

POINCIANA – It was a very proud moment for Jose A. Claudio when he watched the students at New Dimensions High School perform the musical “Grease.”

Claudio, a local **resident** and volunteer at Palmetto Elementary School, noted that the students at the charter school on Pleasant Hill Road were performing the show on Thursday and Friday, and he encouraged everyone to get out and see it.

Keith Laytham, another Poinciana resident, heartily agreed.

“It’s a Broadway musical of ‘Grease,’ and it’s as well done as anything you will see,” Laytham said. “This drama course has got a teacher, and each semester **he** gives them a Broadway course to do.”

The sense of pride that Claudio and Laytham experienced when they watched the show was tempered by a feeling of frustration – namely, that the word wasn’t getting out that Poinciana had so many talented students, and a high school **capable** of fully utilizing their talents.

That’s why both Laytham and Claudio are members of Poinciana Residents for Smart Change, a group formed about three years ago to look for ways to help Poinciana cope with its growing pains – and to make it a better place to live.

When the housing market was hot, so was Poinciana. But the collapse of the market has left Poinciana with a lot of people, and a lot of challenges -- including an identity crisis.



And they think part of their job is to **trumpet** the good things going on in Poinciana – and not just become known for a high home foreclosure rate, abandoned homes and plummeting prices in the wake of the housing market crash.

“The point is communication,” Laytham said. “We don’t have any budget. We have volunteers only. But we try to bring the residents together.”

And part of that, he added, is reminding people that good things do happen in Poinciana. Just ask the students at New Dimensions?

Poinciana certainly has become known in recent years for its problems. The community of 10 villages that crosses Polk and Osceola counties was one of the fastest growing in the past decade – according to the U.S. Census, since 2000 Poinciana has grown by 279 percent.

The growth was fueled by a housing market that caught fire between 2004 and 2006, and led to a construction boom. The community’s unofficial population count is between 69,000 and 83,000 – more than some cities.

The rapid growth brought a lot of newcomers to Poinciana – and a lot of challenges. Traffic is well known to be very congested in the morning on the major roadways like Poinciana Boulevard and Pleasant Hill Road, but the efforts of the community’s leading builder, Avatar, to

construct a new toll road that would connect residents more quickly to Interstate 4 has been stalled by money woes in Osceola County. Last year, **the** Osceola County commissioners placed a referendum on the November ballot, asking county residents to approve a sales tax hike to fund the Poinciana Parkway and 10 other county road projects, but it lost, 70-30 percent.

The housing boom that fueled the growth crashed, and Poinciana now has a painfully high home foreclosure rate and its share of abandoned homes. Prices have fallen sharply since the peak in 2006, and businesses have closed, including the Winn-Dixie that had been a mainstay in the community for years.

Still, Poinciana Residents for Smart Change see hope for the future.

Osceola Regional Medical Center is building the community's first hospital, and will break ground later this year on the first phase of the project, a medical arts building.

"They're now in the phase of leasing offices for the medical arts building," said Fernando Valverde, another member of Residents for Smart Change.

While that project is likely to provide a much welcome boost to the local economy, more needs to be done, Valverde said – including finding ways to bring together government leaders from both Polk and Osceola, and the state, to help address some of the community's ongoing needs.

"It goes to strategies," Valverde said. "How can you make this a better **place**? Get more people involved. We're not politically organized."

"Politically, it's very difficult," Laytham agreed **since Poinciana crosses two counties, three state legislative districts, two state senate districts and two separate state transportation districts who represents Poinciana?** Claudio said the counties should do more to bring public parks to Poinciana, and other programs and services for young people.

"We're just now getting a park," he said of the new park that Polk County built in Poinciana's Village 7, known **unofficially** as "Pocket" park.

"We have a growing community with no public facilities," Claudio said.

Laytham agreed, noting that nearby Haines City just built a banquet facility on Lake Eva Park and a new aquatics center next to it – providing great opportunities there for young people **and families**. Why, he asked, can't Poinciana get the same thing?

"Haines City has a wonderful water center," he said. "It's beautiful. But look at the population of Haines City – it's 20,000 people. Look at Poinciana? According to the U.S. Census, we're at 83,000. That's pretty big. Of that 83,000 people, there's probably 26,000 that are kids."

Poinciana also suffers from an identity crisis, said Venita Saunders, who is also a member of Residents for Smart Change.

"There are so many people in Polk County who say, 'Where is Poinciana?' " said Saunders, who lives in Village 7 on the Polk County side of Poinciana.

"They've heard of it," she said, "but they don't know where it is."

Valverde went back to the students performing in "Grease." It's critical, he said, to find ways to keep them in the community so they can become a part of the effort to improve it.

"The secret is in the upcoming youth," he said. "We need to develop pride in our youth."

"Grease" will be performed on Thursday and Friday at 7 p.m. in the New Dimensions High School auditorium. The school is at 4900 Old Pleasant Hill Road. To learn more, call 407-870-9949.

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