WHY NOT US?:

Infrastructural Citizenship in Eatonville, Florida

By Gramond McPherson

Race in the United States helped shape the geography of highway and road construction in the post-World War II era as federal, state, and local governments along with private investors often targeted black communities to deliberately clear a “blighted” area or because these communities seemed to offer the path of least resistance. However, black communities did not act passively in resisting these changes. Residents employed various methods of “infrastructural citizenship” — a term coined by urban historian Kyle Shelton — including lobbying, court litigation, and historic preservation in exercising their rights to define their own spaces. Yet, these methods often produced uneven results for black communities, compared to white communities, in achieving their goals. During the 1980s, the predominately black town of Eatonville, Florida faced this dilemma as Orange County sought to widen the main thoroughfare through their community, which some residents feared would effectively destroy their town. A unanimous decision by county commissioners to widen the congruent roadway of Kennedy Boulevard through Eatonville and Lake Avenue through neighboring Maitland from two to five lanes in 1987 seemed destined to follow this narrative.

What Is Infrastructural Citizenship?

With proposed changes such as new or expanded roads, commercial development, and housing, infrastructural citizenship — coined by Kyle Shelton — allows residents to contribute and have an impact on what occurs in their community. In taking ownership of their property, streets and land, ordinary residents demonstrate their political power through protesting, lobbying, attending public meetings and pursuing legal action and historic preservation against threats they perceive will negatively impact their community. Thus, government officials or private investors must consider the public opinions of residents regarding proposed infrastructural changes.

In response to the county’s refusing to reopen the widening decision to further debate, residents of Eatonville and Maitland, along with other sympathetic citizens, formed the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community, Inc. (commonly referred to as the P.E.C.). Despite facing great odds in going against the more powerful entity of Orange County, P.E.C. secured several key victories in its first decade: the successful cancellation of the widening project after six years, the establishment of the annual Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities, and the town’s registry into the National Register of Historic Places. So why did the P.E.C. succeed in its fight when many other black communities experienced limited to no success despite their best efforts? A major factor came through the intercommunity alliance of the P.E.C., Eatonville, and Maitland in combining resources of infrastructural citizenship in fighting to preserve and protect their communities. Historically, many black communities have faced the challenge of going against a more powerful entity alone, but the P.E.C. provides a successful model of intercommunity alliance in seeking to redefine spaces endangered by infrastructural changes.

The controversy of Kennedy’s widening, as well as the formation of the P.E.C., requires understanding two pivotal periods in Eatonville’s history. The first period relates to Eatonville’s founding amid the tense racial climate of Jim Crow Florida in the late nineteenth century, as recounted in several town histories and biographies. In the aftermath of the Civil War, freed slaves looking for employment opportunities settled along with white Northerners in Central Florida. In 1885, Union veterans incorporated the town of Maitland, largely through recruiting black citrus grove workers as residents to meet the minimum quota of thirty registered voters. However, as black residents soon outnumbered whites in the town, whites sought to address their diluted power by placing a legal notice in the Maitland Courier which proposed allowing blacks to incorporate their own town on donated land west of Maitland. On August 15, 1887, twenty-seven black men voted unanimously to incorporate the town of Eatonville on approximately 112 acres of land secured by Lewis Lawrence, a Northern philanthropist and Josiah C. Eaton, the namesake of the future town. Eatonville, located one mile west of Maitland and six miles north of Orlando, developed into a self-sufficient black town centered around the three institutions of family, church, and school. This history formed the town’s identity, a heritage the P.E.C. fought to preserve and protect exactly a century later in 1987.

**BACKGROUND**

“Sometimes government has to do things that are not in the best interest of individuals they think at the time, but they have to move forward... in a few years you [Eatonville] will look back and say it’s a good thing.” - County Chairman Tom Dorman

**During the 1980s, Orange County proposed widening Kennedy Boulevard in Eatonville and Lake Avenue in Maitland from two to five lanes to alleviate suburban traffic.**

Eatonville’s officials and residents voiced their opposition to the widening of Kennedy east of Wymore Drive, near Interstate 4, in seeking to spare the impact on the historic homes and businesses in the heart of the town while Maitland residents also feared the effects on their homes and businesses.

Despite these concerns, the county on November 23, 1987, voted unanimously to widen Kennedy/Lake, seemingly bringing closure to the issue with construction set to begin the following year.

Ironically, as Eatonville celebrated its centennial anniversary months earlier in August of 1987, the future survival of the town now lay at stake.
The second pivotal period came amid Orange County’s growth and transformation after World War II as the county’s population nearly increased tenfold from about 70,000 in 1940 to nearly 700,000 by 1990. Interstate 4 helped connect Orange County to other metropolitan areas in the state but split Eatonville in half while denying the town a direct entry or exit ramp to the highway. The western end of Eatonville experienced more development as the influx of new residents during the 1960s saw the addition of new homes and businesses to the town. Eatonville’s population, which historically averaged a few hundred people, grew from 857 in 1960 to 2,024 by 1970, yet remained stagnant during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in comparison to the rapid growth of neighboring cities, towns, and census-designated areas. Politically, these changes became associated with the Sunbelt, a term that envisioned a new conservative coalition of white suburban voters for the Republican Party from the South and West. This trend is evidenced by Orange County’s supporting Republican presidential candidates from 1948 through the 1996 elections. Additionally, until the creation of a minority-majority House district serving the black populace between Jacksonville and Orlando in 1993, conservative Republican congressmen represented Eatonville in Congress between 1963 to 1993, with the lone exception of centrist Democratic U.S. Congressman Bill Nelson between 1979 to 1983.

Even before its formation, the P.E.C. faced challenges due to metropolitan politics. Nationally, the decline of central cities coincided with the rise of suburbanization, with increased automobile use, interstate highways, and white flight from urban cities. While Orlando in 1940 represented just over half of Orange County’s population, by 1990, that ratio reduced to just under a quarter of the overall county population. Until the influx of Hispanic residents beginning in the 1990s, white residents maintained a supermajority in Orange County with black residents, including Eatonville, representing only about fifteen percent of the county’s population between 1970 and 1990, limiting their influence and political power. During the 1980s, Orange County residents voted at-large for county commissioners as opposed to voting in single-member districts. The county commission consisted of five districts, with one commissioner chosen to serve as the chairman, usually from the majority party, which favored Republicans. Tom Dorman, the commissioner of District 2, a largely white voting populace which also included Eatonville, served as the chairman at the time of the vote in 1987.
As county governments develop their county plans, tensions often occur between county and city governments regarding the planning and zoning of land. During the 1980s, Orange County’s vision of alleviating suburban traffic through the widening of Kennedy/Lake countered Eatonville’s and Maitland’s visions for their municipalities. Eatonville’s officials and residents voiced their opposition to the widening of Kennedy east of Wymore Road, near Interstate 4, in seeking to spare the impact on the historic homes and businesses in the heart of the town while Maitland residents also feared the effects on their homes. Yet, in narratives of metropolitan politics, officials bluntly state how some communities may have to suffer or experience inconvenience for the overall benefit of the growing majority. In talking with Eatonville officials Chairman Dorman stated, “Sometime government [sic] has to do things that are not in the best interest of individuals they think at the time, but they have to move forward...in a few years you [Eatonville] will look back and say it’s a good thing.” Thus, on November 23, 1987, the five county commissioners unanimously voted to widen Kennedy/Lake, seemingly bringing closure to the issue with construction set to begin the following year. Ironically, as Eatonville celebrated its centennial anniversary, the future survival of the town now lay at stake.

Yet, the county’s refusal to revisit the widening issue led to the creation of the grassroots organization, the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community Inc. (P.E.C.), dedicated to protecting Eatonville from this threat. Going against the county looked daunting, but the P.E.C. benefited from an intercommunity alliance between the organization, the town of Eatonville, and the city of Maitland. Though the alliance faced many challenges that threatened its effectiveness, the combined use of resources for a common cause played a major role in the eventual cancellation of the Kennedy/Lake widening. The importance of these resources helped set the P.E.C. apart from other movements by African Americans. While blacks have experienced greater political power since the 1960s, black communities still often lack the additional resources from outside sympathizers in preventing similar infrastructural changes, forcing black residents to seek to influence change themselves. For example, in Houston’s black Third Ward during the 1970s, the Third Ward Community Preservation Council fought to prevent the further widening of Interstate 45, which threatened to displace more residents. Yet, as many of the residents lacked the financial and human resources to pursue historic preservation and court litigation, their efforts failed.
Instead, successful resistance requires immediate, consistent, and persistent involvement towards a cause. In Memphis, Tennessee, for two decades beginning in the 1960s, The Citizens to Preserve Overton Park resisted plans to build Interstate 40 through Overton Park. By building a network of outside supporters, lobbying, and pursuing court litigation helped delay the project until its eventual cancellation in 1981. The P.E.C., as a grassroots movement years later, followed a similar model. The organization built on a tradition of Eatonville residents fighting to protect their town from outside interests. During the 1960s, in compliance with the U.S. Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education desegregation order, Orange Wymore Road lacked merit in stating a two to three-lane roadway adequately handled traffic in the area. Over the course of the widening controversy, various residents, activists, and leaders such as Martha Williams and Eunice Baker of Eatonville and Germaine Marvel and Margaret Schellang of Maitland embodied the resistance of the alliance in supporting the P.E.C.’s agenda and using their voices and influence to oppose the widening. Through the alliance, the three entities of the P.E.C., Eatonville, and Maitland raised money for attorney’s fees with potluck dinners while local merchants donated their services to the organization, including creating P.E.C. bumper stickers and collecting signatures for petitions.

THE ORANGE CO. COMMISSION DOESN'T LISTEN TO THE PEOPLE! P.E.C. ’88

County Schools integrated the school system and turned Eatonville’s historic Hungerford High School into an alternative school to provide vocational training and career education for non-college bound students in 1967. Additionally, the county school board called for the closure of Hungerford Elementary. However, the Eatonville community rallied to save the school and, through the efforts of residents, attorney Paul Perkins, and Mayor Nathaniel Vereen, the town ultimately achieved success. In fighting to stop the widening of Kennedy/Lake, Eatonville and the P.E.C. hoped to have similar successes.

The name of the organization, the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community Inc., literally expresses the group’s aim to preserve the town of Eatonville against any damaging effects on its community. The P.E.C., organized by N.Y. Nathiri, a native of Eatonville who resided in neighboring Winter Park, sought to recruit sympathetic parties to support its cause. At the first formal meeting on Monday, December 7, 1987, about 175 individuals from both Eatonville and Maitland came to a rally at Saint Lawrence A.M.E Church in Eatonville with the purpose of collecting fifty thousand signatures by January of 1988 to persuade the county commission to hold another public meeting. Additionally, the P.E.C. recruited Walter Kulash, a Maitland engineer who lived on Lake Avenue, to conduct a traffic study free of charge to the organization. He concluded that the widening of Kennedy east of

Additionally, recent changes within Eatonville’s town council helped facilitate the eventual formation of the P.E.C. Before March of 1987, residents who wished to speak before the town council needed to submit a formal request to the town hall the Thursday before a Tuesday council meeting. However, with the elections of Ada Sims, a former council member, and Merille Glover to open council seats, they advocated for setting aside thirty minutes at the end of council meetings for public comments, giving residents three minutes to speak without a prior request. Despite Eatonville’s mayor Abraham Gordon’s vehement opposition to the measure, Sims, Glover and two other council members passed the measure, immediately turning the town council meeting from brief and unentertaining to long, standing-room-only debate platforms by leaders and residents of Eatonville. Maitland’s Public Period at council meetings also allowed for citizens to express their concerns before the city council. The importance of these measures validates how various residents who attended these meetings became more politically aware of the key issues and events occurring within Eatonville and outside the community including the proposed widening of Kennedy. The formation of the P.E.C. within a week of the vote by county officials demonstrates the effectiveness of such a provision in immediately mobilizing Eatonville and Maitland residents along with outside supporters.
Yet success did not occur quickly as the alliance still faced various challenges. One such challenge involved the differences between the three entities over the scale of the widening. In the preceding months before the county’s final vote, Eatonville and Maitland officials both demanded a three-lane road option instead of the proposed five lanes. Yet at the November 23, 1987 commission meeting, Eatonville’s mayor Gordon inadvertently accepted a concession from the county that narrowed the widening of Kennedy from eighty-seven feet to eighty feet to protect Eatonville homes and businesses. When Mayor Gordon accepted this compromise, he undercut the effort by Maitland to secure a three-lane roadway. As Maitland’s council member Bill Donegan stated, “When Eatonville said five lanes were okay, we were all dead in the water.” Gordon, along with Maitland’s mayor EX Blachka sought in vain to reverse the county’s decision. After accepting an invitation to speak before Eatonville’s council weeks later on December 15, Chairman Dorman affirmed, “This is an entire County [sic] problem not specifically here [Eatonville]… [and] we are going to do everything humanly possible to protect Eatonville.” Yet, when Maitland passed a resolution calling for additional public meetings, the county maintained its hardline stance of refusing to discuss the issue further.

Furthermore, the varying ideologies of Eatonville’s leadership also complicated the alliance. Despite the P.E.C. initially having the unanimous support of the town council in December of 1987, a month later, Mayor Gordon reversed his position and supported the five-lane widening of Kennedy which he claimed would economically benefit the town. Gordon’s pro-business ideology of attracting businesses to Kennedy drew opposition from council members like Ada Sims, who advocated for controlled development in Eatonville. The varying ideologies created factions within Eatonville’s leadership of those who supported the mayor’s agenda and those who held countering views. With mayoral and council elections every two years, between 1987 and 1993, five different mayors served the town: Gordon, former mayor Vereen, James Williams, Sims, and Harry Bing, each with varying ideologies on the widening and other issues impacting the town. While these divisions seemed problematic at the time, in the long run, they kept Eatonville from compromising or settling on any proposal independent of the alliance.

However, the alliance remained tenacious in lobbying and using their political connections in fighting the county. As the county still refused to debate the widening issue, Donegan, one of Maitland’s council members who opposed the five-lane widening, sought to influence change from within the county commission itself. In the November 1988 election, Donegan, with the support from Eatonville and Maitland residents, won a seat on the commission with the promise of seeing the widening issue brought up for further debate. As the widening of Kennedy/Lake would have more detrimental effects in Eatonville than in Maitland, having an ally on the commission could benefit the overall alliance. Immediately after his election, Donegan, at the December 5, 1988 meeting, sought to fulfill his promise by delaying the public meeting for the right-of-way resolution for the widening until a month later on January 3. By then, Donegan planned to present an official three-lane road resolution from Eatonville along with a formal presentation offering new evidence in support of the three-lane option before the commission.

In referencing the insensitivity of the commission towards local residents, Donegan stated that for Eatonville “We are not dealing with just a road widening…Eatonville has some intrinsic value that you and I don’t understand.” Yet, Donegan’s appeal fell on deaf ears as the other county commissioners dismissed his motion before it could even gain momentum. Despite the setback, the alliance vowed to continue pressing on with Nathiri stating that the P.E.C. remained committed to the cause for the long haul as Eatonville and Maitland’s mayors vowed the same.

The epitome of this long-haul resistance came through utilizing court litigation. While often used as a last resort, court litigation is one of the most effective uses of infrastructural citizenship because it brings a neutral third party to help settle disputes between two opposing sides. Despite the three entities in the alliance pursuing legal action independent of one another, their combined efforts contributed to their success against Orange County. While the P.E.C.’s efforts to sue the county fell short, the organization led the way and helped set the standard for the alliance. As early as February of 1988, the P.E.C. threatened to sue the county and appealed for the support of Eatonville officials. Yet, while supported by some officials like James Williams, who co-wrote and presented the P.E.C.’s resolution before the town council, others such as Mayor Gordon and town attorney Joe Morrell cautioned against involving the town in the suit. At the time, Eatonville remained in negotiations with the county over providing fire and police services for the town, and the P.E.C.’s lawsuit would damage those efforts. Morrell and Gordon also objected to the P.E.C.’s representing the interest of the town because they felt the won’s future might be put in jeopardy. Nathiri, the P.E.C.’s representative, harshly reasserted this notion and defended the organization’s purpose in seeking to preserve the integrity of the town and pointing out that the organization did not need any money from the town in suing the county.

Thus, the P.E.C. pursued suing the county without the assistance of Eatonville officials, though both the name and makeup of the organization essentially linked the two entities by circumstance. The organization’s attorney Al Frith argued for the inconsistency of the county’s growth management plan and stated that widening Kennedy would destroy the integrity of Eatonville. Yet, after suing the county in March of 1988, two months later on May 26, Orange County Circuit Judge Cecil Brown dismissed the case as lacking merit. Despite appealing to the 5th District Court of Appeals in Daytona Beach, on December 20, 1988, a three-judge panel defined the widening of a road as a political issue versus a legal issue in upholding the decision by the lower court. Ultimately the full six-judge panel of the appeals court came to the same conclusions on February 7, 1989 and the organization chose not to pursue further legal action in appealing to a higher court.

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However, Eatonville, after a change of leadership from Mayor Gordon to former Mayor Vereen in March of 1988, also began to explore legal action while the P.E.C’s case pended. By May of 1988, Eatonville’s council unanimously agreed to threaten a suit against the county unless they held another public meeting. As Eatonville and Orange County officials met to settle their differences as required by state law, the county, a few months later, in August offered a compromise of a four-lane, landscaped road with amenities such as a grass median, off-street parking, traffic lights, crosswalks, and a historic monument of Eatonville’s history. However, this compromise depended on the town pressuring the P.E.C to drop its suit against the county. Though divisions existed within Eatonville’s leadership, many who supported the P.E.C., made such a unified stance on a compromise nearly impossible. By September of 1988, Orange County independently settled on the four-laned option and fighting the P.E.C’s suit, then under appeal, separately.

Yet, Maitland’s suit carried the biggest impacts to the alliance, which benefited all three entities. Shortly after the P.E.C.’s threat of suit in February of 1988, Marilynne Davis, Maitland’s city manager in 1987 and 1988, advised the city to pursue legal action in arguing the city could present a viable case against the county and appealed for Eatonville to join their suit before proceeding independently. Utilizing the firm of Foley & Lardner, van den Berg, Gay, Burke, Wilson & Arkin and allocating $50,000 to the suit, Maitland sued the county a few months later on June 2. After suffering a setback on September 1, 1988 by Judge Cecil Brown who dismissed the case, Maitland appealed to the Court of Appeals, and a three-judge panel on June 13, 1989 overturned Brown’s ruling, deeming Maitland’s case worthy of trial. In addition, under Florida law, governments who plan to sue one another must meet within thirty days to potentially resolve the issue before going to court. Despite doing so for Eatonville, the county failed to meet with Maitland, resulting in Judge Brown’s earlier ruling on December 1, 1988 that the county must reimburse and pay for Maitland’s attorney fees and costs. If Maitland and the alliance wanted to continue pursuing their fight against Orange County, they possessed the financial means to resist for the long haul.

Additionally, Maitland’s case delayed the scheduled construction of Kennedy/Lake in 1989, as construction could not begin while the case pended. As the delay extended into July of 1990, the alliance faced a test of its resolve and strength as Orange County offered Maitland a similar compromise to Eatonville of a four-laned landscaped road with amenities in exchange for settling the suit. At the July 9 council meeting, Maitland’s new city manager Phyllis Holvey recommended settling with the county, but Nathiri and the P.E.C urged Maitland to table its decision concerning the settlement in giving the organization and Eatonville the opportunity to work together with the city. Accepting the settlement would compromise Eatonville and the P.E.C.’s efforts to receive inclusion into the National Register of Historic Places. With pressure from the P.E.C., Eatonville officials and Maitland residents, who objected to a premature settlement with the county; Maitland, on July 23, formed an Ad Hoc Committee of seven Maitland residents to discuss the settlement and to present their recommendations to the city council. The committee also included Eatonville’s mayor Ada Sims and Paul Lilling, the city representative for the Orlando Urban Metropolitan Planning Organization as two non-voting members on the committee. As a result, Maitland did not settle its lawsuit with the county until 1993 in the aftermath of the county’s canceling its plans for widening Kennedy/Lake.

Furthermore, developments within the county commission impacted the intercommunity alliance. In 1990, led by county commissioner Linda Chapin, the county reallocated the $3 million earmarked for the project in seeking to tighten the county budget, effectively pushing the project construction date to the next fiscal year. Additionally, back in 1988, residents in Orange County approved changes to the county charter that ended the at-large voting of commissioners in favor of six single-member districts voted only by residents within the defined districts. Most significantly, residents also voted to create a more powerful chairman directly voted by all county voters starting in 1990. The chairman would serve as the chief executive in charge of setting the county’s agenda while the county commissioners served in a legislative role in approving the chairman’s policies. In the November 1990 election, Tom Dorman, the current chairman running for this new position, failed to win in the Republican primary. However, Chapin, running as a Democrat in a Republican-dominated county, pulled off the upset to become the first Mayor of Orange County.

While stating the need for improvements to Kennedy/Lake, Chapin’s reconciliatory stance to the intercommunity alliance differed from the hardline position maintained by the Dorman-led commission. Concerning Maitland’s lawsuit against the county, Chapin wrote to Eatonville and Maitland officials that “I no longer believe it is in anyone’s best interests for the county to impose our judgment over yours, generating ill will and expensive litigation, when there are many pressing needs to be met.” Between the delays caused by the pending lawsuits of Maitland along with the budget cuts, ultimately in 1993, after nearly six years of controversy, the county canceled its plans to widen Kennedy/Lake east of Wynmore Road, sparing the homes and businesses of Eatonville and Maitland residents. While circumstances beyond the control of the P.E.C. occurred, if fighting alone, the organization stood little chance against the more powerful entity of Orange County. Nonetheless, despite various challenges, the alliance, through combining resources of infrastructural citizenship, successfully defused the threat of the damaging effects of the widening.

Yet, as important a role as the P.E.C. played in stopping the widening of Kennedy Boulevard, the organization also contributed to the revival of Eatonville’s cultural awareness in boosting and promoting the town’s image into national prominence. Another component of infrastructural citizenship involves residents transforming their homes and local streets from inert materials
of the built environment to active vehicles to assert their political power and to redefine their sense of place. Additionally, the concept of the power of place involves using ordinary landscapes to nurture citizens’ public memories that form a community’s identity. For the P.E.C., opposing the widening of Kennedy involved more than just resisting road improvements, but protecting and preserving their special town. As P.E.C. member Germaine Marvel stated, “This is Eatonville’s main street — this is where the schools, the grocery stores, the churches in this little town are located.”

One method of promoting cultural awareness within a town is celebrating the memory of influential residents. For Eatonville, this came in the person of Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960), a black folklorist and a member of the Harlem Renaissance who featured the town, her hometown, throughout her works. Despite her relevance as a black female voice during her lifetime, she often received criticism for pandering to white fantasies in her use of black minstrel characters and for her later conservative political views such as opposing the Brown v. Board of Education decision which saw her fade into oblivion by the time of her death in 1960. However, various artists and scholars influenced by her work since the late 1970s, such as Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, have resurrected her from oblivion and her works like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* have become fixtures in literature and women’s studies. Thus, the P.E.C. sought a way to both celebrate Hurston while also celebrating the history of Eatonville, culminating in the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts. Various individuals helped organize the festival including Nathiri, along with P.E.C. board members Eddis T. Dexter and Rev. James A. Shortess, local academics and folklorists from Valencia and Rollins College and the University of Central Florida, local politicians and leaders and a host of community volunteers.

Amid the widening controversy, the organization sought to draw national attention to Eatonville, which would also build more support for the organization’s fight against Orange County and serve as an example of its commitment in protecting the town’s cultural heritage. With help from the Florida Endowment for the Humanities, the first festival, held from January 25–28, 1990, drew famous artists, actors, and writers such as Alice Walker, who served as the keynote speaker, actress Ruby Dee and storyteller Augusta Baker to Eatonville. Overall the festival saw about 10,000 people descend on the town during the four-day event. Additionally, the festival hosted a conference where academics, both local and from across the country, focused on the overall theme of “Zora Neale Hurston—The Woman, Her Work, and the Community She Championed: An Introduction.” The academics committee narrowed this theme to cover the next five festivals from 1990 to 1994, showing a long-term commitment to the event. What began as simply a means of promoting the heritage of the town soon grew to become a staple for Eatonville and Central Florida featuring various celebrities and academics like Maya Angelou, Cicely Tyson, Danny Glover, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. over the years. With local and national support, drawing tens of thousands of people and serving as one of the region’s largest annual cultural events, by 2014, the ZORA! Festival had made a multi-million dollar economic impact for Central Florida.

Yet with the prominence of the festival, more individuals began to associate the P.E.C. solely with the event rather than its work in preventing the widening of Kennedy. Critics claimed that the organization over the years lost its core values as the festival’s commercialization no longer appealed to residents, who could not afford its fees. Despite the criticism, the organization sought to remain focused on its goal to bring national prominence to Eatonville through historic preservation. Historic preservation, focused in part on cultural diversity, came about due to the federal government in 1966 passing the National Historic Preservation Act which greatly expanded the criteria for places of state and local significance for registration into the National Register of Historic Places. As social histories that included minorities and women became part of the mainstream narratives of American history, more culturally diverse sites benefited from historic preservation. For the oldest incorporated black town in America, places of historical significance certainly existed, so the P.E.C. sought inclusion into the registry.
The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 saw the rise of more culturally diverse places of state and local significance within the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1990 landscape architect Everett L. Fly advocated for Eatonville to pursue historic preservation, with several historic sites, such as St. Lawrence A.M.E. Church and Hungerford School, worthy of inclusion. He also warned that the widening of Kennedy would negatively impact Eatonville's efforts for a listing.

As the driving force for the listing, the P.E.C. asked the state of Florida to allocate staff and funding to submit a credible application for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

Eatonville's Historic District received its national designation on February 3, 1998, with twenty-three acres of historic buildings constructed between 1882 and 1946 included. The fulfillment of the P.E.C.'s goal to preserve Eatonville with the listing created greater opportunities for federal income tax credits, government grants, and federal and state oversight on subsequent projects that could harm the historic character of the community.

The P.E.C. proved effective in not only stopping the widening project, but playing a role in shaping the history of Eatonville for the present and future.

While applying for the National Register of Historic Places is time-consuming, the benefits are rewarding concerning the cultural awareness of a town or community. Everett L. Fly, a landscape architect who specialized in studying black communities, stood as one of the earliest proponents for Eatonville pursuing this listing. After receiving a $6,000 state grant to study Eatonville, his 1990 survey of the town listed twenty-one buildings and sites within the town's 1919 boundaries along Kennedy, formerly known as Old Apopka Road, which included the St. Lawrence A.M.E. Church and Robert Hungerford School. With the origins of the Old Apopka Road going back to around 1846, Fly stated that any altering to Kennedy, such as the road's proposed widening, would negatively impact Eatonville's efforts for historic preservation.

While opponents of the widening stated that the historic designation could not necessarily stop the widening of Kennedy/Lake, the designation, like the ZORA! Festival, could help bring cultural awareness to the town. As the driving force for the listing, the P.E.C. asked the state of Florida to allocate staff and funding to submit a credible application for the National Register of Historic Places.

As the P.E.C. and Eatonville sought a listing into the registry during the mid-1990s, the town also dealt with a battle to prevent the establishment of a topless bar at the corner of Kennedy and Lake Destiny Road by the Double Eagle Management agency, within proximity of the proposed historic district of Eatonville. However, with the help of Orange County and a long legal battle, the P.E.C. and Eatonville succeeded in neutralizing the threat of the topless bar. Thus, after a nearly ten-year process and submitting a fifty-one page application to the Department of the Interior in 1997, the P.E.C. and Eatonville saw their hard work come to fruition on February 3, 1998, as the town received inclusion into the registry with Eatonville's historic district consisting of about twenty-three acres of historic buildings constructed between 1882 and 1946. Additionally, inclusion into the registry brought greater opportunities for federal income tax credits, government grants, and federal and state oversight on subsequent projects that could harm the historic character of the community. Thus, unlike many black communities, the P.E.C. and Eatonville proved fortunate in not only stopping infrastructural changes and defending their community, but also preserving their town's history for the future.

Looking back at the first decade of the P.E.C. and its fight to prevent the widening of Kennedy/Lake in Eatonville and Maitland, the organization could have been part of the many narratives of...
passionate efforts by black communities eventually falling short of their goals. The widening of the roadway to five lanes threatened to have detrimental effects on Maitland, but especially on the smaller town of Eatonville. It revealed the differing visions over the roadway, pitting community, culture, and heritage by the P.E.C. against suburban expansion by Orange County, with the county having the advantage to see its vision fulfilled. Yet, by forming an intercommunity alliance, the organization became an exception to this narrative of failure in seeing the eventual cancellation of the widening project after six years. Additionally, the P.E.C. and Eatonville took control of their heritage in redefining the memory of spaces within the community by promoting the cultural awareness through the Zora Neale Hurston Festival and securing a listing within the National Register of Historic Places.

While living in an imperfect world, it is increasingly important for black communities, who face infrastructural changes, to use every resource available to protect their community identity, heritage, and culture. While their attempts may not always bring success like that of the P.E.C., it is still important for citizens to make their voices heard. Infrastructural changes impact humanity, so it is increasingly important for citizens to take ownership of their spaces and use their rights to protest anything that jeopardizes their community values. Communities across America have historical relevance and value, and the P.E.C. serves as a model for not only resisting infrastructural changes, but promoting cultural heritage in the process.

The Hurston Museum serves as the entry point for guests who visit Historic Eatonville.

Reviews from Our Visitors:
“We have had an outstanding working relationship with the Zora Neale Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts, and, in turn, they have provided a quality tour of Historic Eatonville. The groups that we have sent into the area have thoroughly enjoyed learning more about the rich history of the Eatonville community. Many have remarked what a fine job the people at The Hurston have done in accommodating their tour needs.”
— Dominic Mascheri, Charter Tour Consultant, White Star Tours, Reading, PA

“What a fun, but educational, day we had! My class will not soon forget it. Thank you.”
— Professor Claudia Slate, Florida Southern College

Source:
This essay is published with footnotes on the P.E.C. website at http://preserveeatonville.org/. Primary sources used to compile this essay include local minutes from the Eatonville Town Council, the Maitland City Council, the Orange County Board of County Commissioners, the Orlando Sentinel, the Miami Herald, and the United States Census Bureau. Secondary sources include Frank Otey’s Eatonville, Florida: A Brief History of One of America’s First Freedman’s Towns and Olga Fenton Mitchell, Gloria Fenton Magbie, and Marion Crette Elden’s The Life and Times of Joseph E. Clark: From Slavery to Town Father (Eatonville, Florida). On “infrastructural citizenship,” see Shelton, Kyle. Building a Better Houston: Highways, Neighborhoods, and Infrastructural Citizenship in the 1970s. Journal of Urban History 43, no. 4 (October 2015): 1-24.