

MIAMI TODAY

WEEK OF THURSDAY, MAY 28, 2009

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SERVING SOUTH FLORIDA'S MOST IMPORTANT AUDIENCE

Aesthetics, events go long way to improve quality of life

By Yudislaidy Fernandez

Improving Miami-Dade's quality of life is a task some leaders are taking on full throttle to transform and beautify the county's communities.

For almost a decade, county commission Chairman Dennis Moss has been working hard to realize his vision for a well-planned, well-landscaped county with improved gateways, more tree canopy and better-maintained roadways.

The county's Community Image Advisory Board, which he helped form in 2000, was aimed at working with other agencies to make aesthetic and quality of life improvements in the community.

Mr. Moss, who chairs the advisory board, said at the beginning one focus was improving the major transportation arteries of the county such as US 1, North Kendall Drive and Northwest 27th Avenue and working with agencies such as the Florida Department of Transportation and the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, also known as MDX.

"We brought folks together to



create a vision to increase the community aesthetically and make other kinds of improvements to try to make a difference in the way the county looked and people perceived us," he said.

For example, the board was involved in coordinating efforts such as landscaping improvements of I-95, from Northwest 11th Terrace to I-395, and of replacing the "pink wall" along US 1 just south of Brickell with help from the City of Miami.

Mr. Moss said working with other agencies has helped them to think outside the brick-and-mortar mentality to see the real value of landscaping in planning.

"Now they are getting so many compliments... that they are incorporating those aesthetic enhancements in their projects," he said.

During planning for International Pow Wow, a travel trade sales event hosted in Miami this year,



Photos by Maxine Usdan

Katherine Moore has promoted green living and unity with Bike Miami.

Downtown Development Authority Director Alyce Robertson says, Mr. Moss got officials from various agencies to hop on a bus and identify needed street and landscape enhancements before the big event.

Ms. Robertson, who worked for the advisory board for three years, said Mr. Moss is hands-on and dedicates a lot of time to working with the board.

Mr. Moss said: "I am going to continue preaching that doing this is good for the community, adds value to properties and sends a message that we take pride in our community."

The City of Miami also took a big step this year to improve residents' quality of life with its Bike Miami Days, a neighborhood biking event that continues to grow in attendance.

Ms. Robertson, the downtown authority director, says she has worked with Bike Miami Days coordinator Katherine Moore very closely and says she has played a big role in the event's continued success.

An aide to Miami Mayor Manny Diaz, Ms. Moore was given the task to develop the mayor's idea for a bike event to unite the community and promote green modes of transportation. The original event, known as Ciclovía, was born in Bogota, Colombia.

Ms. Moore – along with other city staffers and the Bike Action Committee – worked to bring together city departments such as parks and recreation and Miami Police and agencies like the downtown authority to make the bike event possible.

"Initially, it would be one day, one project," Ms. Moore says, adding she had no idea the event would be such a hit with the community.

Bike Miami's popularity encouraged organizers to plan additional events. Seven have been held this year and they're to return in October.

The first event drew about 500 people, a crowd that has since grown to more than 3,000, she said. "Bike Miami has really reconnected people with down-



Bill Fuller has worked to redevelop and revitalize historic Calle Ocho.

town.”

In the private sector, some developers are also enhancing quality of life by restoring, not tearing down.

Bill Fuller, with roots in Little Havana, has focused the past six years on purchasing properties in the historic neighborhood to redevelop and bring the iconic Calle Ocho alive.

“Bill has restored dozens of homes and performed some successful condo conversions in District 3,” said Miami City Commissioner Joe Sanchez. “He doesn’t tear things down – he takes classic old structures, updates them and gives them a new life.”

He has restored two classic buildings in the Calle Ocho corridor. One is at Southwest Eighth Street and 15th Avenue – now home to a lounge and entertainment venue

and an upscale cigar shop.

Mr. Fuller says creating an enticing tenant mix to bring more tourists and locals to the area is a key to its revitalization.

“Some people don’t know that 75% of cigars produced in the US are produced in Little Havana; it’s a big industry here,” he said.

The Miami developer is now working to create an iconic gateway into Little Havana by adding colorful signage to activate the corridor. And five months ago, he formed the Little Havana Merchants Association, a vehicle to promote area businesses and responsible development of the neighborhood.

Meanwhile, developer Matt Greer’s Carlisle Development Group is helping to increase the supply of affordable and environmentally sustainable housing in Miami-Dade and Broward.

He is seeking Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-certification for three affordable housing developments and has what he says is a comprehensive plan to make his existing housing units more environmentally sound.

“Before most developers realized green was going to be a staple of development in the future, Matt was committing his projects, which serve low-income tenants and are among the most efficient units in Florida,” said Nick Gunia, chairman of the South Florida Chapter of the US Green Building Council.

But Mr. Greer doesn’t strive only to offer tenants well-built housing. He also helps offer them better lives.

He and his mother, longtime children’s and education advocate Evelyn Greer, worked toward pri-

vatizing foster care in the county to increase its quality.

Today, some of Carlisle’s housing developments offer housing to young adults who must leave foster homes. The assistance is through special landlord-tenant agreements by which teens at risk of homelessness get a new home.

At age 18, foster children have to leave their foster home to make room for new youngsters, Mr. Greer said. “The kids don’t have anywhere to go. They have no credit and no job.”

He says young adults living in his housing units in downtown Miami – about 25 so far – are near a college campus and have a greater employer pool to find part-time jobs while they go to school.

“Our goal is to induce other developers to get involved.”

