

Atlantic City's Kentucky Avenue looks to return to prominence

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ATLANTIC CITY — For nearly three decades, the area around Kentucky Avenue was an entertainment and cultural hot spot for African Americans.

“Kentucky Avenue, in its heyday, was stupendous,” said Ralph Hunter Sr., founder of the African American Heritage Museum of Southern New Jersey. “Today, it’s a ghost town.”

Seemingly forgotten with the arrival of casinos in the late 1970s, “KY and the Curb,” as it was known, is now poised for a renaissance.

The Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, the state agency that oversees zoning and land use in Atlantic City’s Tourism District, has designated the area as an entertainment district, while a local activist has put forth an economic redevelopment plan for it.

With Club Harlem as its anchor, the Kentucky Avenue neighborhood was a destination where visitors could rub elbows and sip cocktails with some of the day’s biggest musicians and entertainers, from Billie Holiday to Sammy Davis Jr. People would line the streets waiting for a chance to get inside Grace’s Little Belmont, Paradise Club and Wonder Garden.

Nestled between the clubs and restaurants were small shops and businesses, almost all of which were owned and operated by black entrepreneurs.

Black music, food, art and culture were the center of Kentucky Avenue’s appeal between the 1930s and the 1960s.

“Coming in the ’50s, getting off the bus (from Philadelphia) and seeing thousands of people. ... It was (something) that I had not seen before,” said Hunter. “I had never seen so many people who looked like me — so proud, so wealthy, so healthy — and vacationing here in Atlantic City.”

While the glory years of Kentucky Avenue are long gone — a small plaque is the only thing that remains of Club Harlem, which closed in 1986 — some believe the neighborhood, and its African American roots, are vital to Atlantic City’s revitalization.

“Everything that the casinos have (now), we had in one block,” said Steve Young, president of Polaris Development Group LLC. “Before there was lottery, there was numbers on Kentucky Avenue. Before there was liquor being sold, we had bootleggers. Before there was gambling, there was dice in the back of the halls and the clubs. Everything we mastered and made good within our community, it was taken away and profited (on). You can’t even see it existed in our community.”

In 2011, Young and other community activists proposed an entertainment district for Kentucky Avenue, but efforts came up short. That same year, Polaris launched the Kentucky Avenue Renaissance Festival, a free street fair with live music, food and entertainment. Last summer, the festival returned for its eighth year.

Young said the festival helps “keep the culture going” in Atlantic City while plans for sustainable development and opportunity come to fruition.

In 2017, the CRDA included a Kentucky Avenue Renaissance District in its master plan for the Tourism District, which “honors the deep music and entertainment history in the neighborhood.” Polaris jumped at the opportunity to share its vision for Kentucky Avenue, presenting the state agency with an economic development plan that includes restaurants, shops, a non-casino hotel, an arts center and, of course, a nightclub. Young said he presented the concept to the CRDA in hopes the agency would assist the initiative the same way it has others, such as Tanger Outlets The Walk or the casinos.

“We have a plan to bring Club Harlem back, to bring back the stores, the restaurants, all of it,” he said. “But we want no more, no less than what these entities have given to other developers.”

CRDA did not immediately respond to a request for comment on what the agency’s plans are for Kentucky Avenue. In the time since Polaris presented its concept to CRDA, the authority has not made a formal decision.

Still, both Young and Hunter remain optimistic that Kentucky Avenue can, once again, be the “East Cost mecca” of black heritage and culture.

“I think we just have to move forward, and hopefully (Polaris) can work out a deal with the powers that be to get this thing started,” said Hunter. “I think it’s a great concept. Kentucky Avenue could come back.”