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PLANTATION PROGRESS REPORT

Growing pains

Plantation's stretch of U.S. 441 still shows few signs of redevelopment

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When George Lord moved to his Country Club Estates home in east Plantation four decades ago, he and his family could choose among more than 40 restaurants along nearby U.S. 441.

The highway was a major shopping strip, complete with a Gold Triangle and King's department stores, a Howard Johnson's Hotel, an A & P supermarket and a movie theater.

These conveniences were among the reasons Lord spent \$14,000 on his three-bedroom home west of the busy road in 1963.

"My daughter came to this house when she was 6, and lived here until she got married," Lord said. ``She could walk places. Everything you needed was right there."

Now, everything has changed for the two-mile stretch of 441 (also State Road 7) within Plantation's borders. Unless Lord and his neighbors want to buy a car, pawn jewelry, or feast on a 99-cent burger, there's little reason to venture out that way. "There's not much there anymore," he lamented.

Since 1981, the city has made promises to revitalize 441. It has spent thousands of dollars on at least three major studies and dozens of minor ones to determine how to best do that. City officials, some charge, have been too slow to follow through with the studies' recommendations.

'SONG AND DANCE'

"They'll give you a song and a dance, and a dog-and-pony show, too, that they're going to do all these things and then they don't," Lord said.

Jerry Kolo, a professor of urban planning at Florida Atlantic University who worked on one of the 441 studies, agreed.

"Without the political will, this is gonna be a choo-choo train that only chugs every now and then without getting anywhere," he said.

The two most recent studies recommended, in essence, that the city attract residents to the area and create reasons for visitors to come.

For instance, the studies have suggested adding ample sidewalks and trees to encourage walking, bringing in sidewalk cafés and other entertainment businesses, building a performing-arts theater or other major attraction, and encouraging the creation of artists' workshops and galleries.

Kolo conducted a 1998 study for the city that came up with many of the recommendations, which were incorporated in a master plan the City Council adopted in 2000.

Planning, Zoning and Economic Development Director Marcia Berkley said the criticism is unwarranted.

"The process the city has followed is a logical process," Berkley said. ``Each different study adds more detailed analysis and recommendations. I would say they are part of a series, not just a bunch of different studies."

But former Councilman Lee Hillier sees it differently. For instance, he wants to know why, after so many studies, code violations that would be quickly ticketed elsewhere in the city are allowed to persist near U.S. 441. He points to examples such as exposed Dumpsters, ragged fences, some topped with barbed wire, and outdoor car lifts.

"It just comes to show how little the city cares about this area," said Hillier, a frequent critic of the city's political establishment.

The issue of code noncompliance was also brought up in 2000 by the Carr Smith Corradino consultant firm hired by the city to create an implementation plan for the 441 revitalization.

"Current codes for the district are not being enforced," said a report issued by the firm. "This has contributed to a blighted look."

Lynda Kompelien, who heads the city's Community Redevelopment Agency, disagreed. The CRA was created in 2000 and was charged with implementing the master plan.

"I think the city is making significant strides and has been very aggressive complementing this with a capital program," she said.

Since the creation of the CRA, the city has committed more than \$8 million to the area's revitalization in loans, grants and general revenue, city records indicate.

The CRA has completed several beautification projects that include landscaping and created a grant program to spruce up business facades. An upgrade to the sewer system, to prevent flooding, was completed as well.

The agency has also issued grants to help pay for a magnetic resonance imaging facility at Plantation General Hospital, and to demolish some largely vacant shopping centers, in hopes of seeing them redeveloped. There are lighting and roadway improvements, too, although these were performed by Florida Power & Light and the Florida Department of Transportation.

This is a good start, Kolo conceded, but it is still far from the radical transformation that the studies have called for.

"The issue is not 'Let's expand the median and make it look ritzy with palm trees,'" Kolo said. "All of that is good but not sufficient. Encourage or develop quality residential development mixed with light businesses and entertainment for the residents. Bring life and revenue back."

Kompelien defended the city, saying that a 2001 ordinance created the conditions for the radical change to happen, by creating zoning provisions for a mixed residential-and-business development and the artists' district. She pointed out that new restaurants are coming to the area.

In Kolo's opinion, creating these conditions is a good step, but the city has to be more aggressive, deciding what projects they want, and going after them.

LACK OF INITIATIVE

"Cities can no longer sit around waiting for businesses and developers to come to them," he said. "They have to be out there marketing themselves, offering incentives. It takes resources, commitment over a long term, and diplomatic skills to mobilize the public and private sectors."

Another former city consultant agrees about the seeming lack of initiative. In a report prepared in October 2002, two years after the creation of the CRA, Lambert Advisory said the city had failed to promote 441 to developers and other investors. Outside of the people who already had businesses in the area, the consultant said, hardly anyone knew about the opportunities within the district.

When asked if there are now any efforts to market 441 to potential investors, Kompelien said such businesses can learn about the corridor through the city's website.

"This information is in the public domain," she said.

But some business owners and nearby residents would like to see the city do more.

Charles Cannon, 63, a retired chiropractor who for decades had an office on 441, said he's holding on to hope for his family's sake. In the early 1980s, he lobbied city officials for improvements to the corridor. "My son runs the office now," he said. "It is his livelihood."