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The Next South Beach?

North Beach comeback is a growing reality

South Florida Business Journal by Hortense Leon

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MIAMI BEACH -- Forty years ago, when hotels in North Beach were the epitome of glamour and Collins Avenue was the street of dreams, no one thought things could change, much less decline.

Over time, though, the tourists stopped coming and were replaced by the poor and elderly on fixed incomes. The once-grand hotels become known more for their code violations than their opulence. Posh restaurants gave way to fast food operators, pawn shops and T-shirt emporiums.

Today, after years of neglect and decay, the area is showing signs of turning around. On the coattails of South Beach's revival, the area just north of the Art Deco District is getting the same treatment.

The city of Miami Beach is funding a \$21 million streetscape program, currently under way, with improvements to drainage, lighting, landscaping and parking.

Private developers have ambitious plans. Condominiums like the 46-story White Diamond, to be built at 6365 Collins Ave., are replacing decades-old buildings.

The biggest North Beach project today is the \$175 million renovation and expansion of the 40-year-old Carillon Hotel at 68th Street and Collins Avenue. The Carillon, where Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra once entertained, will become a hotel/condominium complex with a 45,000 square-foot conference center.

Andy Gruber, president of Transnational Properties, the Brazilian company developing the site, said the old hotel, which had about 600 rooms, will be restored, and a new hotel will go up next door.

The latter will have 630 rooms, including 124 suites. Ground-breaking is scheduled for the summer 1997, with completion by early 1999.

The timetable for the 49-story, 248 unit-condominium, also planned for the Carillon's 5.8-acre site, depends on how fast units are sold.

Donald Shockey, the new executive director of the North Beach Development Corp., agrees the Carillon will be pivotal to the area's renewal. However, it is only one of many projects which cumulatively could turn North Beach into another South Beach.

Art Deco, too

Comparisons between the two oceanside communities come easily. "A substantial number of buildings in North Beach are of similar vintage and have the same popular Art Deco style that South Beach buildings have," Shockey said. North Beach has two historic districts, compared with South Beach's one. The districts in North Beach, however, are locally designated, while South Beach's is on the National Register of Historic Places.

North Beach politics, like those on South Beach, reflect tension between preservationists, who want to retain the area's low-rise, pedestrian-friendly quality, and high-rise developers. In North Beach, many long-time residents, as well as those who came to escape South Beach's rising rents, can no longer afford to live in the area.

Streetscape is key

The Streetscape construction, which also includes renovations to the historic fountain on 71st Street on Normandy Isle, is key to the rehabilitation of the neighborhood, said Shockey, "because at this point, it still has somewhat of a blighted image."

For many, that is North Beach's charm: The mom-and-pop stores give the neighborhood a homey, urban quality not found elsewhere -- like a bit of New York with palm trees.

In the meantime, the pace of high-rise development has been dizzying in the last couple of years. The list of new buildings planned, under construction or recently finished includes the following:

- In early 1996, condominium developer Pacific Equities International finished and sold all units at LaGorce Palace, a 33-story luxury condominium tower at 63rd Street and Collins Avenue.

- At 76th Street and Collins Avenue, developer Kent Robbins is about to break ground for the Harrison, a 21-story, 71-unit condominium/townhouse complex.

- At Ocean Terrace and 74th Street, St. Tropez, LC, led by managing general partner Alan Waserstein, will soon start construction on a \$16 million, 28-story, 91-unit condominium tower on the beach.

Widening Collins Ave.

A number of old hotels have been renovated in the last couple of years, among them the Pelican, the Monte Carlo (which is being converted to a condominium with a new tower) and the Ramada Resort Deauville, all on Collins Avenue. The Baltic Hotel on Harding Avenue and the Days Inn North Beach and Ocean Surf Hotel, both on Ocean Terrace, are also on this list.

An eight-block stretch of Collins Avenue, mostly used for parking, may someday be the new northern gateway to Miami Beach. A master plan devised by noted architect Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk calls for widening Collins Avenue, creation of a formal entranceway to the city, the redevelopment of North Shore Open Space Park, which parallels Collins Avenue from 79th Street to 87th Terrace on the ocean side, and the sale of six lots to a private developer.

However, there is no money set aside for the plan, Shockey said.

Altos Del Mar redevelopment

Also on the drawing board is a plan to redevelop the Altos Del Mar area, the last single-family housing on the ocean on Miami Beach. The 22 lots between 76th and 79th Streets east of Collins Avenue, some of which are occupied by boarded-up homes, were purchased by the state in the 1980s for the expansion of North Shore Open Space Park. Because that plan did not work out, the lots are slated for sale to a private developer.

In addition to these elaborate fixups, the North Beach facade improvement program provides money to small businesses serving low- to moderate-income customers. Property or business owners can use the money to freshen up exteriors or correct code violations inside.

Owners of the Surf Theater at Collins Avenue near 74th Street recently renovated the building and turned it into a gymnasium using facade improvement funds. The facility, now called the MEDFIT Human Performance Center, is one of about a dozen small businesses in the area that have been able to participate in the North Beach renaissance.