

Boynton Beach pushes to restore Ocean Avenue's identity

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BOYNTON BEACH — Once the city's main street, Ocean Avenue has had a gap-tooth quality for years, with a few shops and restaurants close to Federal Highway, then a thicket of Old Florida-style condos and apartments.

True, the Schoolhouse Children's Museum has been the success story of the avenue since it was rehabbed from a defunct elementary school.

But downtown advocates agreed that Ocean Avenue needed a spark, something that would build momentum and lure people and shops downtown.

Now, four projects on the drawing board could help: a distinctive city logo at the marina end of Ocean Avenue, an outdoor amphitheater for performances and the transformation of two historic houses into retail and restaurant space.

Officials of the community redevelopment agency are hoping that the four projects will be a catalyst to turning Ocean Avenue into an area that is attractive to stroll, from Seacrest Boulevard on to the marina for a cocktail or a meal.

The community redevelopment agency promotes development and activities in the 1,650-acre downtown area.

Ocean Avenue began as the main street of the town of Boynton, a white shell-rock road that extended from the Atlantic Ocean to the Florida East Coast Railway tracks and present-day Congress Avenue. When Interstate 95 was built in the 1970s, Ocean Avenue's role as an artery was officially cut off. It has been struggling for an identity since.

The two small houses, both owned by the CRA, are not registered as historic places, but they have local historic value. Though small, they could be rehabbed to include commercial operations such as stores, restaurants or galleries, said CRA Assistant Director Vivian Brooks.

Owner Ruth Jones lived in the smaller of the two homes, known as the Jones cottage, until about two years ago. She and her late husband, Mason, a farmer and member of a Boynton pioneer family, raised five children there.

Built in 1940, the cottage is surrounded by mango, roseapple and avocado trees.

The 1,000-square-foot Jones cottage now sits at 201 N.E. First St., and would be moved to the southwest corner of East Ocean Avenue and Southeast Fourth Street later this year, once a tenant has committed to the space. It would be next to an existing public parking lot with 21 parking spaces.

CRA Executive Director Lisa Bright told the board Tuesday that she soon will announce a tenant wishing to build a cafe in the cottage.

The other house, the Magnuson house at 211 Ocean Ave., was built about 1910 by Oscar Sten Magnuson, a Swedish immigrant and farmer. His wife, Eunice Benson Magnuson, was one of the first town clerks.

The Magnuson house has been a bit of a political football. Bought at the top of the real estate bubble in 2007 for more than \$700,000, it has sat unused since then.

Last year, Bright suggested the 1,800-square-foot Magnuson house as a possible new home for the community redevelopment agency, which is now on Federal Highway south of Boynton Beach Boulevard.

But the estimate of an additional \$850,000 to expand the house caused Mayor Jose Rodriguez to cool to the idea. The Magnuson house is now for sale and Rodriguez is pushing to move the CRA headquarters to the former Holiday House restaurant at 710 N. Federal Highway.

The third project, an amphitheater, would be on the property of the Schoolhouse Children's Museum, in an area that includes mature oak trees and a natural bowl setting. It would be used for bands and other performances.

And finally, an entryway with a city logo would be built where Ocean Avenue meets the city's marina.

Once the four projects are under way, Old Boynton High School remains a problem.

The large building has stood unused while responsibility for its future shifted from the city to the CRA. Its hurricane-damaged roof needs, at the very least, emergency repairs to protect the interior, which has suffered from leaks.