

## Suburbs trying to create 'downtowns'

## DOWNTOWNS (BR)

was a nucleus, a place where people could live, work, and walk to a good time of shopping, eating and fun.

The movement started in the late 70s and early 80s with the idea of preserving such places as Georgetown in Washington, D.C., where there are restaurants, interesting shops and a lot of history.

But as more and more people moved out to newer, pricier, sprawling homes in the suburbs, they were forced to drive back into the city to work, dine, and shop.

"Suburban development was a reaction to badly managed cities, but now we can see that suburbs are harder to manage than cities," said Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, an expert on new urbanism and dean of the University of Miami School of Architecture.

Planners say that when people live in more compact areas, or have a destination to go to, it becomes a social and environmental experience.

That's what the suburbs are now trying to create for themselves.

But in the quest to do that, they have hit a few roadblocks.

For example, Miramar, just a few miles up the road from Miami Lakes, is trying to create a similar hub.

## GROUND BROKEN

But even though Miramar's Town Center has broken ground, negotiations with the developer are breaking up.

The developer wants to build only rental apartments for the residential aspect of the project. Miramar city officials, however, want more of a mixed use, possibly with condos, townhomes and rentals.

As a result, the city is looking for another developer to build the residential components of the Miramar Town Center, a \$56.5 million vision for a new city hall, a performing arts center, a lake and a library.

Miramar City Manager Bob Payton says the city will be soliciting bids for a developer to fashion the residential portion of the Miramar Town Center — the city's answer to its lack of a downtown.

The Miramar Town Center Group, which includes architects, developers and planners, says it is not about to let the project go.

If the residential portion does go out for bid, the group says it will submit a proposal again.

Said spokesman Carter Christian: "We've been married to this project for quite a while."

Many developers, especially those in the suburbs, are used to doing one type of development, and not mixed uses with different price levels, planning experts say.

"Town centers challenge



**PART OF A TREND:** This section of Weston Town Center is at Main Street and Bell Tower Lane. The retail center opened in 2001.

the conventional," planning expert Plater-Zyberk said.

Other cities planning centralized city or town centers include:

► **Pembroke Pines**, which this month approved a town center next to City Hall. The project will include a hotel, a conference center, offices and about 600 town houses and apartments, all built around a one-acre plaza designed for community events.

► **Plantation** is proposing pedestrian walkways, trails and buses that would link an amphitheater with other venues and businesses in the area bounded by University Drive, Pine Island Road, State Road 84 and Clary Boulevard.

► **Sunrise** is proposing "Metropolis," a \$160 million project anchored at the north end with a proposed, \$40 million Sawgrass Marriott and at the south end with a new City Hall, 500,000 square feet of office space, 363 apartments and 62,000 square feet of space for restaurants and shops.

Real estate consultant Lewis Goodkin said a mix of retail and entertainment can be a good idea.

But developers need to do market research to make sure that mix will be successful and not just trendy, he said.

"Some people are addressing what they think is the right thing to do, rather than addressing what the market calls for," Goodkin says.

## CLOSE TO EACH OTHER

Goodkin thinks that town centers in Miramar, Miami Lakes, Pembroke Pines and Weston can all be successful, even though they are very close to each other.

But the one thing they must not do is try to become regional attractions, he said.

"The key is to think of these things as truly town centers that serve the local community," Goodkin said. "If they are looking to pull people from the outside, that's where they get into problems."

And they must try to distinguish themselves from large suburban malls by offering something other than national

retail stores, he said.

"It's the law of least average effort," Goodkin said. "If I'm going to get something, I'm going to where it's the easiest place to park and the least amount of traffic."

In Miami Lakes, although the shops look a little like the old downtown world, when you look closer you see that one restaurant is just a Johnny Rocket's hamburger joint and that "quaint boutique" is still just a Victoria's Secret lingerie store.

"We need to make it more special," said Mignon deMartinez, who owns Peekaboq, a children's clothing boutique on Main Street in Miami Lakes. "We need things here that you can't find in a mall."

## HIGHWAY ACCESS

Another challenge for places such as Miami Lakes' Main Street and Miramar's Town Center is that they are not next to an interstate highway, which would provide easy access for people traveling from other areas, experts say.

DeMartinez said she would welcome more people.

"It's very quaint here, it's a very humble area," she said. "I wish we had more traffic."

Also, town centers must attract residents throughout the city, not just those who live near them, experts say.

Mayor Alex Fekete of Pembroke Pines has fought for years to get a central gathering place for Pembroke Pines. This month, he got approval from the City Commission. It doesn't have a name yet. He's leaning toward "City Place."

"Pembroke Pines is 15 miles long [and] two miles wide," Fekete said. "We don't have any real central focal point beyond going [to] shop at Pembroke Lakes Mall."

Fekete said he doesn't think Pembroke Pines is saturating the "Town Center Market," despite the city's proximity to Miramar, Miami Lakes and Weston.

"They have their own thing and I have my own thing," Fekete said. "Every community has its own niche."