



# GROWING PAINS

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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“The Duany Plan” for downtown Fort Myers is taking shape but some say at a hefty price

**I**n late November of 2001, the city of Fort Myers — defined at that moment as more than 1,500 government leaders, stakeholders and residents — conducted a 10-day “charrette.”

The brainstorming rendezvous had a big-tent goal as fervently conceived as any born-again convert’s: to inject downtown with a vitality seemingly lost, and to call it not an entertainment district — the wilted label of the previous decade — but more precisely and poetically, “The River District.”

**Inside:**  
Q&A with new urbanist city-planner and architect Andres Duany ... **A9**

New urbanist city-planner and architect Andres Duany and his Miami-based firm, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, led the charrette, adding months of analysis before and after (their bill for services: \$270,000). Together with Duany, the city produced a document called “Downtown Fort Myers.”

SEE GROWING, A8 ▶

FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

## State to reform juvenile justice system

But leaves Southwest Florida off the 25-member committee

BY JEFF CULL

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Florida announced a plan last week to reform the juvenile justice system that was rocked by the death of a 14-year-old boy in a juvenile boot camp in 2006.

That was good news to local experts in teen crime but left some Southwest Florida advocates cold.

The 25 members appointed by Secretary Walter McNeil to a “Blueprint Com-

mission” represent every area of the state except Southwest Florida.

And that’s just the latest in a long line of rebuffs to local juvenile justice efforts.

Frank Busbee, a chief probation officer for the Department of Juvenile Justice in Fort Myers said that Southwest Florida gets the least amount of money, per capita, for substance abuse and mental health for kids.

Carol Helton, a member of the Lee County Juvenile Justice Council, said our area isn’t represented on the State Advisory Group that awards federal grants to combat juvenile crime and “hasn’t had a representative for awhile.”

She said Collier County juvenile advocates are asking legislators for a bill requiring all areas of the state be represented.

Overall, Southwest Florida gets little state help battling the rising juvenile crime problem.

That was a hot topic in last Thursday’s Lee County Juvenile Justice Council meeting where members questioned the state for leaving Southwest Florida out of the juvenile justice loop.

Some even questioned the expertise of some members McNeil selected to the “Blueprint Commission,” which includes a bank president, a regional president of

SEE JUSTICE, A10 ▶



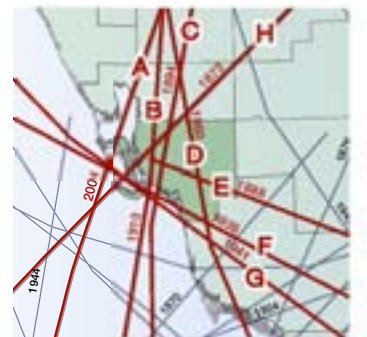
### Tall tale postcards

at the Center for the Arts in Bonita Springs. **C1** ▶



### The final frontier

You don’t have to be an astronaut to enjoy space travel. **A14** ▶



### Hurricane season

Forecasters lower storm predictions but beware: August through October are still the worst for Lee County. **A21** ▶



### FishWatch

New Web site designed to aid seafood consumers. **A17** ▶



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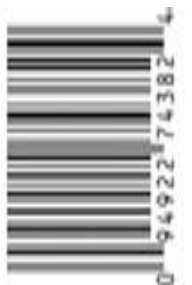
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“Vision” can be defined many ways, but it is perhaps best understood as “accounting for the factor of time.” In other words, when one considers the cumulative impact of repeated efforts towards a well-defined goal, it is possible to imagine overcoming even the largest obstacles over time. This plan is intended to become that goal.

—From the “Executive Summary” of “Downtown Fort Myers,” adopted April 7, 2003

# GROWTH

From page 1

That was almost seven years ago.

“Fort Myers is unique (as) a small town with big ambitions,” said Galina Tahchieva, director of town planning for Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company. She reflected on the outcome of that charette late last week

“(The city) has the perfect urban fabric, the perfect location, and a perfect collection of nice buildings and neighborhoods to become a great success story.”

The document, popularly called “The Duany Plan,” was officially adopted by city leaders on April 7, 2003. It detailed how the city could use its “historic assets” — including “narrow streets, short blocks, historic buildings and a waterfront unspoiled by highways and high rises” — to create an area filled with vibrancy. Or as city Councilman Warren Wright put it, “Someplace where it’s just assumed: We know there’s always going to be activity going on.”

Now, with large swaths of downtown blocked off by green fencing, and with high-rise towers (some still skeletal) appearing on the skyline — with a new Publix supermarket, retail and entertainment area under construction on West First Street (to be fancifully consecrated as “First Street Village”) — old blueprint plans are becoming brick-and-mortar realities that may not wholly resemble them.

Fort Myers has not entirely escaped red-tape restrictions, conflicts-of-interest, and criticisms that arise in an endeavor joined by many: local government, wealthy developers, private business owners, real-estate purveyors, residents, visitors and even construction crews working in the August heat.

Local and regional newspapers, for example, have sharply criticized city leaders for stepping away from the Duany plan when they approved high-rises reaching 12 stories above the 18-story maximum recommended by Duany.

“There were development and market pressures for taller buildings and the elected officials decided to respond to these circumstances,” noted Tahchieva.

City Councilman Michael Flanders specifically blamed the Gannett Corporation’s daily newspaper, The News-Press, for leading readers to a singular misconception: that the city broke faith with Duany’s plan by building higher.

Instead, the plan is much more flexible than editorial opinions and reporting suggested, said Flanders.

“The master plan allows for more height, if developers are willing to give the public amenities back,” he explained. “For example, The Vue — critics say it’s too tall, too big — but the amenities it’s going to bring to the public make for a healthy city. If downtown is rich, so will be the outlying neighborhoods. It’s the trickle-down effect.”

Flanders likens critics of some downtown skyscrapers to those of City of Palms Park, which hosts the Boston Red Sox every spring, a once controversial project that cost taxpayers roughly \$25 million to build.

“The money could have been used to put a lot of streetlights up, or do work in neighborhoods,” Flanders said. “But what happens is the trickle-down effect: the stadium brings (wealth) to all the businesses, and affects all our lives indirectly, and that is a number above and beyond \$20 million. You’re talking hundreds of millions of rev-

enue into businesses and other things all across Lee County.”

That argument fails to convince some, who doubt city planners are doing the right thing by allowing developers to throw up more than a few high-rises — high in both altitude and in price-per-unit — and little else (nine high-rise projects are now built or under construction downtown).

“By frontloading the whole project with luxury high-rise towers, you’re putting all your eggs in one basket,” Wright said. “You need a cross section of economic diversity to have a really healthy community. We don’t have any area set aside to encourage

“The last thing you want to see is speculators or vacant units, but that’s what we’ve got right now,” he said. “Sales are slow, prices are coming down — that’s indicative of the entire market.”

He described a chicken-or-the-egg scenario: downtown needs residents to support the retail businesses, but needs the retail businesses to attract the residents.

“Maybe the market is trying to tell us something,” suggested Marsa Detscher, an urban-planning consultant who lives in Fort Myers but works outside the area. “We already have some beautiful buildings downtown. Why don’t we focus on

experience some success.

“In time, those dwelling units will come around. And in time, downtown will be revitalized, because there are so few places like downtown. Those people who are invested in it for the long haul? They’ll be fine. Will there be a rebirth? Yes.”

Flanders is also looking towards the future.

“Time marches on,” he said. “Things change in the public sector. Things change in the private sector.”

SUBHEAD: On the streets  
Far below High Point Place’s 32 stories



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

Customers at H2 in downtown Fort Myers have to navigate a gauntlet of fences and construction barriers. Some downtown business owners said they feel they were misled about how dramatically the project would affect businesses by restricting public access.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

Large swaths of downtown blocked off by green fencing. The construction on Bay Street is progressing.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

Workers add brick pavers as part of the streetscape to a completed section of Bay Street in the downtown River District.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

Businesses must rely on signs to direct customers around the construction and to their shops and restaurants.

middle-income people to live downtown.”

Without more affordable housing, Wright argued, downtown may continue to be a slow zone, at least until there is enough culture, entertainment and prestige to attract buyers who can spend upwards of \$500,000.

“I think everyone is kind of holding their breath right now because, yeah, you see a lot of empty condos,” he said.

Those condos are being bought mostly by speculators, not tenants or full-time residents, said Brett Ellis, a partner in the Ellis team of the REMAX Realty Group.

those?”

The vision of a vibrant downtown has been “blurred” because the city has not closely followed the Duany plan, Detscher said.

“Allowing developers to build higher because they offer the city money or amenities is largely arbitrary. All we see is dollar signs. The Vue gave \$500,000 worth of amenities to the city? Give me a break. That’s a drop in the bucket. One of their dwelling units alone costs that.”

Ultimately, Detscher concluded, and despite her reservations, downtown will

and the control bubbles of the wispy construction cranes rising into the sky above First Street — and below even the streets themselves — construction crews are excavating long outdated utilities (some from the early 1900s) and replacing them.

Once that’s done, they’ll begin “the beautification process,” according to the city’s Web site (www.fmstreetscape.com). Proposed improvements include “sidewalk and pedestrian amenities, landscaping, traffic signalization, and lighting.”

Wright called what the crews found

under the streets, “a jumbled mess.”

“Previous administrations for the last 60 years have ignored the infrastructure and unfortunately the only way to repair that is to do large tracts at a time — whole streets at a time,” he said.

“It’s time to pay the piper, so to speak. I know business owners are frustrated, but it’s just unavoidable. This is the result of neglect, and as a consequence we’re taking the drastic action we’re taking now. It’s a huge transition, a difficult adjustment.”

The city is planning to beautify and replace the utilities in more than 50 blocks, including water, sewer and storm drain systems, as well as underground communication and power systems.

“We’re averaging about four to six months per block,” said Kaye Molner, a consultant who works for the city. “Depending on circumstances.”

Weather and the conditions of the existing utilities sometime slow the work down. “Businesses might have to do some

“It’s a utility project, not really a ‘streetscape,’” Balink said. “There are nine or ten people to coordinate for every city block. That’s why it’s so hard. Help with sales tax or rent or even a loan, when the construction is in front of a business — that would be a huge (benefit).”

Balink recently e-mailed promotions to customers, briefed his staff on directions to give callers wanting to come downtown, and put up signage pointing traffic and pedestrians to his doors.

“It’s gonna be a struggle for a while,” said Art Baker, owner of Hide-A-Way Sports Bar on Dean Street. “We just hope the rain holds off and things stay on schedule.”

Baker said business dropped about 50 percent the month after construction began on the block directly in front of his business.

Other businesses lucky enough to avoid construction directly on their doorsteps have had an easier time, so far.

“We slowed down a little this week and

ne Davis Art Center on Nov. 3, six years to the month after the 10-day charrette that kicked off the downtown changes.

Still, many storefronts are empty and for sale or rent, and pedestrians strolling the streets are few and far between. The vision of a revitalized downtown could be years more in the making, some say.

“We’re definitely going in the right direction: We’re fixing and repairing the city,” Wright said. “But right now, downtown is a business park. There are bright spots — the old federal building revitalization, the streetscape — these are all good things that over time will increase growth. But there are big pieces of the puzzle missing.”

Wright again noted the large number of high-rises (“a major disservice,” he said), and the lack of middle-income dwellings, as well as the lack of parking space — something he describes as a “key issue.”

“It doesn’t mean downtown can’t be nice,” he said. “It just might not be the vi-

The Duany Perspective

>>Galina Tahchieva, director of town planning and Fort Myers project manager for Andres Duany’s firm of urban master planners, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, replied to Florida Weekly’s questions in an Aug. 3 conversation, by e-mail.

**Q: How and when did your firm begin planning downtown Fort Myers?**

**A:** In 2001, through a 10-day public process to shape a vision for future growth downtown. A number of projects had been already underway when we did the charrette, thus creating good momentum which we could build upon. The consensus achieved during public meetings was taken to implementation very fast and aggressively.

**Q: How did it go, at first?**

**A:** The streetscape improvements as developed by Genesis Group and under construction, the countless building renovations and improvements, the new (Publix) grocery store soon to be built, the new development along the river — these are only a few of the accomplishments which wouldn’t have been possible without strong leadership in the city, even with a good master plan.

**Q: What’s your vision for downtown Ft. Myers?**

**A:** The vision of the community. We do not invent grand schemes in a vacuum and impose them on the public; rather the opposite. We listen to the needs and desires of the local residents, businesses and decision makers, and tailor for them a document, a blueprint for pragmatic and realistic growth that provides predictability to all involved.

**Q: Has downtown development succeeded the way you hoped?**

**A:** We believe that the development of Fort Myers is very successful. Every master plan of a similar kind follows its own dynamics and evolves based on the aspirations and level of commitment of the local community. We should not be in a hurry to make judgments or criticize the results. The implementation of urban redevelopments is a long-term process, continuously evolving within the frame of the master plan but constantly fueled by new ideas, events and people. The enormous investments in the city by developers and businesses are a proof that the plan is working.

**Q: Has there been controversy?**

**A:** There were controversial moments, such as the decision to increase the height limits along the riverfront from 18 (stories) to 32 to 36 (stories). During the charrette, it looked like a good idea to have this height limit so the new building mass expected to be developed is more equitably distributed in the urban fabric along the river. But there were development and market pressures for taller buildings and the elected officials decided to respond to these circumstances. We have other projects, where exactly the opposite had happened; the recommendation by the master-plan building height was lowered. Ultimately the community and its leaders decide the fate of a master plan. The planners are the facilitators and even if they are very instrumental and virtuosic they don’t have control over the built results; the action is in the hands of the local community.

**Q: What would you ultimately prefer to happen in this downtown?**

**A:** The best reward for DPZ as master planners will be the fact that many people live in and close to downtown, that they are enjoying it, that they are walking the streets of the downtown — that it is becoming more lively and artistic than ever before.

**Q: In your experience of such projects, what distinguishes Fort Myers?**

**A:** Fort Myers is unique (as) a small town with big ambitions. It has the perfect urban fabric, the perfect location, and a perfect collection of nice buildings and neighborhoods to become a great success story. The master plan was easy to draft, as we were only building on and further developing what was already there. And the community was supportive and creatively participated in the planning process. All of this is unique but thankfully happens more and more often all around the country. Fort Myers will be among these pioneering cities reclaiming their downtowns.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

Fort Myers is in the midst of replacing the utilities in more than 50 blocks, including water, sewer and storm drain systems, as well as underground communication and power systems.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

Construction crews, such as these on Lee Street, are excavating long outdated utilities (some from the early 1900s) and replacing them.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

The former Federal Building on First Street, has been restored. It will officially reopen as the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center on Nov. 3.

creative things to survive,” Molner said.

That’s not news to business owners.

The hassles of parking, walking and negotiating some blocked-off streets have slowed sales all around.

“You’ve had a state of turmoil downtown which is not conducive to helping the sales in those tower projects,” Ellis said.

Harold Balink, chef and partner of two downtown restaurants — Harold’s on Bay and H2 — said he feels he was misled about how dramatically the project would affect his businesses by restricting public access and causing financial losses.

the last, but prior to that we had some record weeks,” said Ruth Ann Yoeman, owner of Blake’s Barber Shop on First Street. “We are very grateful (to our customers).”

Outside the barbershop and down the street, change is everywhere apparent; finished, landscaped streets appear here and there, as distinct as a crisp dollar bill found on an empty sidewalk.

The formerly spooky Federal Building, for years standing empty behind huge columns on First Street, has been restored. It will officially reopen as the Sidney & Ber-

sion everyone thought it would be.”

Duany’s Tahchieva, meanwhile, takes the long view: “We should not be in a hurry to make judgments or criticize the results. The implementation of urban redevelopments is a long-term process, continuously evolving within the frame of the master plan but constantly fueled by new ideas, events and people.”

Most people downtown probably agree with her. ■

(Editor’s note: Florida Weekly Correspondent Evan Williams works part-time at H2.)