Providence and Progress: Residents bracing for potential change

WEDGED BETWEEN THE BUSTLING BOULEVARD OF LAKE BRADFORD ROAD AND A MAJOR RESEARCH UNIVERSITY RESIDENTS OF THE PROVIDENCE NEIGHBORHOOD FIND THEMSELVES FACING CHANGE.

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To an outsider, the Providence community serves as a drive-through neighborhood.

Signs at Lake Bradford and Levy Avenue, one of Providence’s main entrances, direct visitors to the internationally known National High Magnetic Field Laboratory, the FAMU-FSU College of Engineering and Innovation Park.

“A lot of people don’t know where Providence is but once you tell them, they say, ‘Oh, I go through there all the time going to the Mag Lab,’” said Walter McDonald, president of southwest Tallahassee community's neighborhood association.

Just north of Levy is Stuckey Avenue, another east-west thoroughfare favored by motorists eager to get from Lake Bradford to Capital Circle without the interruption of stop lights.

Today, the fate of Stuckey Avenue concerns Providence residents. They recently learned that the side street is a key piece of Florida State University’s grand design to connect its main and southwest campuses. The extension, in conjunction with plans for an upgraded Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course and club house, is part of FSU’s overall mission to attract and recruit top level faculty and researchers on the way to becoming a top 25 university.

“Approving the New FSU Gateway Route would redirect airport traffic through the Providence neighborhood via Stuckey Avenue, thus consciously injecting a substantial amount of new traffic into the neighborhood,” said Leslie Harris, who served as Providence Neighborhood Association president from 1998 to 2004.

THE FSU Plan

The FSU proposal is being considered as part of a larger plan by the Blueprint staff to expand an Airport Gateway project designed to give arrivals a better view of the city as they leave the airport and head up Springhill and Lake Bradford roads to the bustling Gaines Street district. They also hope to improve the connection between the main-landlocked downtown campus and the 900-acre southwest campus.

The Intergovernmental Agency board, made up of Tallahassee and Leon County commissioners, is expected to vote on incorporating the Gateway District concept into the long-range Southwest Area Transportation Plan study in December.

The $78.8 million project will include the initial Blueprint estimated investment of $57.8 million from the extension of the penny sales tax, but now would include $9 million in right-of-way donations and costs paid by FSU, $7 million for right of way and $2 million for construction. The new road includes a contribution of $4.08 million in right of way and $2.03 million in construction from FSU.

The Florida Department of Transportation would contribute an anticipated $12 million for construction costs associated with the widening of Orange Avenue.

The road proposed by FSU would begin at Orange Avenue near the existing entrance to the university’s nursery. It would extend north through the nursery and the driving range of the Don Veller Seminole Golf Course, crossing over Pottsdamer Street between the Morcom Aquatic Center and the golf course parking lot.
From there, it would extend north through Alumni Village, crossing over Levy and connecting to Stuckey, which would link with the FAMU Way extension at Lake Bradford Road.

“A primary objective for FSU is to strengthen the road network between the airport and the main campus,” said Kevin Graham, executive director of the FSU Real Estate Foundation, who has been speaking Blueprint staff and community residents to explain the university’s plans.

“In order to improve access and functionality in the long term, FSU needs to create access from Orange Avenue through the central and eastern portions of the property,” he added. “This is a critical element in our planning process.”

The goal would be to create a roadway with bike paths, lanes separated by a median, and landscaping, similar to FAMU Way, which has undergone major improvements that enhanced the northern perimeter of the Florida A&M University campus.

**Neighborhood reaction**

While FSU and Blueprint staff see the proposal as an opportunity to create an improved road network that benefits the entire community, some residents in Providence and the nearby Callen neighborhood view “FSU’s Plan,” with skepticism.

At what cost, they ask.

How will the inevitable increase in traffic change the quality of life in the neighborhood? They worry that widening Stuckey Avenue would lead to even more traffic through their neighborhood for those seeking another route to Tallahassee International Airport.

Graham said if plans move forward to recreate Stuckey into a roadway similar to FAMU Way, right-of-way acquisition could extend from Lake Bradford Road to Iamonia, or about a half-mile stretch.

Residents also worry that some homeowners will lose property to accommodate right-of-way for a wider road. Those changes, they suspect, will open the door for current commercial zoning on Stuckey and could lead to another Gaines Street-type district.

Gentrification could follow.

“We also have long-term concerns about development that is likely to come in and around Providence as a result of this proposed road,” Harris said. “There are many low-income renters in the neighborhood. If development does not address that particular neighborhood dynamic, such as by maintaining decent affordable housing in the area for those residents, many of them could be displaced because of rising rents or redevelopment of properties housing the low-income residents to attract more affluent clientele.”

In recent meetings at Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church and at the Providence Center, residents questioned why FSU needs the new road through Stuckey since there already is another access to Innovation Park west of the new proposed road at Paul Dirac Drive and Orange Avenue.
Graham said that boulevard doesn’t address FSU’s interest in providing a more appealing gateway from the airport.

“A significant portion of FSU’s developable property is on the eastern side proximate to the retired Alumni Village,” he said. “Paul Dirac Drive provides access to the west side of Innovation Park but does not function as the primary access to the central part of FSU’s campus.”

Dissatisfied, neighbors are fighting back.

Last week, a petition was placed in mailboxes throughout the Callen neighborhood calling for residents to lobby the Intergovernmental Agency to hold off on making a final vote in December. The unsigned petition says residents have not had time to vet the new plan. They also want money included in the plan to widen Springhill Road — a demand supported by County Commission Bill Proctor.

Blueprint has scheduled a series of meetings for residents and businesses over the next few weeks leading to the December meeting.

**Neighborhood reaction**

Neighborhood suspicion of FSU’s plans, it appears from conversations with area residents, have to be viewed through the lens of history. For two decades, they have worked to rid the community of crime and successfully lobbied to get neighborhood amenities and build community.

At Stuckey Avenue and Lake Bradford Road is a prominent marker designating Providence as the 2016 Neighborhood of the Year.

“It’s always been a neighborhood in transition, but you have some stakeholders who really care about the neighborhood,” said McDonald.

McDonald says, 1,220 people live in the community bordered by Stuckey to the north, Hutchinson Street to the south, Iamonia on the west and busy Lake Bradford to the east. The neighborhood is a mix of students, working-class adults, retirees, and workers earning modest incomes. More than 80 percent live in rental properties, largely owned by absentee investors, he said.

McDonald, 49, recalls his father, the Rev. Walter McDonald Sr., pastor of Providence Baptist Church, and Doug Douglass, a retired IBM manager, forming a Crime Watch program at the church in 1996.

“The crime was super-bad in Providence,” McDonald said. “It was for security. It needed to be cleaned up.”

Residents formed the Providence Neighborhood Association. Six years later, Providence was selected by the city for a Community Renaissance Partnership.

Leann Watts Williams, a neighborhood services coordinator with the city’s Parks, Recreation & Neighborhood Affairs department, said the Renaissance project included street repairs, infill housing, housing and rental rehabilitation grants, a focus on crime-reduction and addressing zoning issues. The goal was to give residents the tools to not just turn around but to save their community.

Several million dollars were spent on roadway improvements, said John Baker, manager of the city’s neighborhood affairs division. “If the Providence neighborhood hadn’t had the Renaissance program it wouldn’t exist as it is today.”
Rhani Wright bought a home seven years ago in Providence. Living there has taught her the value of getting to know her neighbors and, more importantly, getting involved.

“I felt like I was connecting into a community,” Wright said who served as neighborhood association president from 2009 to 2014. She’s now helping spearhead community block parties every other week throughout Providence. “I feel I changed when I moved to Providence,” she added. “Knowing your neighbors wasn’t something I was taught living in other neighborhoods in Tallahassee.”

(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

Besides improvements in roads and sidewalks and building neighborhood pride, Harris said the No. 1-priority was to construct a community center — a place for neighbors to come together, a hub for after-school programs and workshops on health and nutrition. Even chess games.

In September 2012, the Delta Kappa Omega Providence Community Service Center opened at 1908 Highland St.

“I think it’s been a great success,” Harris said of the center. “We continue to use that as a model to identify our needs.”

Eyeing the future

Another positive addition to Providence is the Touch of Life Community Garden, developed four years ago on a vacant city-owned lot at Stuckey Avenue and Indian River Street. Beds with fresh produce — collards, peppers, tomatoes, egg plants, okra are grown and shared among neighbors.

The garden faces Stuckey Avenue. McDonald is sure the garden will be lost if the road plan goes through. It’s too important to lose, he said.

“That will be one of the asks,” he said. “We will ask FSU for space for the garden. It doesn’t matter where. It could be in Alumni Village. It needs to be within walking distance of the community. We will sit down as an organization and discuss this with FSU.”

McDonald said Providence has had a good relationship with Florida State. The university has reached out to help the community. He’s excited about the College of Medicine’s plans to build a health center near Roberts and Eisenhower. At the same time, he wants surety that Providence residents are heard.

A steady stream of cars and work trucks enter Stuckey from Lake Bradford as McDonald locks the garden gate. The road stretches from Lake Bradford to Iamonia, which turns into Roberts Avenue, leading to FSU property housing warehouses and other centers.

Along the route are apartment complexes, with single-story duplexes, modest houses, including a fenced in complex of housing for migrant workers.

Rudy Rowe III, owner of Rowe Roofing, is heavily invested in Providence. He owns two apartment complexes, Ashton Glenn and The Oaks, in addition to rental housing.
“I’m extremely excited about it,” Rowe said of FSU’s proposal. “I really think it will help the blight in the neighborhood. I think the plans are paramount to the university and to the success of the Providence community.

“I can see the Providence neighborhood being reinvented similar to Gaines Street. That’s based on the gateway road.”

Also located on Stuckey is the Home Front Apartments, housing for homeless veterans. The Big Bend Homeless Coalition opened it in October 2011.

There are no commercial business within the neighborhood. Nearby stores include Dollar General, Family Dollar, Tony’s convenience store and Ray’s Mini Mart, advertising “Lotto. Beer. Cigarettes. Phones.”

“Four years ago, you couldn’t drive down the street,” McDonald said, riding through a neighborhood street once known for drug deals. “It was like Burger King. How much do you want?”

Change could benefit community.

“Stuckey would change,” he said. “I think you will see more housing complexes. I think all that (currently) on Stuckey will be torn down and Stuckey will look like Gaines Street, with new housing, retail shops, which could be a good thing for economics in Providence.”

But McDonald said Blueprint and FSU’s acceptance of community input could make the Gateway District “a model” project between neighborhoods, government and the university.

“FSU could show the world they can come in and work with a neighborhood to enhance that neighborhood, not take away the neighborhood.”

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