

Rail line stirs bad memories in black neighborhood

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ST. PAUL, Minn. — ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) - When the Rev. George Davis learned the government was coming to take his family's home to make room for a shiny new interstate, he told his loved ones he'd defend 304 Rondo Avenue with a shotgun.

But Davis was old, about 80, and his wife Bertha was blind by then. When the police came one day in 1956, he went quietly. And soon Rondo - St. Paul's only black neighborhood - was torn in two, dozens of homes and businesses leveled.

Historically, major public works projects often uproot black and other minority neighborhoods the hardest, leaving communities decimated and longtime residents with little or no compensation. Now, just as what used to be Rondo is finally starting to rebuild itself thanks to new businesses and strong community groups, another transportation mega-project is ticketed to come blazing through the same neighborhood.

It's a \$1 billion, 11-mile light rail line that's dredging up both bad memories and new fears that history will repeat itself.

"People want to know that this community's aspirations, its desires and integrity are respected. We don't want to be locked out of the renaissance," said Nathaniel Khaliq, who heads the St. Paul NAACP.

Supporters of the rail line say it will bring economic benefits to an area that desperately needs them by attracting new residents. But some neighbors and merchants see a huge downside: a lengthy construction that limits easy access to nearby businesses, and a rise in property values that could force longtime, low-income residents out of their homes.

Some of the critics have filed a federal lawsuit, fighting for a piece of the promised prosperity. They're seeking an emergency fund to help businesses weather construction, and tax incentives and housing policies that protect current residents against new development.

The NAACP is the lead plaintiff in that lawsuit, and for Khaliq the fight is personal: The Rev. Davis was his grandfather, and Khaliq grew up in the house that was lost to Interstate 94.

Davis arrived in St. Paul from Texas decades earlier, one of the millions of blacks who migrated from south to north in the early 20th Century. For those that made it as far north as St. Paul, they were drawn by jobs in the flour mills and stockyards as well as the hotels and train cars.

And for blacks, Rondo was the place to be. There they could own homes and run their own businesses with little interference from the whites, a rare thing in those days before the civil rights gains of the mid-1960s.

"This was our neighborhood," said Khaliq, now 66. "We had grocery stores here, there were taverns here, there were restaurants, barber shops. A little bit of everything."

Then, about 650 property owners learned the state would lose their land to eminent domain, and they scattered to what remained on either side of the interstate or other neighborhoods.

"When Rondo died, a lot of economic aspirations died with it," said Khaliq, whose office wall is decorated with a photocopied newspaper photo of his grandfather being led to a squad car, a moving van in the background.

Peter Bell has his own Rondo memories. The 58-year-old chairman of Minnesota's Metropolitan Council was just 5 when his family's house was taken. When they were forced to move, he cried.

Now Bell is the man pushing the light rail project. He heads the Metropolitan Council, the lead defendant in the lawsuit, and insists the project has "more pluses than minuses." He said it's becoming nearly impossible to gain momentum on major public works projects as interest groups threaten lawsuits to get expensive concessions.

Already, two powerhouses along different stretches of the proposed line have wrung a few financial victories. The University of Minnesota, concerned about loud construction and a traffic mess, is getting almost \$33 million to be spent in part on a new pedestrian mall. Minnesota Public Radio, worried that train vibrations could affect broadcast equipment, got a pledge of \$3 million to pay for a rubber pad underneath the track, dampening vibrations.

And those who filed the lawsuit have taken note of that other groups have gotten concessions.

Now known as Frogtown, parts of old Rondo used to house adult bookstores and gun shops but now is a bustling mix of ethnic restaurants, hair salons and other shops owned by both longtime black residents and, more recently, southeast Asian immigrants.

"For a long time this neighborhood was very bad," said Long Her, who has run a clothing store for more than 20 years. He, like many, are concerned whether his business will fit into the new Rondo. "I'm just very, very worried for when this project starts."

The street-level track will be just outside the front door of Her's store on University Avenue. Though no homes or businesses will be taken through eminent domain, a number of Her's fellow merchants have bright red signs in their windows that warn, "Light rail is coming! Save our businesses and jobs."

The line is Minnesota's most expensive public works project. To be completed in 2014, it would connect the downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul, with the federal government paying half the construction cost, the regional Counties Transit Improvement Board paying 30 percent, the state 10 percent, Ramsey County 7 percent and Hennepin County 3 percent.

A line that linked downtown Minneapolis to the airport opened in 2004 and has 30,000 riders a day. The Metropolitan Council credits that line for thousands of new housing built along that corridor.

Bell says the same can happen in Rondo.

"There will be economic development and there will be revitalization," Bell said, "and what I would ask the critics is, 'Do you consider that a good thing? Would the neighborhood be better off without it?'"



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