

# Restoring Dunbar

Fort Myers community is poised for a renaissance.



**Positive potential:** A rendering of what McCollum Hall could look like drew gasps from the audience during a presentation.

**>>For the past decade** Southwest Florida has been riding high on ever-climbing population and real estate values. The prosperity of the area, even as national trends begin to slow, makes the contrast to Dunbar, the sprawling network of neighborhoods just east of downtown Fort Myers, very conspicuous.

While Lee County's population shot up nearly 32 percent from 1990 to 2000 and almost 17 percent more from 2000 to 2004, the number of Dunbar residents actually declined in the 1990s by 5.8 percent to 8,590 in 2000. Numerous businesses have either moved from the area or shuttered completely. And while Southwest Florida's unemployment rate is famously low—hovering around 3 percent to 4 percent in recent years, unemployment in Dunbar is closer to 11 percent.

Hope for renaissance is pinned to a redevelopment plan in the works. The City of Fort Myers, which in recent years has annexed sections of Dunbar that had been in unincorporated Lee County, has hired the Coral Gables-based urban planning firm of Dover, Kohl & Partners to bring a

new vision for the area and jumpstart revitalization along Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Veronica S. Shoemaker Boulevard, major east-west and north-south thoroughfares, respectively.

Just a couple of decades ago, Dr. MLK Jr. Boulevard—previously Anderson Avenue—was a “vibrant hub of local economic activity,” says Lee Duffus, marketing and economic consultant for the project and an associate professor of marketing at Florida Gulf Coast University. “A lot of that disappeared as the result of the emergence of mega-retailers.” Consumers left the small, mom-and-pop stores in Dunbar, largely owned by local black businesspeople, for big-box stores and supermarkets, he says.

The decline of local businesses was hastened by the widening of Dr. MLK Jr. Boulevard, also known as S.R. 82—a “gateway” into Fort Myers from I-75. As the state bought up properties along the road, business owners decided not to take on the high costs of rebuilding, says Ron Matthews, who grew up in the area and remembers a thriving Anderson Avenue.

“Some moved. A lot just shut down. Nobody built back,” he says.

Matthews wants to see neighborhood businesses return to Dunbar. “Right now, you live in Dunbar, you have to travel to [U.S.] 41 or Palm Beach Boulevard. There’s [nowhere] in this area we can go to at nine o’clock at night and get something to eat,” says Matthews, who returned to his hometown with the hope of seeing it come back to life. Critical to the revival are “bringing back black-owned businesses,” he says, and educating residents in financial matters “to make the community more self-sufficient.”

Matthews was among residents, businesspeople and others who attended workshops in December to develop a vision for the area. They hovered over large aerial photographs and brainstormed parks, ball fields, townhouses, shop fronts and ways to integrate a range of community needs and desires, from heritage preservation to financial education to housing for seniors.

For participant Rob James III, Dunbar holds promise. The Pine Island resident

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has a 10-year track record of redeveloping brownfield (blighted) areas, such as in Indianapolis, where he redeveloped warehouses and manufacturing plants in deteriorated sectors. For Dunbar, his vision is affordable housing—perhaps row houses that would lend to the pedestrian-friendly atmosphere the urban planners are urging.

"Lee County is so far behind in affordable housing, there's potential gain there because of the need," says James, who bought land near the corner of Dr. MLK Jr. and Shoemaker boulevards. "There's opportunity there," he adds. "Any time you put in a major thoroughfare, you're going to bring more traffic."

Also participating was Joseph Brunson, another native son and a trained economist who hopes to heighten financial literacy and organize a community bank. "I want the people in the community to be the owners," he says. "There are too many people living paycheck to paycheck."

Dover, Kohl & Partners' project is just the latest initiative to revitalize the area, but Duffus thinks this one might work.

"Other programs have been developed by [the] government for the community, and there has not been any community involvement and no pressure to accomplish them," he says. "Clearly what we need is community discussion. For the community to achieve the desired goal, we need to engage the community in participating in diagnosing the problems."

Elements are in place to help it succeed, he adds, including new population growth. "The population seems to be reinvigorating and is growing," he says. "There is an increased confidence in the community that things are happening; the community is poised for economic development."

Assets include its location and "access to attractive markets throughout the region," he says; some 900 vacant lots inviting a variety of housing, which provides economic opportunity for construction-related industries; Dunbar's available

work force; and a decline in crime rates.

In addition, public investment is boosting the area through road projects and land acquisition for public space and redevelopment, such as an expansion to Roberto Clemente Park. The Southwest Florida Enterprise Center (the city's small-business incubator) is expanding, the Enterprise Zone has doubled in size, providing greater incentives for businesses, and much of the project area is a TIF (tax increment financing) district, so tax dollars go back into it. What's more, a \$20 million Hope VI grant has



**Drawing interest: Residents and other stakeholders put their heads together at workshops to envision the future of Dunbar.**

finally been awarded to replace Michigan Court, public housing that many see as a blight on the area.

Duffus also points to a "supportive regulatory environment" that makes Dunbar attractive for investment. Governments have demonstrated a willingness to make changes in zoning and other regulations to create "better residential patterns."

Dover, Kohl & Partners' process is to find out what the community wants and needs and use that to create a vision—literally, with pictures.

"Livable communities come about by design," says Victor Dover. "We've imagined a lot of things that are expressly prohibited. We do that to see what must be changed," such as zoning, allowable densities, or land uses.

"It takes years to implement," says his partner, Joseph Kohl. "The city can't do it all. It's up to the private sector to come in."

"They have to feel the time is right and build a piece of it," says Dover. "They will only get inspired when there's a high level of confidence."

