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Chain stores shrink as land grows scarce

Driven by residential growth and the scarcity of land in eastern Broward, major retail chains are switching from big-box store models to smaller, more efficient designs.

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RETAILING IN BROWARD

For decades, we all knew the formula: Every year, row upon row of new homes would crop up on the westernmost edge of Broward civilization, followed closely by a new Publix or Winn-Dixie shopping center. Every year, the homes and strip malls would creep farther and farther west.

But no longer. Now that nearly all the county's developable land is exhausted, builders are looking east, and buyers are flocking to new condo towers and villas in once-desolate downtowns. Retailers are following the money and the pattern by building new places in tight spaces.

As with the urban residential building boom, Fort Lauderdale is leading the way: a Publix with a parking garage near downtown, a two-story Barnes & Noble on Federal Highway, a smaller-than-average Home Depot on East Sunrise Boulevard.

The pattern reflects a nationwide trend that Miami-Dade County also has been seeing. The Fort Lauderdale Publix resembles a similar store in South Beach. In Coral Gables, the grocery chain has even built a store into an apartment building.

Corporations like Target and Home Depot have staff that is focused on fostering urban growth.

"Retail follows rooftops, it's pretty simple," said Anita Kramer, director of retail development at the Urban Land Institute, a Washington-based development research group.

Challenged by the small size of the lot for its new South Andrews Avenue store, Publix incorporated a two-level garage into the building. A ramp-like escalator transports customers and their groceries from the ground-level supermarket to the parking deck above.

"It's very nice, very clean, a little smaller maybe but with everything I need," said customer Carlos Sánchez, as he carried groceries up to the parking deck. The new store, he said, has cut his drive for groceries in half.

The small, scarce, and expensive lots available in downtown areas have forced retailers to cut floor and shelf space. An acre in East Broward can go for \$1 million, said Anthony Abbate, assistant professor of architecture at Florida Atlantic University. The same acre might cost 20 to 30 percent less in some western suburbs.

The challenge is to make the smaller, tighter stores as efficient and profitable as their larger suburban counterparts.

Atlanta-based Home Depot is mastering this skill.

Its average store, said spokesman Don Harrison, is about 135,000 square feet built on a 13- to 15-acre lot. By comparison, its store in east Fort Lauderdale, on Sunrise Boulevard, is 110,000 square feet and sits on 11 acres.

"We carry maybe 10 percent less than other area stores, but whatever we don't have we can get for our customers," said assistant manager Ayaz Gany.

Usually, Gany said, he locates the product at another store and has it transferred to his at no additional cost for the shopper.

In other markets, Home Depot has had to cut floor space to less than half the average. Two stores set to open later this year in Manhattan will be around 65,000 square feet. That means doing away with entire departments.

"You have to do it carefully, tailoring it to the neighborhood," Harrison said. `` Our Manhattan stores won't have a lumber yard. We don't expect customers to carry five sheets of plywood home in the subway. But if they need them, we will have a first-class delivery service in

place to deliver them."

Retailers are moving downtown because that market has been underserved and there's an opportunity to make a profit, said Cynthia R. Cohen, president of Strategic Mindshare, a Miami retail consulting firm.

"We're seeing a lot of new high-rises in South Florida, which means tremendous density," she said. "A quarter of a mile of apartment buildings translates into more density and buying power than a quarter of a mile of single-family homes."

Many South Florida condos are second homes. "That means that they are buying everything new," Cohen said. "They are not moving anything."

But even much of the new East Broward retail still looks suburban, said Abbate, who is advising the county on redevelopment.

"Our centers are still suburban in character because they rely on cars," he said. "To go from one store to the next, even if they are just a few feet apart, you have to drive."

Abbate is part of a Broward County team that is working on a design guide for urban redevelopment. Alternatives to the automobile will be a part of this initiative, he said.

"We are never going to be a Manhattan," Abbate said, "but we need to create an in-between model."

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