

Manatee County NAACP leader Rodney Jones says FDOT's process of gathering public input is flawed and "appears to be a deliberate attempt to exclude the black community from the project." Tiffany Tompkins - ttompkins@bradenton.com

LOCAL

NAACP leader accuses FDOT of ignoring black community in Desoto Bridge proposal

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MANATEE — Rodney Jones, president of the Manatee NAACP, says the Florida Department of Transportation is intentionally ignoring the black community with the department's proposal of a flyover bridge to replace the aging Desoto Bridge between Bradenton and Palmetto.

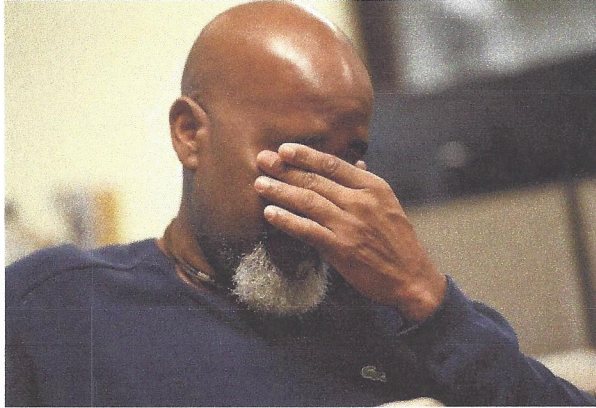
"My family's roots are here," Jones said. "My roots are here. I'm very proud of my community. I cherish it and feel a real need to stand up for home."

Jones contends the way FDOT is gathering public input is flawed and "appears to be a deliberate attempt to exclude the black community from the project."

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"But that was about 60 out of hundreds," Jones said. "It's the housing market. That's the big reality of this. I live in a neighborhood where 50 percent of the people have no high school diploma. We have an increase in violence over the last couple of years. An increase in shootings. We see it. We know our community is in crisis and then you want to run a flyover through that will kill business? It's been a one-sided story. It's absurd. If we lose our neighborhood, then we are basically being run out of town with nowhere to go."



Manatee County NAACP leader Rodney Jones gets emotional talking about the challenges the black community faces in 2018. Jones believes the FDOT proposal to build a flyover bridge to replace the Desoto Bridge would enhance those challenges and destroy a historic community.

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Michael Gallen, vice president of public policy and small business for the Manatee Chamber of Commerce, said the chamber is taking the concerns of First Street businesses seriously, but it may be too soon in the process to determine the final solution.

"We are doing some information gathering," Gallen said. "We also created a task force made up of business leaders who are chamber members to analyze all of the alternatives FDOT is proposing. We are in the process of evaluating that, and we are getting all sorts of feedback for the best alternatives. But we have some more time to go through the process before we come up with recommendations."

Gallen said he has heard from First Street business owners who are expressing concern about diverting regional traffic from local roadways. FDOT says as much as 33 percent of overall traffic is regional - trying to get through Palmetto and Bradenton with no intention of stopping in either city.

But does that mean they aren't pulling over for gas or a quick bite to eat?

"That is their main concern," Gallen said. "We are early on in our process and still evaluating it and we'll be looking at it throughout the beginning of this year."

Not everyone in the community agrees with Jones. Bradley Phillips, regional general manager for KFC, said he's long thought an overhead expressway would improve business at his First Street location.

He points to a community meeting held at St. Mary's Missionary Baptist Church in the heart of the historic black church community along First Street in early December. Jones said the black community had to force that meeting and didn't understand why FDOT would not schedule a meeting within the community where a flyover would have the most impact.

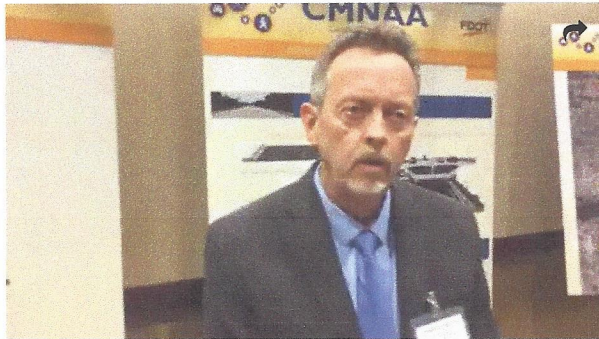
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"FDOT comes out and they were very disingenuous," Jones said. "They basically lied. Over 100 people showed up and the information from our meeting was not being recorded. We were in furious opposition, and it's an old-school approach from keeping black folks out of the conversation."

But FDOT District One Project Manager Lawrence Massey explained it was not an official public meeting because FDOT didn't schedule it, and officials went to the meeting based on an invitation from the area's pastoral association.



"I wish it had been recorded," Massey said. "But we went at their invitation. They asked us to present to their constituents, and we did so. We showed up and went from there, but it wasn't something we organized."

Jones said FDOT didn't hand out surveys, which he said has skewed recent survey results showing that 71 percent of participants support the flyover proposal. Massey said handouts were distributed with a link to the survey, and questionnaires also were handed out to get everyone's contact information. Massey said he also provided his own contact information via the handouts.

Jones acknowledged, as well, that many of the St. Mary's meeting participants followed up by attending a FDOT public meeting at the Bradenton Area Convention Center to take the survey.

"I think it would be better, actually," Phillips said. "A lot of people don't want to try and get in here because of the traffic now. If they take all that traffic out of here, I think the locals know where we are and we'll probably increase business when it's easier to get in and out of here."

Josie Colon, manager at Zeko's Mediterranean Grill, 820 First St. W, agrees — especially if FDOT follows through on significant First Street improvements, including beautification and more lighting.

If they don't, Colon said, "We are going to be under a bridge, and I am concerned about that creating some hangout areas for the wrong kind of people. But yeah, I think it would end up being good for business if they do all that. It's 50-50 and can go either way, but if they can reduce this traffic where it literally blocks the intersection right in front of us, then that will be a good thing."

Massey said he didn't know why Jones would say FDOT is ignoring the voice of the First Street community.

"We are actually going the extra mile by setting up a working group committee with members of the community that came out of that meeting at St. Mary's," Massey said. "I don't know how it can be perceived we are not working with the African-American community. We had 10 people step forward that want to be a part of it, and we are in the process of organizing our meetings with them and actually setting that schedule up as of (Tuesday)."

FDOT is proposing the flyover or replacing the Desoto Bridge and adding a third bridge at either Ninth Street East, 15th Street East or 27th Street East. FDOT says those three options would face significant environmental and historical challenges.

Entrance onto the flyover would be around the 2700 block of First Street, where drivers would have to choose to take the overhead lanes across the river or divert onto local roadways. It will be the same in Palmetto, where the flyover would begin around the Bradenton Area Convention Center.

If the community doesn't like any of the options, then Massey has said FDOT also will consider a "no build" option — replace the Desoto Bridge and do nothing more.

Massey said other meetings are scheduled with various members of the community, including the Riviera Dunes community in Palmetto, which would be affected by the north side of the flyover.

"We also held two public meetings, one in Bradenton, which had a huge African-American turnout, and one in Palmetto, which also did," Massey said. "I don't know why that perception is out there, but we are certainly doing everything we can to make sure all of their questions are answered."

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