

URBAN FORUM: A COMMENTARY

by Frank Schnidman

Housing is key to North Miami's innovative, untested plan

When the Miami-Dade County Commission unanimously approved creation of the North Miami Community Redevelopment Agency this month, it put in place the most creative redevelopment plan in Southeast Florida — and, at more than 3,400 acres, the largest south of Vero Beach.

Its most significant feature is that it ties development of the prime Biscayne Landing mixed-use project to construction of equal numbers of affordable new or rehabilitated housing elsewhere in the city.

Working with other government agencies and with their constituents, North Miami officials established a redevelopment area to use most of the taxes from new development not as an incentive to a key private developer, but as the funding source to help redevelop other areas of the city.

This innovative effort to create a public-private partnership and a private sector economic engine to fund public policy goals and objectives is a model other municipalities need to consider as they debate growth and

redevelopment.

With a population slightly over 60,000, North Miami is home to an evolving community of Caribbean immigrants, the largest group hailing from Haiti.

It also contains a significant number of low-income residents living in substandard housing. In general, it is indistinguishable from the mid-20th century "strip city" development patterns of surrounding communities.

As part of their CRA planning, North Miami officials undertook to graphically depict the city's slum or blighted districts. A detailed study found a substantial number of deteriorating and dilapidated dwelling units and commercial structures, overcrowding, a shortage of decent, safe and sanitary affordable housing, and defective and inadequate street layouts.

Leaders realized that one of the keys to the city's future economic health was the development of a large parcel of city-owned property known as Munisport. It had been leased for a recreational use but never built on, and for a decade was operated as a permitted landfill.

This 190-acre site east of Biscayne Boulevard and adjacent to Florida International University and Biscayne Bay

has received media attention as government agencies investigated the site, assessing water quality and toxicity in order to determine the nature and extent of any contamination.

The county played a critical role in supporting the city's effort to get the land ready for development. Because of its size and location, the tract became a prime site after being declared safe for residential and commercial development.

The city selected Preserve Partners — a partnership between the Swerdlow Group and Boca Developers — to develop Biscayne Landing on the Munisport site. The development agreement for the mixed-use project of residential, commercial and hotel uses also requires the developers to provide the city with off-site projects including a charter school, an Olympic training facility and the renovation and expansion of the city library.

The most innovative aspect of this unique public-private partnership requires an equal number of new or rehabilitated affordable housing units to be built in the western and central portions of the city as are built in Biscayne Landing. This will eventually mean more than 5,000 units.

A large portion of the housing to be rehabilitated is 40 to 50 years old. It includes undersized, substandard and overcrowded single-family homes. More than half of North Miami's existing housing stock has a taxable value of less than \$50,000,

severely limiting the city's ability to expand services to meet growing needs.

The new housing will be designed and built as market-rate homes and apartments. The CRA will then subsidize both the rehabilitated and the new homes with tax funds, traditional grants and loan programs to reduce front-end costs of purchase. That, in turn, will make the units affordable to individuals and families of low and moderate incomes.

The process has already begun with the creation of a new development entity, North Miami Housing, whose general partner is Otis Pitts. Substantially minority-owned, the company targets residents of the city for jobs and is in the midst of obtaining permits for its first affordable housing project.

North Miami Housing will also create a program to encourage minority contractors, many currently disenfranchised from the building boom by licensing and financial inadequacies, to participate in both the construction and future maintenance of the housing.

This large employment and training program, prioritizing local participation, addresses the high levels of poverty in the CRA area. The effort goes beyond the physical and works hard to address human needs. This, in turn, will lower the demand for city and county services and provide higher incomes, hopefully resulting in more spending in support of local businesses.

The city and Preserve

Partners crafted their development agreement to address every conceivable regulatory issue the Biscayne Landing project would face. Once executed, it was included with most permit applications. This approach is partially responsible for the fact that Biscayne Landing has already received all local regulatory approvals.

How will all of this happen? With county approval of the CRA, the city can formally implement its redevelopment plan, a process that has already been informally under way for a year. County Commissioner Dorin D. Rolle told county staff to prepare a proposal with a tax-sharing plan that provides the city of North Miami enough funds to achieve its redevelopment goals.

South Florida is a living laboratory, a place where experience gained by one municipality should be studied and evaluated by others.

Through the effort to provide growth and redevelopment that is economically sound, environmentally friendly and supportive of community livability — growth that enhances the quality of life, Miami-Dade County and the city of North Miami are truly fostering smart growth.

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