



Posted on Sun, Jul. 11, 2004

Reviving the corridor along U.S. 441

BY SAMUEL P. NITZE
snitze@herald.com

Tammy Priscak drives out of her Hollywood neighborhood onto U.S. 441 and shakes her head at the chaos of pawn shops and used car lots, shabby curbs and shadeless asphalt.

"Look at all this," she says. "This is crazy."

That has long been a common sentiment in communities along Broward County's central highway, fueling studies and meetings and calls for something better but, until recently, few results.

Civic leaders across the county say all that's about to change.

From Miramar to Lauderdale Lakes to Coconut Creek, towns along Broward's stretch of U.S. 441 are working to erase an eyesore, hashing out plans to replace drab streetscapes and ragged strip malls with a string of vital neighborhoods.

They hope to pull together the best ideas on place-making from the nation's premier urban planners and apply them to a 25-mile stretch of highway. The aim is to create distinct, hey-let's-go-there destinations instead of the grim sameness common to suburban drags across the country.

The communities are like siblings, each at different stages of development, each with different abilities and styles and ideas. Hollywood called a halt to building while ground rules for change are set. Lauderdale is moving ahead with a developer to create a Caribbean-themed village on the site of an abandoned Kmart. Coconut Creek is planning an ambitious 440-acre town center project incorporating "green" technologies such as solar energy.

But several years ago, the towns agreed their dreams for the highway, also known as State Road 7, stood a better chance if they worked together. The result was the State Road 7/U.S. 441 Collaborative, an unusual partnership of 14 local governments and state and county agencies that is drawing attention for its cooperative approach.

"It's usually sort of every man for himself -- each town tries to get what it can and compete," said Jeffrey Zupan, a senior fellow with the Regional Plan Association, a nonprofit planning and advocacy group based in New York. "But this is what needs to go on, having people talk to each other and learn from each other."

WORKING TOGETHER

LEADERS PUSH TO MAKE UP FOR PAST MISTAKES

The move to revive U.S. 441 comes as planning and transportation officials across the country look to make better use of major roads with the potential to support mass transit, said Kristine Williams, a corridor management expert at the University of South Florida's Center for Urban Transportation Research.

Williams, who recently completed a national study of such efforts, said she, too, was impressed by the number of agencies working together in Broward County.

"I haven't seen anything quite this extensive anywhere," she said. "This is a great model for other places to consider elsewhere in the country."

Last year, the federal government gave the Collaborative \$2 million to come up with a planning framework for the corridor. The idea is to let each town follow its own dream, but to impose some consistency.

The South Florida Regional Planning Council, which manages the Collaborative, is organizing weeklong design workshops meant to produce a set of regulations that tell developers what belongs where and how it should look.

The workshops, featuring wall maps, colored markers, and good food, are aimed at getting the public talking and thinking. Planning council

officials say they are working on ways to attract members of immigrant communities that already have changed the area with their entrepreneurial spirit.

Driven by collective horror over what the road has become, local leaders are pushing to make up for mistakes of the past -- and to plan for development before it hits.

"What we've all done to State Road 7 is an abomination," said Lauderdale Commissioner Leanna "Lee" Mirsky, chairwoman of the Collaborative. "We have some wonderful neighborhoods, but nobody has paid attention to them. Now that we are talking to each other, discussing ideas, we have a much better chance of achieving what we want to achieve."

A dense mix of homes and businesses grouped around key intersections will allow people to live near where they work and shop, or at least near public transportation. In keeping with a widely embraced tenet of "smart growth," people on foot will get as much attention as people behind the wheel. The sidewalks should be wide, with benches and shade. Parking should be tucked out of view. Side streets should connect to one another.

To people like Tammy Priscak, president of her Hollywood homeowners association and a longtime participant in city affairs, all of this brings hope.

"I have no doubt in my mind that it's going to get developed, but I'd rather the city look at it and figure out what's best for the people who live here," she said. "We have a chance to do it right, to say hey, I don't want to see a pawn shop every 200 feet."

So far, the bulk of the effort has been stage-setting, but change is already visible, much of it fueled by a roughly \$300 million state Department of Transportation project to widen the road to six lanes and install new lights, trees, and drains.

Bigger changes are inevitable, planners say.

Nearly a million more people are expected in Broward County by 2030, and with open land disappearing, developers already have turned back to areas neglected during the frenzied, decades-long push west.

"It's like a wave hit the berm of the Everglades and now it's washing back," said J. Gary Rogers, community redevelopment administrator in Lauderdale Lakes. "This isn't pie-in-the-sky dreaming. I am absolutely confident this is coming."

A recent study found that the U.S. 441 corridor, with its central location and connection to neighboring counties, could accommodate 30,000 new homes and scores of new businesses by 2020. That's in keeping with the view of planning experts who say creating denser development along major transportation corridors may be the only way to avert a housing and traffic crisis as newcomers pour in.

"The people will continue to move here in spite of anything we do," County Administrator Roger J. Desjarlais said recently. "That is why we have to take this whole issue of redevelopment so seriously."

With help from the Collaborative, the county's planning staff has drafted new "transit-oriented" land-use categories meant to help revive routes like U.S. 441. And the road will gain from its selection as Broward County's first bus rapid transit route.

' IN THE GROAN ZONE'

OFFICIALS SAY PLANS WON'T SIT ON THE SHELF

There are skeptics, of course, many of whom warn that planning for revival is one thing but making it happen properly another. The pretty drawings produced by the Collaborative are just pictures, and comparing some future U.S. 441 to the Champs Elysées in Paris won't make magic happen.

Charles Cannon, who opened a chiropractic business on Plantation's bit of the route in 1964 (now run by his son), recalled watching as investment swept west and each new mall seemed to leave the one before it gasping for air.

He attended meetings, urged city leaders to focus on the road, wrote letters, filled binders with clippings and notes. But the result always seemed to be another study and more conversation, Cannon said, with little effect on the businesses.

"I have always been optimistic about what it could become," he said recently. "I wouldn't still be here if I wasn't optimistic. But here we are in 2004 and still talking."

Collaborative officials say these plans won't sit on a shelf. Agencies at various levels of government are committed, developers are interested, and more people want to escape from long commutes and suburban monotony.

"It's hard to make change absent a crisis," said Carolyn Dekle, executive director of the South Florida Regional Planning Council. "But we're in the groan zone -- the place where people are really experiencing the effects."

And real investment has already begun.

Hollywood officials hope to tap energy from one of the most visible examples: the recent opening of the multimillion-dollar Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino.

The city of Lauderdale Lakes has purchased 25 acres near the intersection of U.S. 441 and Oakland Park Boulevard and hopes to attract a developer to build homes and a shopping district near a recently approved public library.

One of the corridor's first true mixed-use developments, with shops at ground level and homes above, is rising south of Lauderdale Lakes City Hall.

National powerhouse Lennar Homes is building two residential projects off the corridor -- one in Lauderdale Lakes, the other in Plantation - and both are sold out or close to it, said Lisa Maxwell, the company's director of redevelopment.

And in a striking sign of progress, Lauderdale officials are working with developer George Rahael to replace a Kmart boarded up more than a decade ago with a village dubbed "Carishoca," for Caribbean showcase.

The village project, a nod to the area's thriving Caribbean community, is expected to include a hotel, shops, and restaurants offering island cuisine. The county is working on a \$60 million regional park nearby that will include a world-class cricket facility.

"I remember about 25 years ago, State Road 7 was a street full of vitality," Rahael said. "I don't see why it can't come back."

^ A LONG WAY TO GO ^

RESULT MAY BE LESS GRAND THAN PLANNED

For all the progress, full-blown revival is unlikely to come quickly or easily. And when it does, communities may end up settling for something less than the grand visions depicted in their new planning documents.

Lauderdale Lakes produced a plan that places a picture of the majestic Champs Elysées next to sun-blasted U.S. 441. But when Wal-Mart committed to opening a superstore at one of the key intersections of the proposed downtown -- on the site of a former Home Depot -- city leaders were thrilled.

And with good reason, said David Dahlstrom, a senior planner with the regional planning council.

"At first people said this is not going to happen -- State Road 7 is not a place anybody's interested in," he said. "We still have a long way to go, but now they aren't so skeptical. They are seeing that some good things can happen."