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HALIFAX

By Elaine Flaherty
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

HALIFAX -- As blacks from Nova Scotia and across Canada gather here this weekend, they will both celebrate and mourn what was once an impoverished but independent community known as Africville.

But this year, there is certain to be an uneasy mix of emotions at the annual reunion of the community demolished 25 years ago.

The reunion takes place only a week after a riot that once again highlights Nova Scotia's racial woes.

While charges of racial discrimination at Halifax bars sparked the violence, black leaders, municipal and police officials are all trying to grapple with the bigger underlying causes.

Social and economic disparity between the black and white communities, combined with recurring incidents of racial discrimination are the real reasons behind the violence, say black leaders.

Added to that larger pattern is the bitter history of Africville and the worry that now even its memory is about to be desecrated.

Some black leaders say the forces of economic development behind the destruction of Africville are once again at work, this time threatening to encroach on the park that commemorates the site.

"This year, I think it's going to be a sombre mood," predicts Rev. Ogueri Ohanaka, a spokesperson for the Black United Front and the minister who last year gave the reunion's closing sermon.

What's worrying former residents and some other members of the black community are two related development proposals affecting the nearby port.

CN plans to build a terminal that will allow cargo containers to be quickly on- or off-loaded to rail, truck and ship. And, in a plan originally approved by city council seven years ago and reaffirmed this year, the Halifax Port Corp. proposes a new access road that would run along the edge of Seaview Park, the former site of Africville.

Neither plan would actually infringe on the park itself. Claude Ball, the port corporation's chief operating officer, said the road is important for development and would actually allow better access to the park.

"It's a really straightforward project that would enhance everything it comes in contact with," he said. "We're not in the business of hurting anybody."

But opponents say the development projects overlook the historic and emotional significance of the site. And they worry that these are just the first demands on what is a valuable piece of real estate, located on the shoreline's curve where the harbor opens into the Bedford Basin.

"We want to make sure that nothing is done to this little area you've given us that used to be Africville," said Ohanaka. "It's not just another piece of land. It holds a lot of memories."

The homes and the church that were the heart of Africville are long gone. But the area's evocative name continues to carry a highly charged significance here.

Razed in the late '60s for development and in a misguided attempt at integrating the city's black population and improving living conditions, Africville is today romantically remembered.

It was founded in the 1840s by the sons and daughters of black refugees from the War of 1812 and many of the leaders of the black community today are descendants of those first families.

Undoubtedly poverty-stricken, but perhaps not the slum it was portrayed to be, Africville in the 1960s had a sewage system and a running water system.

Despite that, many former residents and their children today see themselves as exiles forced out of a beloved home.

Its destruction is labelled an act of racism that, as Donald Clairmont and Dennis Magill point out in their book *Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community*, has taken on great symbolism.

"Subsequent to the relocation, Africville became a kind of red alert, signalling danger to the black community and traditions in the guise of city development projects, area upgrading and gentrification ..."

Charles Saunders, a free-lance journalist who writes columns for the *Halifax Daily News* and who closely follows issues involving Africville, said the Seaview developments are worrisome to the black community because they echo what happened in the '60s.

"It seems as though their needs, their aspirations, their considerations aren't taken into account."

But today, the black community is more organized, has more allies and wields more political clout than it did in the mid-1960s.

Stung by the outcry about the port corporation's access road, the province announced a study to consider alternative routes. The report is expected in a few weeks.

And in September, opponents to the developments will take their case to a public meeting, announced by the city in response to the controversy.

There was no such outcry when the city decided to tear down Africville. Then, the biggest question was compensation and Africville residents were promised better housing and job retraining after the move.

"The black community just sat back and watched the destruction take place," said Ohanaka. "Events have proven that it wasn't a better life at all."

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