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City of Opalacka

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Community Background Report

City of Opa-Locka

County

Miami-Dade

Boundaries

North: N.W. 151st Street

South: N.W. 125th Street

West: N.W. 47th Avenue

East: N.W. 45th Avenue

Community Type

Municipality

History

It is hard to imagine that the City of Opa-Locka was once comparable to today's South Beach. Opa-Locka began as a vision of Glen Curtiss, the man responsible for developing the cities of Miami Springs and Hialeah. Occupying 4.2 miles in northern Miami Dade County, Opa-Locka is a page out of Arabian nights boasting one of the greatest collections of Moorish architecture in the Western Hemisphere. Curtiss approached Bernhardt Muller in 1925 about helping him create a city that was beautiful and unique, yet distinct from the Spanish Mediterranean architecture that dominated cities such as Coral Gables. The name Opa-Locka is derived from an Indian word "Opatishawockalocka" meaning "a big island covered with many trees and swamps." By 1921 Curtiss shortened the name to "Opa-Locka". Curtiss wanted Opa-Locka to be the most perfect city that planning and engineering could achieve and the most beautiful art man could conceive.

The City of Opa-Locka was incorporated in 1926. Curtis built more than 100 buildings with an array of domes, minarets, and outdoor staircases between 1925 and 1928 during Florida's land boom years. The streets bore names the characters from Arabian nights such as Sharazad, Alibaba, and Aladdin. In its early days, Opa-Locka was an all-white community that attracted middle class home buyers. The city had its own airport, zoo, golf course, archery club, and swimming pool. Shortly after the 1926 hurricane, which destroyed many of the structures, the U.S Navy opened a base at Opa-Locka Airport. The City began to decline when the Navy pulled out following World War II during the 1950s. By the 1980s, the white middle class was moving

out and the working middle class was moving in. The area became settled by black laborers who laid railroad tracks for the Seaboard rail line. Following this transition The City has experienced a sharp decline, become one of the most violent and poverty stricken communities in South Florida. The City has become a mix of residential, commercial and industrial zones with the Opa-Locka airport being its best known landmark.

Community Dynamics

Over the years, Opa-Locka has received a poor reputation for poverty and crime, especially in the "Triangle Area". In 2003, Opa-Locka was ranked as having the highest violent crime rate in the country for a city its size. According to the 1990 census, Opa-Locka grew less than one percent from 1980. The City has experienced high unemployment, poverty, and illiteracy rates. Of the households with children in the city, fifty-one percent are led by single parent mothers. Nearly four out of five Opa-Locka households receives some form of government assistance and fifty-two percent of resident 18 and older did not complete high school. Two-thirds of the population is black and the median age for the area is 27.3 years of age.

Under the direction of Mayor Joseph Kelly, city officials have vowed to turn the city around by focusing on crime prevention, cleaning up around the city, and reaching financial stability. Despite the fact that The City of Opa-Locka has had the highest taxes in the county for the past six years, in 2002, the state took over Opa-Locka's city budget after the city claimed it was in a financial emergency. Opa-Locka has not been able to find the funding to clean trash out of its canals or to buy basketball for kids in city parks. The city was eventually forced to close its only library in 2003 because of financial troubles. Much of the city's past financial problems are due to the miss-use of funds by past government officials such as excessive raises and lavish personal expenses.

Despite the plague of problems The City has encountered in the past, the city is trying to regain the spirit it was founded with in the 1920s. The Opa-Locka community has increased the sense of community and pride among its residents. The City offers programs that promote homeownership, improving the public schools, and repairing public infrastructure. The city has also capitalized on its Arabian Nights theme by an annual celebration called the Arabian Night's festival. At least 30 churches are crowded into the small city. Opa-Locka residents have access to three parks and recreation facilities. Despite its limited resources Texas Justice, Bad Boyz II, and 2 Fast 2 Furious

Sources

www.cityofopalocka.org

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