable housing such as Velasco Village, which replaced the old "Bottoms."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, the community's main street and a major eastern entrance to Fort Myers, is sparking from an extensive facelift.

Crime, though still a problem, is down, and the commu-

nity's once-declining population seems to be rising.

The hope is that confidence is growing in Southwest Florida's largest predominantly African-American community as a place to live and invest.

JUMP THE TRACKS

Downtown Fort Myers is experiencing a renaissance that has transformed the place and promises to bring much more improvement in the next few years.

Dunbar can feed off and join that progress, which needs to jump the railroad tracks east of Fowler Street that remain a psychic dividing line.

The city council is reviewing the revitalization plan, which focuses much attention on the new intersection of MLK and Veronica Shoemaker Boulevard, where the plan calls for a prominent cultural landmark of some sort and new housing initiatives.

The idea there and elsewhere is to encourage the development of a walkable community with a mix of incomes, housing and businesses that will be based on Dunbar's own traditions of small business entrepreneurship and vital street life.

One need is to reshape too-rigid land-use restrictions to make redevelopment easier. That could be done in a matter of months.

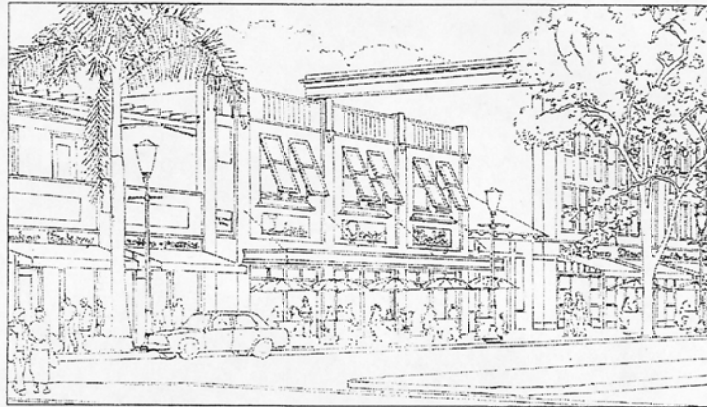
Another is money.

The plan calls for creating a community redevelopment area — which should be a high priority, also doable this year — to retain tax revenues from growth inside the community.

BIG BAND

Another node of progress could be Eastwood, the community planned by the Bonita Bay Group and the City of Fort Myers on the old well field at the eastern edge of town.

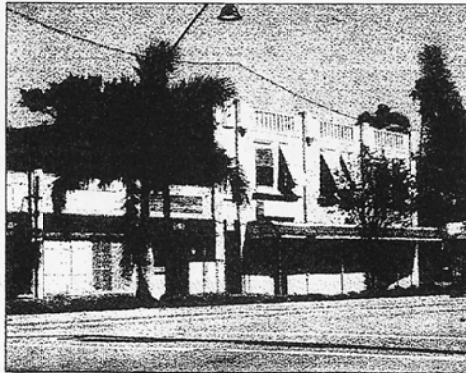
It will be an attractive mixed residential/commercial development with a serious amount



THE NEWS-PRESS FILE PHOTOS

■ The historic McCollum Hall on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, where famous black musicians used to perform. The artist's rendering shows one way it might be restored.

■ McCollum Hall, as it is today.



of housing affordable to people in the workforce who struggle to buy homes in today's market.

The redevelopment of the old Michigan Court public housing project can result in another model neighborhood of attractive, safe streets.

An intriguing possibility is the redevelopment of historic McCollum Hall and its vicinity at the western gateway to Dunbar, just east of those railroad tracks.

The hall, where Duke Ellington and other luminaries played in the big-band era in the 1940s through the early 1960s, could be the heart of a retail and entertainment area that builds on Dunbar's rich history and on the nearby Imaginarium museum.

The McCollum family is

pursuing grants, but would also welcome investor interest, says Michael McCollum.

"We want to bring it back to its original condition, the way it was when my grandfather built it," he said.

If an entrepreneur could work out a deal with the McCollum family to refurbish that block, it could become a seedbed of improvement and start the link-up between downtown and Dunbar.

ADVANTAGES

Dunbar has been blighted

by poverty, crime, commercial decline and the flight of too many talented people.

But it has some powerful assets.

Planning consultant Bill Spikowski, who helped develop the revitalization plan said: "Land 'close in' is being perceived as valuable again all around Florida. And just look at Dunbar's location: very close to all the jobs downtown, at the Edison Mall, and at the commercial/industrial plants along Hanson and Metro.

"Good public transporta-

ON THE WEB

■ The full revitalization plan can be downloaded at spikowski.com/MartinLutherKing.htm

news-press.com/opinion

■ **Readers' forum:** What is needed to revitalize the Dunbar community in Fort Myers? Let us know what you think in our online forum at news-press.com/opinion, or by sending a letter to the Mailbag c/o The News-Press, P.O. Box 10, Fort Myers, FL 33902, or by e-mailing one to mailbag@news-press.com.

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tion. Established neighborhoods. Strong social ties among the long-term residents. Scores of churches! Not to mention fairly cheap housing and land."

Now it's time to get down to business, and we'd like to hear your ideas about how to keep the momentum going.

Is there a developer out there willing to take some risks on an old area with some problems, but great promise?

Meanwhile, urge the city council to act on the plan's recommendations.