

More, Bigger, Busier

Written by Caitlin Granfield, BT Contributor
May 2017

In Aventura, it's traffic nightmare vs. developer's dream

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Aventura has a little bit of everything -- a thriving cultural arts center, one of the largest malls in the nation, parks and golf courses, hotels, and stores galore. It attracts people from all over South Florida and beyond, making the city a developer's dream, but a driver's nightmare.

Aventura Mall is currently undergoing a 315,000-square-foot expansion, with more retail stores and popular "destination" restaurants, like Pubbelly Sushi, Harry's Pizzeria, CVI.CHE 105, and Serafina set to open in November.

The new three-level wing, which will take over the mall's east side, will also boast a VIP lounge, a rooftop garden, and a 93-foot outdoor sculpture that doubles as a slide.

All of this will attract a large following, and rightly so. It doesn't seem, however, that Aventura city commissioners or Miami-Dade County officials are considering the traffic nightmare that will no doubt ensue for drivers in their daily commutes, and for those who live in and around the city.

Traffic studies and surveys will be done, and a few more turning lanes may be added, but long-term solutions to alleviate traffic on Biscayne Boulevard should be planned and implemented. The Boulevard in Aventura, and the William H. Lehman Causeway, are constantly

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congested, as is I-95 off Ives Dairy Road, owing in large part to the 30 million people who visit the mall each year, and because of the young city's steady growth.

Adding to more development, the Aventura City Commission recently entered into a purchase agreement with the Gulfstream Park Racing Association to acquire two acres of land on NE 213th Street (adjacent to Waterways Park) to build a four-story charter high school. It's slated to open in August 2019, with capacity for 800 students.

I spoke with Aventura city manager Eric Soroka, and asked him how Aventura plans to help ease the onslaught of more traffic upon completion of the mall's expansion and with the addition of the high school.

He acknowledges that there will be only limited parking for students at the new school. He *envisions* that students who live nearby will take the school bus or shuttle bus.

"Our goal is to have them use as much mass transportation as possible," he says. "We're going to limit students driving to school."

There are only four lanes leading up to the site of the school on NE 213th Street, two lanes in each direction. More lanes should be added to avoid jamming up the existing ones with school buses and parent drivers who will be dropping off and picking up their kids.

While the free Aventura Express shuttle bus is helpful for Aventura residents, it hardly makes a difference in reducing traffic congestion on Biscayne Boulevard and other nearby roads.

Tri-Rail passenger train service, however, could play a significant role in freeing up space along the Biscayne Corridor, as it would operate from downtown Miami to Aventura, on Florida East Coast Railway's tracks -- approximately four years from now.

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“When that becomes a reality,” says Soroka, “the mall has agreed to build a connection from their mall to that train platform.”

In the meantime, if and when there’s an emergency, getting help from police, firefighters, and ambulances will take longer; parents dropping off and picking their kids up from school will take longer; and commuting in general will be even more aggravating.

It’s mind-boggling how city officials are quick to accept and praise new developments without considering that the increase in traffic will negatively affect people, especially those who live in Aventura and in neighboring communities.

Aventura is lauded for being a safe, well-manicured place where families put down roots and where Jewish delis, mom-and-pop shops, and big-name retail stores coexist to meet everyone’s consumer needs. I wonder if Aventura commissioners have weighed the real possibility that families may seek a less-congested place to live, changing the dynamic of the City of Excellence.

A new school and a bigger mall will mean more jobs, more revenue for the city, and most likely an increase in property values, but at the expense of anyone who uses a car to get from Point A to Point B.

When I visit my husband’s family in Lima, Peru, people use an above-ground metro railway to go all around the city, because traffic is a nightmare there, too. When I lived in Costa Rica, everyone took the bus, as it was affordable, quick, and mostly on time. Miami city buses have a reputation for being notoriously late and taking too long to get people to their destinations, another effect of heavy traffic.

Miami-Dade is the seventh-most populous county in the nation, and as our numbers continue to grow, so should options for better means of public transportation.

Silicon Valley just developed a flying car prototype. Maybe it’s time we consider a new way of traveling, too.

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