NNB News : 2015 : 07 : 20 : "The Deuces": can the once-vibrant street make a comeback?

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“The Deuces”: can the once-vibrant street make a comeback?
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Emily Wehunt | NNB
The Manhattan Casino (left) is back, but empty lots now dominate the street, which was divided by Interstate 275 (background) in the late 1970s.

ST. PETERSBURG – For decades, they had to sit in the back of the bus.

They couldn’t eat at downtown lunch counters, couldn’t catch a movie at one of the big theaters, couldn’t sit on the famous green benches. They couldn’t even try on clothes before they bought them at downtown department stores.

Why? They were black.

During the 1920s, along a dusty trail that became 22nd Street S, blacks in St. Petersburg began creating a town within a town where they could safely live, dine, shop and attend school during an era of white supremacy, segregation and hate.

In time, their town got a nickname: “The Deuces.”

In its heyday in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Deuces was a thriving neighborhood of homes and more than a hundred businesses. There was a hospital where black doctors could treat their patients, funeral homes where the bereaved could mourn lost loved ones, a movie theater where families could
be entertained, and a dance hall – called the Manhattan Casino – where famous black musicians like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington could perform.

“A black person could be born, live and die on 22nd Street,” said Jon Wilson, a former Tampa Bay Times reporter and author of three books on St. Petersburg history. “Some residents never left the neighborhood.”

But now, he said, the Deuces is “just a bare shadow of its former self.”

Most of the buildings are gone or boarded up. Most of the people who lived there have died or moved away. The roar of overhead traffic on Interstate 275, which in the late 1970s effectively cut the neighborhood in two, makes conversation difficult for the people below.

Nikki Gaskin-Capehart, the city’s director of urban affairs, said the interstate dealt a “death blow” to the Deuces. “It cut us off from each other,” said Gaskin-Capehart, 40, who grew up in the neighborhood.

By then, however, the Deuces was already in decline. When the legal and unofficial barriers of segregation began falling in the 1960s, its residents started living, shopping and attending school in once-forbidden places. The black hospital, which opened in 1923, closed in 1966. So did the theater. Two years later, the Manhattan Casino hosted its last concert.


Where others now see only decline and decay, however, Gaskin-Capehart sees opportunity. The St. Petersburg native, who fondly recalls what was, now stresses what could be.

As the city’s urban affairs director, she is the point person in Mayor Rick Kriseman’s campaign to put renewed economic development emphasis on Midtown – a cluster of predominantly black neighborhoods, including the Deuces, where poverty, unemployment and crime rates are high.
“We want to take it back to what it should be,” she said.

The challenges are daunting.

In June 2014, Gov. Rick Scott stunned city leaders when he vetoed $1.6 million in the state budget for St. Petersburg’s antipoverty 2020 Plan. The money would have gone to programs designed to help young job-seekers and small-business owners.

Other parts of the plan, developed by a private group and embraced by Kriseman and City Council members, aim to reduce poverty throughout the city by 30 percent. Those will continue without the state money.

Spurred in part by riots that shook the area in 1996, government and private enterprise have already spent heavily on improvements in Midtown and nearby Childs Park. Between 1999 and 2012, the city estimates, government and private interests invested $207 million in Midtown.

A post office, a credit union, a grocery store, a library and a federal Jobs Corps training facility have opened. The theater on 22nd Street has been modernized, air-conditioned and turned into a home for the Boys and Girls Club. The old hospital building has been expanded into a public health center. St. Petersburg College, which opened a Midtown campus in 2003, is expanding into a three-story, $15 million building that has four times the space, far more students and a greatly expanded agenda.

Meanwhile, the city and Pinellas County have approved a so-called tax-increment financing district for the 7.5 square miles that include the Midtown and Childs Park. Annual increases in city and county...
the studio and gallery of Duncan McClellan, a renowned glass artist who moved his operation to Midtown in 2010.

Property tax revenue generated there on improvements in housing, health care, economic opportunities and education. The financing plan is expected to generate up to $70 million over the next 30 years.

Private organizations are investing as well. A North Carolina nonprofit has bought 68 homes in Midtown and Childs Park and begun restoring them. A Naples-based investment firm has bought 40 homes for restoration. Habitat for Humanity has begun a program to help Midtown homeowners make substantial repairs, energy efficiency upgrades and landscaping improvements to their houses.

Elihu and Carolyn Brayboy, who grew up in Midtown, say they are spending $800,000 to buy and renovate four buildings along 22nd Street. Those buildings now house a Creole restaurant, a barbecue stand, an art gallery, a beauty salon and a fitness center.

On Sunday afternoons, the empty lots behind one of the Brayboys’ properties at 22nd and Ninth Avenue become the Deuces Live Open Market, which offers baked goods, produce, plants, fine crafts, home goods and live entertainment.

Meanwhile, along the northern and western flanks of Midtown, other businesses have taken root, among them several craft breweries, a couple of distilleries, a pet shelter and a monthly vintage market for secondhand goods.

More than 200 artists now work out of studios in a former freight train depot and nearby warehouses that offer ample space and low rent. Some of the artists in the Warehouse Arts District have formed a nonprofit that has bought six old buildings at 22nd and Fifth Avenue that will be turned into rent-controlled studios.

In the heyday of the Deuces, its crown jewel was the Manhattan Casino. It was the home of dances, teas, wedding receptions, fashion shows, club meetings and high school programs.
The famous Manhattan Casino, crown jewel of the Deuces in its heyday, closed in 1968. It was restored by the city and reopened in 2013.

Charles, Sarah Vaughan – were barred from white venues in segregated St. Petersburg. But at the Manhattan, they played to packed houses that sometimes included white fans. Across the street, in the parking lot of the Sno-Peak drive-in, crowds gathered to listen to the music coming through the Manhattan’s open windows.

In 2002, the city bought the long-empty building and then spent nearly $3 million restoring it. In 2013, a branch of Harlem’s famous Sylvia’s Queen of Soul Food Restaurant opened on the ground floor. There’s a gospel brunch there every Sunday, a jazz brunch on Saturdays and other events during the week.

The ballroom on the second floor, where the greats of jazz, soul and rock once played, is again a venue for parties, wedding receptions and group meetings.

Do the return of the Manhattan and the stirrings of change elsewhere along the street portend better days for the Deuces? Some people are betting that they do.

NNB reporters Karlana June, Jennifer Nesslar and Andrew Caplan contributed to this report, which also includes information from St. Petersburg’s Historic 22nd Street South, a book published in 2006 by Rosalie Peck and Jon Wilson, and the Tampa Bay Times.

If You Go

Sylvia’s Queen of Soul Food Restaurant and the Manhattan Casino are at 642 22nd St. S. Call (727) 823-4240 or (727) 423-9825 for information and reservations.