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COVER STORY

## Downtown Designs

Coconut Creek and Margate are now seeking to develop town centers so their residents will have places to socialize and enjoy themselves

BY JASMINE KRIPALANI Special to The Miami Herald

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Farmers once harvested the lands that now sustain concrete instead of tomatoes and strawberries.

But the humble beginnings of Coconut Creek and Margate have kept up with Broward's growth.

Coconut Creek is now a 12-square-mile city of 53,627 residents and 1,400 businesses.

One of the longest-living residents and former city commissioner remembers a time when the only concrete roots in the city included a few homes, a gas station and a 7-Eleven.

"We didn't have any streetlights," said Art Bennett, 87, one of the first city commissioners, who served in the late 1960s. "On the north side, there were all farmers, and you had drive-in vegetable markets."

Now, 430 acres of remaining farmland, which includes tomatoes among its crops, will become a multi-use, pedestrian-friendly town center. The project will include shops, restaurants, walking paths and condominiums. Few seem to object to the change for the property between Sample and Wiles Roads, east of U.S. 441 and west of Lyons Road.

"We need a place to walk and hang out," Mayor Marilyn Gerber said.

Gerber's opponent in the last election, import retail company CEO Patricia Duaybes, campaigned on her opposition to the project. Gerber won by a wide margin in the mostly white, Democratic city.

"We came up with the design and [developers] will come up with the money," Gerber said of the strategy behind the town center project, known as Creek Commons.

Gertrude Weinberg, 89, said the city needs a town center where residents may gather and get to know each other.

"I think it's a very exciting thing. I hope it works out," she said. "You have to have progress."

Despite the growth, Coconut Creek has held onto its agricultural roots by billing itself as the Butterfly Capital of the World.

### WILDLIFE EMPHASIS

The city is home to Butterfly World, where about 5,000 to 7,000 living butterflies flutter among hundreds of tourists daily.

City Hall is also surrounded by wildlife. Its greenery houses blue herons, bushy-tailed squirrels, and an array of butterflies.

In backyards, schools and businesses all over the city, people are working to lure birds, butterflies and other creatures.

For its efforts, the city last year became the first in the state to be designated a Community Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation.

More than 150 homes qualified as Backyard Wildlife Habitats, as did six schools and 22 businesses and public areas.

A few blocks south, in Margate, plans also are under way for a 40-acre town center for similar reasons.

Margate's layout has car dealerships, pharmacies and stores scattered throughout the city's nine square miles. It means residents don't

have a central point to socialize, sit, sip coffee and simply see each other.

"It's going to be a very upscale venture so far as keeping in mind architectural values and diversity of the new downtown," said Joseph Varsallone, who has been the city's mayor for 21 years.

### **FOR IDENTITY**

Construction on the multi-use project, which would run along U.S. 441 and Atlantic Boulevard, could begin as early as next year, Margate Community Redevelopment Agency Director Marsa Detscher said.

"We're looking for an identity, and we know we can't build Mizner Park," she said of the Boca Raton complex other cities have tried to emulate.

Several community events, however, do bring together Margate's working families and senior citizens.

They include the annual Fall Festival, Winter Solstice Festival and the Fourth of July parade.

The city also recently celebrated its 50th year.

Varsallone said he's seen the community change from mostly seniors to younger families and more Hispanics.

Seniors, however, still make up the largest voting bloc, he added.

"I love being involved with people," Varsallone said.

Miami Herald writer Beverly Bidney contributed to this report.