
BLAKE FONTENAY | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

I wrote a book about Stuart's past. It taught me a lot about the city's present. | Opinion

I believe there are people in Stuart, particularly some who have lived here much longer than I have, who still want to hold onto that friendlier, less-hurried way of life.



Blake Fontenay

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Key Points

Downtown underwent a major revitalization during the 1980s and 1990s.

That history is chronicled in Blake Fontenay's book, "Saving Stuart, Florida."

What happened in the 1980s and 1990s can offer lessons as current residents plan for the future.

The question was straightforward, but it still caught me a little off guard.

It happened a few weeks ago, at an event promoting my latest book, "Saving Stuart, Florida," at B Boutique, a bookstore on Ocean Boulevard in Stuart.

I was having an informal question-and-answer session with a few people who were interested in the book when a woman asked me what qualifications I had to write about a topic like that.

By that, she meant, how long had I lived in the city? Did my roots go back generations, to the early days when the small settlement along the St. Lucie River was known as Potsdam? Was I one of those elusive Florida natives that are often spoken of but less frequently encountered?

I answered the question the only way I honestly could: I had no special qualifications for writing the book, other than my reporting and writing skills and a general love of history. I only moved to the area about four years ago, which makes me a relative newcomer.

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Frankly, I was surprised to discover no one had already written about what happened in downtown Stuart 30- to 40-odd years ago. It's not hard to find books about the notorious Ashley Gang — bandits based in the Stuart area who took on legendary status during the Great Depression — but there was nothing about what I consider to be one of the community's greatest triumphs.

Downtown Stuart used to be down and out

After I had been living here a little while, people began sharing stories with me about the city's history. I was particularly interested in what happened during the 1980s and 1990s, when a determined group of business owners and residents saved downtown Stuart from oblivion.

When I learned how desolate downtown Stuart had become before that time period, I couldn't believe it. The streets were so deserted, the popular joke went, a person could roll a bowling ball down Osceola Street during the busiest parts of the day and not hit anybody.

A legislative poison pill: [State's new disaster relief law may stop local governments from limiting growth](#)

That didn't track with what I saw whenever I visited the downtown district, with rows of quaint shops along Osceola and Flagler Avenue. This part of town makes up the heart of a community, certainly with the help of other thriving neighborhoods, that has been [landing on national "best cities" lists left and right](#).

I couldn't get my mind around the idea downtown Stuart had once been so much less than what it is today. But it was.

In Stuart, as in other communities around the country, modern shopping malls and strip shopping centers were rendering traditional downtown shopping districts irrelevant. Since Stuart's historic district was several blocks from U.S. 1, the main road through town, it was particularly endangered.

At one point, it looked like Martin County officials might move the courthouse somewhere else — a stinging insult for the town designated as the county's seat of government.

A grassroots fight from the beginning

That narrative began changing when people in the community started fighting back.

When the city didn't have enough money to spruce up the police headquarters and surrounding areas, residents organized a volunteer community cleanup day to handle the work. (Hint: That's a tradition worth reviving.)

When county officials were talking about moving the jail and courthouse, residents started showing up at meetings wearing yellow ribbons as symbols of unity to protest the proposed moves.

Residents raised money to restore the Lyric Theatre. Two married couples took it upon themselves to buy and renovate The Arcade building.

Residents even fought to save Confusion Corner, when state Department of Transportation officials were considering an alignment for the new Roosevelt Bridge that would have eliminated dozens of buildings and reduced the city's strangest traffic feature to a mere four-way intersection.

The work of local residents was the common thread running through the story. There were some government officials involved, too, particularly at the city level, but often the key players bounced back and forth between private and public life, serving a couple of terms as commissioners, then continuing their work as citizen activists.

What made the whole effort work was the way residents and business owners were able to put aside their differences and unite toward the common goal of protecting an asset that meant something to all of them.

Not on every issue. Sure, there were squabbles about whether replacing parking spaces with landscaped curb cuts or filling in plain asphalt surfaces with paver-stone walkways were good uses of time and money. On the main goals and objectives, though, people seemed to agree and act accordingly.

Society has grown coarser in the decades since downtown's rebirth

I was going through high school and college when many of the important changes were made that transformed downtown Stuart into what it is today. A lot has happened since then.

Maybe too much. One of the reasons Confusion Corner survived the changes that took place in the 1980s was because it was a feature that was uniquely Stuart's. People associated the ability to negotiate the roundabout with a minimal amount of, well, confusion as a sign of how close-knit and friendly the town's population was.

Stuart residents weren't going to get too upset if somebody couldn't quite figure out which way they needed to turn at the point where Colorado Avenue, Dixie Highway and the railroad tracks all converge. Maybe a gentle beep of the horn or two, but nobody was going to erupt in road rage if passage through the intersection didn't go smoothly.

I believe there are people in Stuart, particularly some who have lived here much longer than I have, who still want to hold onto that friendlier, less-hurried way of life. There are also those who aren't particularly worried about bonding with the neighbors they might pass in the street every day, especially if they happen to have different political beliefs.

There are a lot of people in town divided into camps: Pro-Brightline or anti-Brightline. Pro-Costco or anti-Costco. The next big divisive argument could be

looming right around the corner.

Reasonable people can disagree on issues. It's a story as old as time. In this modern era, however, it's becoming harder to find people who are willing to compartmentalize their disagreements.

There's a mindset, often reinforced by toxic keyboard warriors on social media, that if someone disagrees with you on an important issue, that person must be an enemy to be demonized and discredited. Once someone starts attacking another person's character in front of their friends and neighbors on social media, it's hard to stuff that genie back in the bottle and resume any kind of a normal relationship.

It was never about storefronts or streetscaping

On May 30, I'll be participating in a [Stuart Main Street](#)-sponsored event celebrating the city's history, which is sort of a capstone to Martin County's Historic Preservation Month. After a keynote speech from Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, famous urban planners who helped shape the city's vision in the 1980s, and a panel discussion featuring some of the movers and shakers who helped bring that vision to life, I'll once again be signing books and taking questions.

If someone asks what qualified me to write a book like mine, I'll have a different answer: I'll say I felt possessed by the same community spirit that helped bring about those momentous changes in the 1980s and 1990s.

It's that spirit — not the quaint storefronts, flower boxes or paver-stone pedestrian crossings — that made Stuart special. I hope it can withstand the test of time.

This column reflects the opinion of [Blake Fontenay](#). Contact him via email at bfontenay@gannett.com or at 772-232-5424.

