

Giddy for This Shorecrest Vision

Written by Ken Jett, BT Contributor
May 2018

Let's hear it for a 79th Street renaissance



mid deserved celebration for new and newly renovated businesses in the MiMo Historic District, the nonprofit MiMo Biscayne Association (MBA) has been working feverishly to secure letters of support for a re-envisioned streetscape that adds landscaped medians, more pedestrian crosswalks, and on-street parking.

All this circling of the wagons is presumably being done to avoid a repeat of the previous FDOT plan outcomes for the same area -- wherein differing opinions resulted in what we have now: a freeway. However, I've seen the future and it is 79th Street!

MBA's new plan focuses only on the needs of the MiMo District. But the traffic calming could create a bottleneck and/or speeding zone in Shorecrest, where the plan stops. In addition, the plan would likely compete for the same public funds as the traffic reconfiguration that is *not* part of the current resurfacing project along NE 79th Street.

The current FDOT project will result in some pleasant landscaping in our downtown Shorecrest area, with midblock pedestrian crosswalks, on-street parking, and curb extensions ("bump outs") to calm traffic. Wait! Wait! Maybe the MiMo Biscayne Association has seen the same future that I've seen.

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From pioneering early investors in this recent upturn, like Yasmine Kotb, chef/owner of Mina's Mediterraneo restaurant, to long-timers like Alex Richter, the chef/owner of Royal Bavarian Schnitzel Haus, I hear excitement about this underdeveloped roadway that flows through the heart of Shorecrest. A look at the property appraiser's website will show that some properties have changed hands recently, which leads one to speculate about what may be in the hopper.

And all indicators -- from the soon-to-open bayfront Shorecrest Luxury Apartments to the shell of the new CVS at Midpoint Plaza (formerly Biscayne Plaza), and from plans for the old INS building to Avra Jain's design for Magnum Lounge -- point to 79th Street as the future of the Upper Eastside. The buzz is loud and bright.

Giddy excitement is not limited to 79th Street. There is a long-awaited renewal happening along Biscayne Boulevard between the Little River Canal and 87th Street, too. It doesn't have streetscaping as part of its realized future yet. But why shouldn't a comprehensive approach, a communitywide proposal that would fix all outstanding roadway issues, be undertaken as one seamless project that encompasses the MBA concerns, traffic reconfiguration of 79th and 82nd streets, Biscayne Boulevard streetscaping, and calming above 77th Street? Hmmm?

The new antique mall shops at 87th Street are going up quicker than the CVS. Property owners along this corridor appear to be changing, too. Add this to the commuter rail station proposed for Shorecrest, and the future unfolds.

Some may not like the future I see, but fighting against change is sometimes a fool's errand. So bear with me for a bit. Starting at NE 79th Street and the FEC tracks, imagine a commuter rail stop. High-rise condos and apartments spring up from the east side of the Little River canal to act as a bookend to the Shorecrest Luxury Apartments on the bay. I think we'll see these buildings as part of Midpoint Plaza, replacing both the areas along the canal south of 79th Street and north of 82nd Street. Apartment buildings will infill the areas north and south of 82nd Street. If they front Biscayne Boulevard, there will be a retail wrap. Picture Midtown, only a bit shorter.

You've seen the Triton Tower (INS) plans. I see an eventual reconceptualization for the remainder of Midpoint Plaza, too. I don't see the single-story commercial structures being salvaged on the northeast corner of 79th Street and the Boulevard. I don't know of any

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commercial properties available from there to the bay. So the rest is waiting ... and fantasizing.

I see more restaurants, specialty food stores (more than just Marky's), and office buildings (doctors, dentists, veterinarians). Live, work, eat, and play. Maybe (hint, hint) John Kunkel of 50 Eggs group or Michelle Bernstein of Michy's fame could find a place on NE 79th Street for a new restaurant -- I hear tell of a public storage facility that is unlikely to happen on a large parcel zoned for restaurant use.

I hope new development is held to current zoning, with adjustments where they're reasonable and sensible. Please, no 20-story buildings next to successful two-story businesses, forcing them into obsolescence -- but skillful placement next to irresponsible business owners might be welcome. I challenge developers to look at the community comprehensively, as opposed to how high, how much profit, and how to exit.

If done well, NE 79th Street (along with the rest of Shorecrest) will become the crown jewel of the Upper Eastside, instead of the oft-forgotten neighborhood north of the MiMo district. It can be a place people want to live and play. Now is the time for a business district association to form and work with area leaders to shape and polish that jewel. We are primed to become a Cinderella story.

Unfortunately, past zoning decisions suggest that the city will not always concern itself with the right decision. The jet ski rental allowed to take up shop in Ted Vernon's old place to tear up the backs of manatees was not of concern to the city's zoning department. Surprisingly, the shop is now vacant. Kudos to those of you reporting to police the rentals being operated above wake speed! Remember that you do have some power, and we didn't have to resort to picketing.

Bad decisions and lack of enforcement still plague the Little River Club and Tokyo Valentino issues. Both are under settlement agreements that they appear to be violating. The city's responses are slow but ongoing. Persist, people, and contact your commissioner, city mayor, and city attorney to request that they take action. If you don't think the bayfront area really needs a large storage facility, let these folks know about it.

Transformation is sometimes slow, painful, and compromising. The scale of change is often larger than expected. Evolution is at times iterative. Moving forward may mean taking a step

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back before moving ahead again. With time, the brilliance at the other end is often amazing.

The MiMo district is having an amazing resurgence, and applause is in order for all of those responsible. Scaling safeguards, while beneficial in maintaining height restrictions, can create dilemmas when thinking about mixed-use projects. Given traffic, available space, ease of working with the area's civic organization, and some incredible plans in all phases of development, NE 79th Street is indeed the future, and the future is now.

Shorecrest is poised to become the Upper Eastside's superstar.

This column originally appeared in November 2014.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com