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City seeks to discover its downtown character



Waterfront a huge plus; traffic a monster hurdle

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Anyone who saw what Boca Raton did with its Mizner Park would be hard-pressed to not become a fan of community redevelopment areas.

Boarded warehouses turned into restaurants, an amphitheater, movies, town houses and trendy shops with free parking took more than a wave of a magic wand.

It took about 20 years for Boca Raton to transform its rundown Mizner Park area into what many consider a drop-dead gorgeous attraction.

Cape Coral residents can look forward to transforming their downtown into its own version, said Suzanne Kuehn, Community Redevelopment Agency executive director .

The area encompassed by the CRA now has restaurants and businesses, but has no central theme or look to it. To qualify for the CRA designation the area had to be considered blighted and generally neglected.

Boca Raton offered only one vision of how an area could be transformed into a place where people like to remain.

"It was what we did and how we did it," said Jorge A. Camejo, Boca Raton CRA executive director, about his presentation to the City Council on Monday.

"Cape Coral has its own problems and will find solutions to remedy them. It is spread out and predominantly a single- family residence city."

Boca Raton, with its 80,000 residents, already had a central business and civic core, but it was rundown, Camejo said. It redesigned a 30-acre area with a failing mall into what he called an urban village filled with amenities.

• Jose Martinez, left, Juan Delada and Elias Hernandez move the internal framework of a tilt wall while working on the site of the future Hampton Inn on Wednesday. The hotel is one of the first major projects nearing completion for the Cape Coral Community Redevelopment Agency. *STEPHEN HAYFORD/The News-Press*

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Mizner Park has beautiful buildings and parks made for strolling and taking in the atmosphere.

Cape Coral can use its unique character and build on it, said Jim Jeffers, who is City Council liaison to the CRA.

"I wouldn't want to see us just duplicate what Boca Raton has done," Jeffers said. "We have our own character and the water and waterfront areas make us unique."

Kuehn suggested that Big John's parking lot and the area around it could make the beginning of an attractive business, dining and entertainment destination for the city.

The CRA runs two to three blocks along both sides of Cape Coral Parkway from the Caloosahatchee River to Palm Tree Boulevard. Del Prado Boulevard also runs through the area.

Those two roads pose a problem for the concept, but it is not insurmountable.

"We have two heavily traveled roads," Kuehn said. "But we can work around them."

The city is currently undertaking a traffic study, Mayor Eric Feichthaler said. He liked the Boca Raton project, but recognized Cape Coral would have to find its own way.

"A project like Mizner Park could happen for Cape Coral," Feichthaler said. "But we have a lot of different owners in our CRA and the traffic poses serious issues."

Developers built Mizner Park in phases with parks, courtyards and promenades at the beginning. A commercial section with an eight-screen movie, seven restaurants, 47 retail shops, 272 apartments and a 170,000-square-foot office building followed.

Parking space located in attractive buildings within the project offer free spaces to visitors.

"The idea is to sell our city- owned parking lots to developers," Kuehn said. "Then the city leases back the spaces, making it convenient to residents and visitors."

Kuehn also emphasized the city's relationship to canals and the river as unique features that could enhance future design.

Projects such as The Hampton Inn in the CRA are currently under construction. Other projects are in various stages of buying property and planning.

"We can make the area into a place where you go because you know your needs will be met. You could find places to eat, relax, entertainment, shopping," Kuehn said. "A rebirth for the area as a whole is achievable."