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Henderson: Strike up the choir! Tax collector's new office helps Drew Park comeback

By [Joe Henderson](#)

It must have been a little strange around the neighborhood Monday morning in Drew Park. I doubt the good people there expected to hear a full-throated and enthusiastic choir singing loud and proud. They especially wouldn't have expected that outside the new Hillsborough County Tax Collector's Office.

But there it was, an honest-to-goodness choir to serenade the usual suspects gathered to snip the ribbon on the new building where you can pay for your auto tag and other things. The singers were rockin' folks from their foreheads to their shoe tops, and maybe making some people forget they had chosen to wear suit coats to an outdoor ceremony on an August morning in Florida.

That last vision is best left to your imagination.

This was a pretty big deal. Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn and County Commission Chairwoman Sandy Murman were among the Very Important People there to celebrate the occasion with Tax Collector Doug Belden, who runs a seriously efficient ship with a priority toward customer service.

This office will help, and celebrating that is not a bad thing. Oh, and the new building has a cool replica of a P-51 Mustang fighter plane hanging from the ceiling, which brings us to another major part of this story.

This is the latest sign of a neighborhood revival in Drew Park, and that benefits everyone. It's the result of a commitment by the city and county to concentrate resources on a grand old area that was teetering on disintegration not too many years ago.

"This was a viable neighborhood until it got infiltrated by the adult-use industry," Buckhorn said. "This can be a solid, stable place. It can be an economic contributor to the greater community."

There is some serious history there.

Drew Field, which occupied the land now used by Tampa International Airport, was a major training and aviation stronghold in West Tampa. Four squadrons of B-17 Flying Fortresses and dive bombers called it home, and German POWs were housed there as well. The end of World War II and the increased importance of MacDill Air Force Base led to the closure of Drew Field in 1946.

Heritage like that needs to be celebrated; hence, the P-51 replica in the new tax office. The comeback started well before that, though.

Tampa got a national reputation for strip clubs in the 1980s and that "adult-use industry" to which Buckhorn referenced set up shop in Drew Park, as the area is now known.

Even now, there is a big strip joint a couple of blocks up the street from the place of Monday's celebration. The area is slowly taking on a new shape, though. It won't turn into trendy Hyde Park or South Tampa, but its location so close to the airport makes it ideal for new businesses and jobs.

"It just takes leadership," Murman said. "We have to be careful who we're giving permits to in the future."

They cut the ribbon and music played on and echoed into the neighborhood as staff and everyone celebrated the new building (and the air conditioning). Yes, it's just a building, a place where people go to take care of business required by the state. A new tax collector's office won't turn a neighborhood around by itself.

The city didn't lose the fight for Drew Park overnight. Winning it back will take some time.

One good building could lead to another, though.

That could lead to another, and maybe another. And when the streets don't flood, and business owners know the location of their shop won't scare off good workers, things change. Ten years from now, this area could look a lot better.

As Buckhorn said, "Drew Park doesn't have to be known (now) for what it used to be known for. ... It's always a good day when we succeed."

That's worth singing about.