

Margate has high hopes for development of City Center

Former Mayor describes Delray's revival experience

by Randy Abraham, Special Correspondent
November 4, 2007

Margate

With plans for the City Center redevelopment area emerging, city officials are hoping to issue a request for proposals from potential developers of the 32-acre site by early next year.

During a recent workshop, city officials and commissioners talked about a number of possibilities for City Center, which could include a shopping district, theater, restaurants, a parking complex, a park and a waterfront promenade.

They also heard from the former mayor of Delray Beach, who recounted a similar experience his city went through, beginning in 1985.

At least one more workshop is planned, while city officials continue to develop a plan for the site, which includes 17 acres previously used as a flea market.

Residents, city staff and elected officials got a retrospective on Delray Beach's revival from former Mayor Jeff Perlman, who termed that city's progress "exciting and still unfurling."

He cautioned that the process requires patience and a view to long-term results. He noted that Delray Beach's revival began in 1985 when concern grew over companies leaving the area, a 35 percent vacancy rate in the downtown business district, unsafe buildings, a lack of nightlife activities and desirable affordable housing.

"You could throw a bowling ball down the (downtown Delray) streets at 9 o'clock and not hit anything," Perlman recalled. "It takes 20 years to do anything."

Margate Vice Mayor Pam Donovan, who is chairwoman of the CRA board, said she felt the flea market site acquisition has changed the city's initial redevelopment plans.

"I think that's our biggest asset, where we can have entertainment and restaurant uses rather than residential," Donovan said. Commissioner Arthur Bross cautioned that the city needs to focus on its niche before going forward.

"Sometimes it pays to leave the land vacant for a while than to do the wrong thing," he said.

Perlman said progress began when Delray officials met with businesses, developers and property owners in 1988 and arrived at common goals for downtown.

After that, the city floated a \$21.5 million "Decade of Excellence" bond issue to fund physical improvements, develop a marketing campaign complete with a schedule of special events, promotions, activities and advertising, and to assemble land parcels and offer grants, loans and other incentives to businesses and property owners.

A historic old School Board building was preserved and became a major downtown anchor and now houses a museum, theater and meeting facilities. Also an 8,200-seat stadium was built and has hosted championship tennis tournaments.

“That sent a message to the private sector that the city was serious about establishing a CRA,” Perlman said. “Sometimes it takes a catalyst.”

Special events such as jazz and arts festivals helped bring new faces downtown and in turn attracted investors and businesses, Perlman said. Zoning codes were made flexible to support slightly higher residential densities while providing for work-force housing and a four-story height limit.

Over the life of the redevelopment process, Perlman said, downtown rental rates went from \$8 a square foot to \$30 to \$40, vacancy rates are down to 5 percent, and the tax rolls swelled from \$250 million in 1985 to \$1.6 billion, boosted by an increase in the construction of condos, townhomes, retail space and offices.

Copyright 2007, South Florida Sun-Sentinel <<http://www.sun-sentinel.com/>>