

Posted on Sun, Sep. 14, 2003

A new Paris in Lauderdale Lakes?

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Sure, it's big, busy and ugly. In Broward County, U.S. 441 offers a 25-mile stretch of parking by the acre, stripped-out strip malls, thrift shops, auto dealers and fast-food joints competing for breathing space with equally unattractive islands of residential development. Yet where others see the epitome of urbanized suburban sprawl, Lauderdale Lakes sees -- ahem -- another Avenue des Champs Elysees.

Yes, the famed main drag of Paris ranks as the hot metaphor for redevelopment along Broward's infamous U.S. 441 corridor. Lauderdale Lakes, a former bedroom community that has known hard times and now boasts a largely West Caribbean populace, plans to transform itself from "pass-through" between the western suburbs and downtown Fort Lauderdale to a destination.

"Lauderdale Lakes is at the center of Broward County and just 20 minutes from everything," said Marcella Cambler of the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council. "The opportunities for redevelopment give it the chance to become one of the best places to live in Broward County."

The city of Lauderdale Lakes and its Community Redevelopment Agency proudly show their ambitious plans for reinventing the city and creating a pedestrian-friendly town center with upscale housing. Informally known as "The People's Plan" for the citizen wish list it incorporates, the "City of Lauderdale Lakes U.S. 441 Corridor and CRA Charrette" references Paris and Seaside as architectural inspirations.

Michael and Peggy Rigg moved to Lauderdale Lakes five years ago, drawn by the combination of affordable housing, proximity to downtown Fort Lauderdale and the bustling Jamaican and West Indian cultural connection.

'LIKE FAMILY HERE'

"It's like family here. Jamaicans and West Indians understand each others cultures -- they are very similar. It makes it familiar and comfortable for people," said Michael Rigg, 49, a civilian employee of the Fort Lauderdale police department born in Jamaica. Peggy is a native of St. Kitts.

Like other islanders, they enjoy the annual Unifest celebration and the ability to find foods and other products that taste of home. "There are a lot of reasons for [Jamaican and West Indians] to move here. It's close to downtown and the beach. Housing is affordable. And there are many families," Rigg said. That's a bonus for a couple raising four children, ages 10 through 19.

Expect to pay about \$110,000 minimum for a small (just over 1,000 square feet) two-bedroom, two-bath single-family home built in the 1970s. Larger homes start in the \$140,000s. Homes fronting on canals, often with pools and other upgrades, go in the \$160,000s.

Condos are still a buy, with one-bedroom, one-bath units starting at \$30,000 in age-restricted communities like Hawaiian Gardens. At Cypress Chase North, with no age restrictions, a two-bedroom, two-bath condo goes in the mid-\$70,000s.

According to Esslinger-Wooten-Maxwell Realtors, the average selling price for a home in Lauderdale Lakes during the last 12 months was \$140,000. The median sales price in Broward in July was \$241,000, according to multiple listing service data tracked by EWM.

Lauderdale Lakes condos sold for a median price of \$50,000 in the last year. "You have to understand that most of the condos available in Lauderdale Lakes say they are age-restricted communities," said Patrick O'Connell, head of EWM's Plantation office. "That cuts down on the number of potential buyers."

IMPROVING HOUSING

One redevelopment goal is to improve both the quality and quantity of existing housing. Lennar recently broke ground on an 82-unit townhouse development on 7.5 acres south of Oakland Park Boulevard and west of 33rd Terrace, with prices probably starting at \$169,000.

The plan to remake Lauderdale Lakes spans decades, but it includes the near-immediate beautification of U.S. 441 with landscaping, benches, lighting, brick pavers and buried utility lines. Planners envision a future in which shade trees would line the roads, and mixed-use multistory buildings would front on spacious sidewalks, parking discreetly hidden. The plan uses side-by-side photos to illustrate that both the Champs Elysees and U.S. 441 occupy roughly identical footprints.

How can a notoriously ugly and blighted stretch of road be made to resemble one of Napoleon's great architectural triumphs?

"We are going back to the future," said Danny Homes, the city's CRA director. "There is a classic look that great cities share, and we believe we can reference that to recreate Lauderdale Lakes."

CITY'S NEW LOOK

The city's new look will be expressed in the Cornerstone Groups St. Croix development on U.S. 441 at Northwest 36th Street, a mixed-use project offering 244 rental apartments and townhomes, plus 14,000 square feet of commercial space. The apartments will be reserved for families whose income doesn't exceed 60 percent of the county median.

Few would dispute the need for a Lauderdale Lakes redesign. Commercial development along 441 defines a cars-first aesthetic featuring acres of blacktop parking areas stretching from the sidewalk to mammoth buildings and strip malls. Condo and apartment complexes reiterate the design.

City officials admit the area is short on parks, entertainment, upscale housing stock, landscaping and other amenities that attract homeowners and investors.

Public schools in the city remain troubled, which may account for the growth of magnet and private schools.

But this year, higher education made its debut in Lauderdale Lakes when Florida Memorial College enrolled 55 students in a satellite campus.

Today's Lauderdale Lakes bears scant resemblance to the city born little more than 40 years ago. At its incorporation in 1961, Lauderdale Lakes boasted a population of 300.

"We used to land our airplane out back," remembers Marian Woodall. The retired state worker moved into her two-story, five-bedroom house abutting the C-13 canal 37 years ago, when beans, tomatoes and corn grew in surrounding fields. The family Cessna used the strip of green land along the canal as an airfield.

INFLUX OF RETIREES

The condo craze of the 1970s brought retirees, many drawn to "over-55" developments. In the '70s and '80s, the city population supported a vibrant retail sector. Sports Authority opened its flagship store and its corporate headquarters in the city in 1986.

"This was a great place to grow up," says Erica Scott, 31, who has lived in the city since age 4. Now raising four children ages 2 to 14, Scott pays \$800 a month for her three-bedroom apartment. She remembers the "bad days" she dates from

the late '80s through the late '90s. "There was a lot of crime," she says.

Eastern cities like Lauderdale Lakes watched helplessly as new subdivisions in western Broward siphoned off middle-class homeowners with the promise of mega-size pool homes, new schools and parks.

Coupled with a flood of condos hitting the market as retirees died or moved away, the changes brought hard times. Retail development stagnated, leaving empty strip malls. In August, Sports Authority announced plans to shutter its headquarters, taking away more than 350 jobs after an August buyout by Englewood, Colo.-based Gart Sports.

HOLDING STEADY

Today, Lauderdale Lakes' population seems to be holding steady at just under 32,000. City officials believe the number may be higher, since immigrants are less likely to participate fully in the census.

Hurricane Andrew blew new residents into all of Broward. An influx of West Indian immigrants now helps define the city's reputation for ethnic diversity. According to the 2000 census, about 60 percent of its citizens immigrated from Jamaica, Haiti, the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago or other Caribbean countries.

Lauderdale Lakes boasts laudable programs for the elderly and children, including an Alzheimer's day care center and an after-school cultural enrichment program. Both are the brainchild of 97-year-old City Commissioner Samuel D. Goldstein.

ACTIVITY FOR KIDS

"I looked at the budget and thought, well, we spend an awful lot of money on sports programs. But what do we have for the children who aren't interested in sports or can't play for some reason?" Goldstein said. He begged photo equipment from area pawn shops to start photography classes. He organized music lessons and a chess club. Today, more than 200 kids participate.

Programs like these may account for the sense of hope that probably traces its beginnings to 1998, when voters opted for a form of government headed by a mayor and city commission, with a professional city manager.

In 2001, the city created the CRA to revitalize the U.S. 441 commercial corridor and build a town center on 25 acres south of Oakland Park Boulevard. The city commission recently approved a new \$1.9 million library there.

Residents also want to celebrate the water in Lauderdale Lakes. The C-13 canal and its feeder system figure largely in redevelopment plans. Envisioned is a linear park along the canal on U.S. 441's west side, with benches, lighting and walkways.

Not everyone likes all the changes. Longtime resident Leslie Wolfe owns a single-family waterfront home that backs up the C-13 canal, where his children, Takea, 14, and Antonio, 15, like to fish. "I like the idea of the park along the canal. Walkways are fine, but not benches. You put benches there and soon you'll have slackers hanging out and making trouble," Wolfe said.

Wolfe reflected on what has kept him in Lauderdale Lakes for 21 years. "It's a good area, quiet at night. They are really working on making a better community."