
Vision turns into reality in Kendall

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After a few years of listening to talk of changes, developers are finally beginning to embrace the community's vision for a downtown in the Kendall area of Miami-Dade. The first of 3,500 planned residential units for the now mostly commercial area are starting to shape up.

Anchored by Dadeland Mall, the 325-acre downtown Kendall plan grew from a 1998 master plan.

The nascent district could actually accommodate up to 18,000 units, with an absorption rate of up to 2,000 units a year, said Lee Rawlinson, assistant director of Miami-Dade County's Department of Planning and Zoning.

"In the past 14 months," he said, "more than 3,500 residential units came to us for permit approvals."

The proposed downtown is south of the Snapper Creek Expressway, or State Road 878, east of the Palmetto Expressway, or State Road 826, and west and north of the zigzagging Federal Highway, or U.S. 1, he said.

National and local developers are pouring into the area, proposing pedestrian-friendly buildings with ground-floor retail and restaurants, colonnades, water fountains and squares. They are buying land from owners eager to liquidate their properties now worth up to 40 percent more than their value just three years ago, said Pedro Martin, an area developer and shareholder with Miami law firm Greenberg Traurig's real estate division.

In 1998, Miami-Dade changed the zoning of downtown Kendall, pushing for a new urbanism code, which calls for reducing density in favor of improving residents' quality of life, said Stefan Johansson, a principal with Gulfside Development Corp. in South Miami. Johansson and partner Jackson Ward designed the 416-unit Downtown Dadeland using a village concept, just as promoted within the five-year-

old master plan.

In October, his group paid \$22 million, or \$2.9 million an acre, for the former home of the Williamson Cadillac dealership. Covering 7.5 acres, the \$140 million project will lie south of Dadeland Mall and Kendall Drive, north of the Dadeland South Metrorail station, east of U.S. 1 and west of Dadeland Boulevard and the Dadeland Marriott Hotel.

Maximizing quality of life

"The new zoning doesn't maximize density but maximizes quality of life, maximizing the dollar per square foot," he said. "People are willing to pay more for being able to walk downstairs to buy a cup of coffee or go to a pizzeria or take the Metrorail to work."

Raised in Sweden, Johansson said that in a couple of years, the area would resemble the urban living setting so common in Europe and major U.S. cities such as New York, where mass transit is key to people's lives.

The group is currently building seven 7-story buildings sporting a Mediterranean style, with Spanish and Moorish architecture.

With underground parking, the project would look like a transplant from Palm Beach or Coral Gables, in contrast to the current area, with plain-looking office towers and big-box retailers.

The group would build new streets to connect the seven buildings and wide, brick-paved sidewalks and green space, Johansson said.

To be ready for occupancy in early 2005 and with condominium units priced from the low \$100,000s to the \$500,000s, the residences would sit on top of ground-level shops.

Nationally known tenants sign up

Some of the tenants enlisted to occupy part of the 120,000 square feet of retail in the Downtown Dadeland project are Starbucks Coffee, Pier 1 Imports, Pointe Bank, The Cheese Course, Romano's Macaroni Grill, Chili's Grill & Bar and Latin American Food.

"The retail space is about 55 percent pre-leased, and the units are about 80 percent sold," said Monette Klein-O'Grady, a real estate broker with Miami-based Prime Sites, which handles the retail leasing.

A 200-unit condominium project is also planned for a site immediately west of Downtown Dadeland. The 1.9-acre Metropolis at Dadeland would have twin 25-story towers with units selling from \$170,000 to the \$400,000s. About 90 percent of the first tower and 25 percent of the second building are sold, said Martin, a principal with Terra International Developments, the result of Chilean and Spanish capital. "Our goal is to reverse suburban sprawl by creating urban centers where people can work, live and shop."

The group is on schedule to begin construction of the \$80 million project this month and be completed in March 2005. Martin said his firm last year paid more than \$10 million for the 1.9-acre parcel.

"We decided to enter this market because, after talking with real estate brokers and area residents, we realized there was a big demand for residential units," he said.

His group recently secured a \$41 million construction loan with Fremont Investment & Loan of California to build the first tower.

Fairfield Residential of Dallas, with offices in Coral Gables, plans to start building in July a 396-apartment building next to the Metropolis. The group, which bought the 3.8 acres for \$12 million in October, expects to complete the \$100 million project in about two years.

Lennar Development (NYSE: LEN) is proposing a \$180 million residential complex. The Colonnade would consist of four 10-story towers across from Dadeland Mall. The 530-unit condominium is slated to be completed in phases within four years.

Dayco Holding Co. in Miami, a commercial and residential developer, is currently negotiating to buy land in the area to build a residential tower, Martin said.

The wave of development is making some wonder if the area will be able to deal with more traffic and occasional flooding, generated in part by the county's operation of the Snapper Creek Canal, along the northern boundary of the proposed downtown area.

"Development is good," said John Lucas, a realtor with Coldwell Banker in Miami, "but developers and the county need to make sure the infrastructure is in place to avoid traffic jams, parking problems and flooding. The area gets pretty bad when it rains a lot."