

Dunbar gets chance to map future

Originally posted on December 15, 2005

In an overheated, L-shaped room in a renovated building on Dr.



Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, a vision of Dunbar is taking shape. Those are urban planners on folding chairs at folding tables crowded into this bland room which is lined and stacked with 4-by-10-foot street maps fixed to poster board.

Hunched over tracing paper, sketch pads, crumpled Doritos bags and felt tipped pens in vibrant colors, young and earnest new urbanists are drawing — not their vision of Dunbar — but the vision of Michael Barnes, Willie Battle, Lee Duffus, Veronica Shoemaker, Isaac Church, Shirley Mathis, Alice Goethie ("Baby V's" mom), Ernest Blanks. The people who live and work here, people who have wandered in from the street to see what's going on and stayed to suggest a park here, trees there, a bike path right along here.

The noise is distracting. Children, mostly black, skip through the room on the way to — somewhere. Some stop, gaze at the maps and colorful renderings, ask questions. Parents arrive for the children, puzzled, then drawn in to the process. After all, this is the Quality Life Center's school, a community hub, a boulevard landmark. The confusion, the kids swarming around, merely add more democracy and inclusion to the process.

This vision of Dunbar is not going to be imposed on the residents; they will create it. Notes containing their suggestions are clipped to the maps, waiting to be shaped by pencils and colors into pictures that can be seen and touched and passed around. A version of Clemente Park emerges



art courtesy dover, kohl & Partners

The photograph above shows historic McCollum Hall on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, where famous black musicians used to perform, as it is today. The artist's rendering at left shows one way it might be restored.

IF YOU GO

- WHAT: The Boulevard Project: A redevelopment plan for Dunbar. A work-in-progress presentation.
- WHEN: 6:30 to 9 tonight.
- WHERE: Fort Myers City Hall
- WHY: To shape your community's future.

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from a planner's pens, then another, then it is changed as more suggestions are offered.

Some of the suggestions: The kids need a pool they can walk to and public football/soccer fields, the nearest of which now are 10 to 15 miles away. This in a community that nine NFL stars call home. Dunbar needs entertainment sites, more police substations, fewer junkyards, shopping and safe places to walk.

It's most important, says Victor Dover of Dover, Kohl & Partners, based in Coral Gables, that the community "does not have the plan done to them." Dover Kohl also did plans for downtown Cape Coral and Fort Myers Beach. The group has been cited by Architecture magazine as among the country's best urban designers.

A redevelopment plan for Dunbar is not a new idea, but the process is.

"We've had a series of plans imposed on us. We had no feeling of empowerment," said Lee Duffus, professor of business at Florida Gulf Coast University. "We scuttled it; we just did not want it."

Factors have combined to bring Dunbar to a tipping point, said Bill Spikowski, a local planner who is working with Dover, Kohl on the boulevard project.

Those factors include the outlandish cost of real estate, making Dunbar property an affordable opportunity, the widening and landscaping of MLK Boulevard, the development of intersecting Veronica S. Shoemaker Boulevard and winning, finally, a \$20 million Hope VI grant to tear down the Michigan Court public housing projects. The projects will be replaced by better new forms of subsidized housing and designed in part by this process.

All that's needed now is more people bringing ideas. The process is far from over, but this is the time for Dunbar residents and business owners to come out to participate.

The possibilities and opportunities are limitless for those who put fear and suspicion on the shelf and help shape what we'd like to call The Boulevard Project.

The planners say the community has been wonderful and they want more people to come out, see the plan so far and offer their suggestions for Dunbar's future at tonight's meeting.