

A Vision for Ft. Pierce

Good evening, and thank you for the opportunity to speak on a subject that is very important to all of us; you, the public servants who give of your time and energy, we, the people assembled, and yes, the Reverend Jefferson, too.

My name is Alki Steriopoulos. I am a lifelong musician and composer, with an international career spanning over fifty years as a concert pianist, Broadway conductor, and film composer. My wife, a lifelong dancer, choreographer, artist, and I have called Ft. Pierce home for two years. We came to Ft. Pierce for many of the reasons people do; weather and affordability, certainly, but more importantly, the raw potential of what we believe Ft. Pierce can be – a destination, rather than a town to drive quickly through with doors locked en route from Vero Beach to West Palm.

Last year, a sizable group of interested citizens and Planning Department officials were invited to an open house, graciously hosted by Gus Gutierrez in one of his Orange Avenue holdings. There, easels and work-stations were set up asking us to list our priorities of what we wanted, needed, and *didn't* want, in a proposed Peacock Arts District. In short, what were our dreams and visions for the Renaissance of an area that remains underused, empty, and blighted. When these lists were tabulated and the numbers were crunched, it came as no surprise that the answers were uniform. We wanted theatre, music, dance. Restaurants, cafes, art galleries. Classes for young and old alike. Nowhere did another church appear on anyone's wish list.

Now, why is that? Is it because we are all godless heathens? No. My wife and I are church members. We attend services, and attempt to lead godly Christian lives. Could it be that the reason no one saw a need for another church was because that need was already well met? I say, yes.

Ft. Pierce has dozens of churches serving every denomination and ethnicity. We have Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Gospel. We have several churches serving the Haitian community. We even have a Muslim mosque nearby, one that God forgive us, has suffered for its religious identity. In the immediate Orange Avenue area and its adjacent boundaries there are probably dozens of places to worship, running the gamut from modest store-front neighborhood gatherings to grand churches with choirs and schools and social gatherings.

But in that same area how many dance schools are there? How many fine-dining establishments, coffee houses, acoustic jazz clubs? How many art schools, symphony orchestras, music schools? How many theatres, for film *and* live locally produced offerings? How many bike shops and book stores? The answer to all of these is none, zero, zilch, nada.

Now, ask yourselves in addition to the plentiful churches, how many bail bondsmen does Ft. Pierce boast? How many dollar stores and thrift shops? How many businesses dedicated to selling you booze, then fixing your drunk-driving ticket, and filling your closet with guns and ammo sufficient to shoot bad guys, good guys, drug gangs and children many times over. I think we all know the answer.

The real thing we are here to discuss tonight, the elephant in the room, isn't really about parking spaces, or limiting the number of people that can legally attend the Reverend's church. Is there anyone here foolish enough to believe that the parishioners will be counted and people turned away when the limit has been reached? And would anyone including the Reverend want a church that turned away a seeker because their quota had been met? I think not. No man's god would want such a church, the very idea of

such a place is counter to the teachings of Jesus, Buddha, or Mohammed.

Within the environs of the proposed Peacock Arts District and its neighbors to the north and south, we could have the next August Wilson, the next Alvin Ailey, the next Toni Morrison, fermenting in the minds and hearts of our youth. We could have the next Misty Copeland yearning to put on tights and a tutu but can't for lack of a solid dance school and the fear of leaving her house for gang cross-fire. For those who may not know, Misty Copeland is the first African American woman to become the principal dancer for ABT, the American Ballet Theatre.

It has been suggested that this new church will serve the community's needs in a way that might improve the quality of life of the neighborhood. Yet I look around and see all of these churches, good, solid, churches that have been established for decades that have failed to make a fundamental discernible improvement in the quality of life of the community, or the town.

Many of you were as outraged as I to have Ft. Pierce voted the worst town in Florida last year, by a poll citing crime, unemployment, and horrific teacher / student ratios in our city. A city where every other house is held by a far-away bank, foreclosed, forlorn, and empty; left to fall into the weeds becoming havens for crack-heads, rats, and other vermin.

I stand here tonight to ask you the Board, and the assembled on both sides of the immediate issue, to ask what kind of town do we envision for the future of Ft. Pierce? What is the foreseeable destiny of this place we all call home? To remain a town of too much of one and none of the other? Or a place that will welcome the arts and the humanities, invite vibrant newcomers, foster a new generation of creators, and flourish as a place where there is room to make beauty *and* worship God by whatever name you call Him?

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There is room for all, but only if this Board and current and future policy-makers commit now to beginning to lay that fertile ground. There are visionary developers wishing to provide these spaces, and people like myself that will teach and create the kind of beautiful experiences we so desperately need. But we will need an area dedicated to this re-birth and re-purposing. Another church, using a prime space primarily for Sunday services, that produces neither jobs nor tax revenues, while limiting the color and scope of the neighborhood, is neither wise nor necessary.

This is what we should be considering. This is what I ask you to think of when casting any vote that will impact the vision we have for our town, our town's future, and the Peacock Arts District. I ask you tonight to proclaim the Peacock Arts District and help us make it a reality.

I thank you.