Main Street meeting draws hundreds to discuss future of iconic road

By Eileen Zaffiro-Kean
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A meeting at the Ocean Center on Tuesday night drew a standing-room only crowd of local residents who discussed the challenges and opportunities on Daytona Beach’s Main Street.

DAYTONA BEACH — For two solid hours Tuesday night, a standing-room-only crowd of more than 300 people shared their passionate opinions about Main Street one after another.

Gathered in an Ocean Center meeting room packed mostly with beachside residents and business owners, they talked about what’s right and wrong with the iconic road that cuts through the city’s oceanfront core tourist area.

“I’m kind of a little bit sad to be here, because when I started the venture at Main Street Station 10 years ago, I didn’t realize I’d have all these challenges,” said Phaedra Lee, managing partner of the bar on the north end of Main Street.

Taylor Turner said he frequently rides his motorcycle down Main Street, and he doesn’t find it to be a welcoming place.

“Everything is dark and all the businesses are closed,” Turner said. “It’s all the same type of shops. I like the idea of bringing in more art and curb appeal. Maybe then I’d spend more money. We could try and bring in more NASCAR fans. I don’t really know how to solve the problem; I just know there is one and it needs to be fixed. I feel very pushed away when I come to Main Street.”
Tuesday's meeting was organized by The News-Journal. It came two days after the newspaper published a story examining what can be done to improve Main Street, and six months after the publication of The News-Journal's "Tarnished Jewel" series of stories that examined government spending on the beachside and how the area is faring.

Tony Grippa, chairman of the Beachside Redevelopment Committee that was formed a few weeks after the Tarnished Jewel series to come up with suggestions to improve the beachside, said there are challenges with everything from aging infrastructure to a need for parks.

“I have no vested interest other than I'd like to see something better for Main Street and Daytona Beach,” Grippa said.

Grippa did more listening than talking during the meeting, and at the end he had compiled a list of the things that echoed comments of those who took a turn with the microphone. On his list of things to explore: Pursue better street lighting; find out how much the city spends on Main Street versus other areas; check on the impact of more aggressive code enforcement efforts; examine red tape to get events on Main Street; push for an improved residential area around Main Street; probe investment possibilities for infrastructure; look at what other communities have done successfully.

Andrew Davis, a DeLand roofer, said people trying to improve Main Street miss “the biggest problem.”

“Getting rid of Bike Week won't change anything,” Davis said. “When I see a girl laying on the ground in a shadowy corner talking to herself, and prostitutes walking down the street, that won't make people want to live here. People say this is a really good place to visit, but they don't want to live here.”

The people who do live around Main Street are so broke they don't have money to support Main Street businesses, he said.

“That's why Main Street is dead,” said Davis, who was applauded for his comments.

Others agreed that one problem on Main Street is the vagrants and homeless people. One Main Street business owner said, “Feed the squirrels, not the bums.”

Grippa said the new homeless shelter that is expected to open west of Interstate 95 next year...
should make a visible difference with the homeless problem on the beachside.

Lee said she’s become frustrated with the negativity that has been intertwined with Main Street’s reputation, and she’d like people to see all the good things on the corridor connecting the Halifax River and Atlantic Ocean.

“Tattoos are art. People who build motorcycles are artists,” Lee said. “Bike Week is a convention. What’s the difference between a convention on Main Street and a convention at the Ocean Center?”

Lee said owning anything on Main Street is frustrating, especially when a business or property owner is slapped with a code violation.

“That doesn’t make them feel very good about doing business, so they rebel,” Lee said. “You have to make business owners feel special, or they won’t put any money in your town. You’ve got to tell them, ‘thank you for owning this building.’ If they get a code violation, they’ll say F you and never put another dime in their business.”

Steve Barnes, a longtime Daytona Beach resident, said rather than push biker events off Main Street, the city needs to embrace its motorsports history.

“We should have a car show on Main Street every weekend,” Barnes said.

Mayor Derrick Henry said “it sounds like we as a community are not rejecting Bike Week, which is what I said when I knocked on doors (to campaign) five years ago.” But if Bike Week stays, Henry said a change he wants to see is businesses open year-round.

The mayor said the city also needs to talk about increasing home ownership on the beachside.

“If it’s worth living in, then people will want to visit,” he said. “It will take intentional action over a long period of time. Doing the same thing will deliver the same results.”

Speakers at the meeting also touched on other issues that have been at the center of Main Street debates. Longtime beachside resident Mike Denis said there are too many large empty parking lots on the oceanfront for parking to be a problem. Both he and Lee said there’s just a need for coordination.

Vern Weatherholtz, a member of the city’s Code Enforcement Board, said property owners
need “to have the code up to date and up to city standards.”

“We could have terraces over the sidewalk like New Orleans, but the area around Main Street is why people don’t come here and don’t invest,” Weatherholtz said.

Marcia Tuggle, who lives less than two blocks from Main Street, said she’s “really frustrated I continue to see Bike Week scapegoated as the number one source of problems on Main Street.”

“It’s what makes Daytona Beach one of a kind,” said Tuggle, a member of the city’s Beachside Redevelopment Board. “It’s as much a culture here as car racing and Spring Break and all the other things that make this a fabulous place to live.”

Rick Cantor, who said he’s looking into renting Main Street property for a business, said “without bike events, Main Street really doesn’t exist.”

“We’re never gonna be Naples with a Fifth Avenue,” he said.

Lee said the corridor just needs additions — not deletions — with more entertainment, festivals and art.

“Let’s just take what we have and just do it better,” she said.

“We need to work together. Stop fighting each other,” said Daytona Beach resident and business owner Belinda McMillian. “Main Street used to be so beautiful. We all have solutions. Bring solutions to the table.

“Stand up and fight for what you believe in. Don’t give up. If we all work together we’ll bring a positive solution.”