

Opa-locka airport lease to enhance economic opportunities

Contributed by JOY-ANN REID

OPA-LOCKA — A non-profit organization chaired by former U.S. Rep. Carrie P. Meek is aimed at bringing new business, and revenue, to the city of Opa-locka.

The Carrie Meek Foundation won unanimous approval last month from the Miami-Dade County Commission to lease space at the Opa-locka Airport for a mixed-use industrial park that would include retail and office space, as well as a business incubator.

The 121-acre facility, to be called the Opa-Locka Aviation and Commerce Center, will seek to attract transportation-related businesses to rent warehouse and commerce space.

Meek said the project is needed in order to spur the kind of development in Opa-locka that has come to neighboring Miami Gardens.

“As we know, Opa-locka has had a big crime problem, and much of it is probably related to the lack of economic development and job creation,” she said. “If there's one thing we do well, it should be job development, so people in Opa-locka can get jobs and try to live meaningful lives.”

Anthony Williams, 35, executive director of the Carrie Meek Foundation, said, “It's going to be a mixed use project. Primarily warehouse and hangar space but also including office space and a little retail, which will service workers in the industrial park as well as the surrounding community.”

Williams said the goal will be to attract “businesses [that] need to move goods by land and by air,” and, he said, “Opa-locka Airport is perfectly positioned for both of these.”

The plan, first introduced by Miami-Dade County Commissioner Barbara Jordan in May 2007, grants a 40-year lease to the Foundation on land previously leased to the Opa-locka Community Development Corporation.

The county terminated the CDC's lease last April, citing the organization's failure to secure financing to develop the site, or to initiate any development since the original lease was signed in 1986, and reinstated ten years later.

The county hopes to improve on that this time, requiring the foundation to invest at least \$110 million in the facility within nine years, and to pay more than \$26,000 a month in rent to the county, which owns the airport.

The agreement with the county also requires the foundation to give ten percent of revenues generated by the industrial park to the city of Opa-locka, to be used for economic development and job training programs. Another 20 percent will go to community organizations through a competitive bid process, and the rest will be administered by the foundation for programs Williams says will focus on training Opa-locka residents and fostering small business development. The county will receive 7 percent of gross revenues beginning 35 years into the lease.

In approving the project, the commission mandated that 20 acres of the industrial park be built within four years, 70 within six years, and the entire 121-acre facility completed within nine years.

Williams, a former aide to Carrie Meek's son, U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, said that neither the former congresswoman, who chairs the foundation, nor any members of the board of directors, receives a salary.

The foundation employs four staffers, including Williams, plus a team of consultants. The number of staff is expected to grow as a result of the project, which Williams said he hopes will eventually provide between 1,500 and 2,500 jobs.

The average median income in Opa-locka is less than half that of the state, and more than one third of families live below the federal poverty line, which is \$22,000 for a family of four.

As of 2005, Opa-locka's median income was \$20,300, versus \$42,433 for the state as a whole, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The U.S. median income in 2005 was \$48,200.

Williams said the foundation is in talks with the Miami-Dade Chamber of Commerce to create a business incubator that could include office space for small start-ups, plus access to technical and clerical support.

"That's one of the critical areas that we are negotiating with our co-developers, to make sure the incubator is a part of the project," he said.

The project also won approval from the Miami-Dade Aviation Department, which runs the airport, and from the Federal Aviation Administration. Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez signed off on the project at the end of July.

Both Meek and Williams called the partnerships crucial to the project's success.

Said Meek: "We're not trying to be a developer. We're not trying to be a landlord. But we feel that the foundation is suited to identifying and trying to define and express the needs of the community."

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Photo by Khary Bruyning. Carrie Meek