

BUSINESS MONDAY



Transformation underway
on South Dixie Highway

TRANSIT HEAVEN?

ON THE BRINK OF CHANGE

A spate of big redevelopment plans linked to Metrorail is creating an urban transformation along the traffic-clogged stretch of South Dixie Highway (U.S. 1) from Coconut Grove to South Miami.

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Miami's lone rapid-transit system, Metrorail, began rolling in 1984 under a forward-looking

car-choked suburban corridor.

No fewer than nine significant redevelopment projects are now on the drawing board for the 4.2-mile stretch, promising hundreds of new apart-

The bet by developers, Miami-Dade administrators, and planners in Miami, Coral Gables and South Miami, is that some substantial numbers of

ments, a hotel, shops and offices. "It's not *whether* it's happening. It's happening."

Skeptics may scoff, but Spillis says his own office



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Pedestrians make their way across South Dixie Highway beneath a new bridge to the University of Miami Metrorail station that's nearly finished.

premise that went beyond shuttling commuters downtown: Metro stations would become urbanized hubs where residents wouldn't need a car to get to work, or to visit a lunch spot or the gym, or to pick up groceries or their dry cleaning.

It took just 33 years, but that train's finally pulling into the station. And fast.

The high-demographics stretch of South Dixie Highway that runs between Metrorail's Coconut Grove and South Miami stations is suddenly on the brink of a thorough transformation that could bring the rail system's original vision to belated fruition — and in the process, maybe even provide some welcome relief to that notoriously

ments mixed in dense clusters with shops, restaurants, offices, hotels and new public open spaces.

Three of the mixed-use projects sit smack at the center of Metro stations. A fourth, a redevelopment of an aging Miami-Dade County community center on the corner of Douglas Road in west Coconut Grove, is directly linked to a station by a pedestrian bridge.

Four others would be in easy reach of Metro stations on foot or by bike — a convenience their developers are volubly touting. They include a proposed conversion of a large chunk of the Shops at Sunset Place mall into a high-rise residential, dining and hotel complex.



Spillis

say, are ready to live in an urban setting near transit and walk, cycle or train it to work and other daily activities.

"We see the tide changing," said George Spillis, a Miami native and partner at Grass River Property, which won county commission approval at the end of 2015 to build on underused parking lots at Metrorail's Coconut Grove station. The \$196 million plan includes 250 apart-

Miamians beyond Brickell and downtown are finally ready to ditch a car or two.

Many, project backers

in downtown Coconut Grove is a case in point. Grass River's younger hires, he said, make do with one car per family, or no car at all. The firm bought bikes for staffers to get around — and they receive heavy use.

Spillis himself, at 56, tuned up a long-unused bike, which he has ridden to Metrorail, taken on the train downtown and then pedaled to his architect's offices for meetings. "You've got to take a taste of your own medicine," he joked.

The evidence is not all anecdotal. Last year, Grass River completed a 186-unit residential rental tower a block north of the Grove

SEE CENTERPIECE, 12G

A transformation on South Dixie Highway

Nine significant redevelopment projects are set to transform the stretch of South Dixie from the Coconut Grove Metrorail station to the South Miami Metrorail station into an urbanized, transit-oriented corridor. Seven of the projects promise a dense mix of residential, retail, office and hotel uses linked to transit stations and the planned Underline beneath the elevated Metrorail.



TREO Group



NP International



13th Floor Investments / Adler Group

Link at Douglas:
Douglas Road Metrorail Station. Apartments, hotel, retail and offices.

Gables Station:
215/251 South Dixie. Apartments, hotel, retail and public park.

SoMi Station:
South Miami Metrorail station. Student housing and offices.

Riviera Plaza:
1560 South Dixie. Retail commercial / supermarket.

Shops at Sunset Place:
5701 Sunset. Apartments, hotel, retail added to redeveloped mall.



Grass River Property / Commex Group / Federal Realty Investment Trust

Grove Station:
Coconut Grove Metrorail station. South Dixie at Southwest 27th Avenue. Apartments, hotel, retail and offices.

Platform 3750:
750 South Dixie. Apartments, retail, offices and Miami-Dade County community center.



Cornerstone Group

Artefacto:
101 South Dixie. Showroom/home furnishings.



Artefacto

Paseo de la Riviera:
1350 South Dixie. Apartments, hotel, retail.



NP International

Biscayne Bay

1 mile

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CENTERPIECE

station on Southwest 27th Avenue, which is now leased to near-capacity at rents ranging from \$1,750 to \$3,200 a month.

Meredith Dobbs, who was looking for a place to live in Miami with her husband, dog and toddler after moving from New York City, zeroed in on Grove Station Tower precisely because it was so close to the transit station.

Seven months ago, they settled into a roomy townhouse unit attached to the amenity-laden tower. Dobbs' husband gets to work in Brickell by train in 15 minutes. Most days, she walks their 2-year-old in a stroller the half-mile to Marjory Stoneman Douglas Park, a lush playground in the

MIAMI TO GO TO BRICKELL.

The couple looked in Brickell, but they preferred the more-ample space, access to parks and proximity to good schools along the South Dixie corridor.

"I was like, yes, yes, yes!" Dobbs, 36, said, recounting the occasion when she and her husband first checked out the building. "We're used to the train culture. Being able to walk places is important to us. It's just an easy, convenient place to live."

Students living in the building, meanwhile, take Metrorail to the University of Miami, she noted.

The county has been a principal catalyst in the surge of transit-friendly development plans along the corridor. The idea was always that Metrorail would thrive on the synergy that makes transit work: The station hubs would provide the population density that's required to feed passengers

same time reducing auto dependency and easing stress on overburdened roadways.

The Dadeland South station, the system's southern terminus, saw some early success with the development of the Datran Center's office towers and adjacent hotel and residential buildings. The subsequent Downtown Dadeland mixed-use urban district next door, though slow to take off, is now finally thriving.

"The stores are doing well. There are bodies in the street. They're using that Metrorail," said Spillis, who says his team has studied the district as a model for their Grove Metro station plan. "You have to create a dynamic mix of uses."

But planned development at some critical stations stalled. Litigation over failed proposals at the Grove and South Miami stations paralyzed progress for years. Complex settlements of multiple

suits in the past two years, though, has allowed the county to approve new developers at both stations and put land at a third, at Douglas Road, up for bid.

"This is the best way to plan your city," Miami-Dade transit chief Alice Bravo said. "To avoid congestion, you plan your development around your mass transit. That makes it all the more convenient for people to get around by mass transit.

"This is just a natural evolution for a city of our size. It's modern urbanism."

At the South Miami station, the winning SoMi Station proposal by the TREO Group calls for a sleek Class-A office building with ground-floor retail fronting South Dixie and a 99-unit residential building for students at the back of the station.

The Douglas Road redevelopment plan is massive. The \$280 million Link at Douglas plan by 13th Floor Investments and the Adler Group comprises 970 apartments, including a number of affordable “workforce” housing units, shops and a 150-room hotel set around a public pedestrian plaza.

That plaza, said 13th Floor CEO Arnaud Karsenti, is a key element because it would tie the project to the Underline, the planned conversion of the bare, paved pathway under the Metrorail into a lushly landscaped greenway for cyclists and pedestrians. It would run the 10 miles from the Dadeland South station to Brickell.

Each feature, each use, he said, provides people one more reason to forgo their cars.

“You can incentivize people to not use cars by making stations places they are attracted to, by designing spaces that are inviting and where you can have a meal, have coffee, go to the gym,” Karsenti said.

The county is also moving forward with redevelopment of the Frankie Rolle community center, which is connected by a pedestrian bridge across South Dixie to the Douglas Road station.



Karsenti

Winning bidder Cornerstone Group, now in contract negotiations with the county, plans to build 200 mid-rise apartments with a mix of market-rate and affordable units, said partner Lenny Wolfe. A separate building will have 30,000 square feet of offices, including 12,500 square feet for the county offices and neighborhood service center. The complex will also have 20,000 square feet of neighborhood retail and a station for a car-share service, Wolfe said.

“All you have to do is walk across the bridge and you’re downtown or at Dadeland in minutes,” Wolfe said.

Echoing Spillis, Wolfe cited the appeal of the transit-oriented, car-share lifestyle to young staffers at his firm, who “don’t have cars, but they get to work on time, they socialize.”

“They’re normal people,” he added in jest.

Not all the proposals entail a mix of uses or are

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linked to transit.

Artefacto, the home furnishing store now at the Shops at Merrick Park, expects to move into a striking, hyper-modern new showroom it plans to build on what's now a car lot on South Dixie, just north of its current location. The two-story, 45,000-square-foot showroom, designed by rising Miami firm DOMO Architecture, is shaped like stacked boxes that look in both directions along the highway and aims to take advantage of the revitalizing corridor, Artefacto CEO Paulo Bacchi said in a statement.

Karsenti's 13th Floor, meanwhile, has purchased the old Riviera Theater in

Coral Gables and the attached strip mall. He plans to replace the complex with a larger and denser urban commercial building. Real-estate blogs have reported that Publix plans to move in and close its nearby, antiquated Monza Avenue store, but Karsenti and his attorney, Mario Garcia-Serra, declined to confirm those reports.

Like Wolfe and Spillis, other developers and the county's Bravo say one overriding factor underlies the new appeal on the corridor of what planners call transit-oriented development: unbearable and ever-worsening traffic congestion on South Dixie, which is traversed by some 85,000 vehicles per day.

What was once an easy 20-minute downtown commute by car has turned into a twice-daily affliction that can take as long as 45 minutes each way, they note. And many people are sick of it and looking for alternatives.

"There's only one way to go north and south," notes Michael Comras, a partner with Grass River and Federal Realty Investment Trust in the Sunset Place redevelopment. "To me, it's about creating opportunities for turning a negative to a positive."

And those opportunities are available, Comras said, because of the South Dixie corridor's outdated suburban-style development and low density — not just the Metrorail stations and their acres of surface lots, but the outdated strip malls, fast-food joints and small commercial buildings

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that sit on increasingly valuable yet underused land.

An expansive auto-dealer lot on South Dixie in the Gables also provides an inviting target for redevelopment. The old Ford dealership now used for overflow parking by the Collection luxury dealer is slated for transformation into Gables Station by NP International. The \$160 million plan, already approved by the Gables City Commission, envisions a 16-story complex of 460 residential units, a hotel and ground-level retail grouped around a series of plazas and pocket parks.

NPI will also build what it says is the largest park in the city on a series of adjacent city parking lots that will lead to the Douglas Road Metro station just to the north. The developer has also pledged to build a stretch of the Underline attached to the park.

and his partners are trying to win the support of South Miami residents and elected officials for a plan that would turn the troubled, self-enclosed mall across South Dixie from the Metro station into an open, lively "town center." They're also working on a companion plan that would encourage people to walk and bike there, and to improve the hazardous South Dixie crossing to the rail station.

"We want a place we can ride our bicycles to. And hang out at. And bring our kids to. The goal today is really attracting families and bringing the community together," Comras said.

How quickly this can all happen is unclear, though projects are likely to roll out over a number of years. The Artefacto showroom could break ground as soon as September, Bacchi said, but all others are in some phase of seeking permits and financing. Link at



NP International

A rendering of a plaza at the Gables Station mixed-use development on South Dixie Highway in Coral Gables.

ject that would mean higher density and height in close proximity to an affluent Gables neighbor-

approval of the project, after some downsizing, prompted a pending lawsuit by residents that has

sider the adjacent properties. You have to make the project to scale. It's not just one size fits all.

single [auto] ridership. It's amazing."

In any case, said Mitchell Bierman, a Gables attorney

"It's designed to create a place, not just a space, to bring people together and allow people in surrounding communities to participate," NPI managing partner Brent Reynolds said.

Comras said the presence of Metrorail service justifies increasing densities in proximity to stations, meaning that redevelopment of the corridor is all but inevitable.

"The county is sitting there with this totally underutilized dead space at the stations," Comras said. "You can't make new real estate. You have to regenerate. It's smart development. We're limited in mass transit. We have to take advantage of what we have."

At Sunset Place, Comras

Douglas would be built out in phases over a span of as long as 15 years, the developers said.

What Comras and others envision eventually happening along South Dixie: a series of bike- and pedestrian-friendly urban "villages" around the stations interconnected by rail and Underline. Those hubs are already increasingly connected to surrounding communities and commercial centers like downtown Coral Gables or the Grove's village center by a growing network of trolley-bus circulators.

"It's the urbanization of suburbia," Comras said.

But some suburbanites along the corridor aren't ready to embrace the change. At least one pro-

hood of single-family homes has met stiff resistance from some residents.

The \$172 million Paseo de la Riviera plan, by NPI, would replace the aging Holiday Inn across from the University of Miami with a pair of Mediterranean high-rise buildings, about 10 and 12 stories tall, for apartments and a hotel, and a public plaza with cafes and retail. A broad arch would connect the complex to a park and the neighborhood behind it.

The project would also have easy access to the University Metrorail station across South Dixie, said NPI's Reynolds, thanks to a new pedestrian bridge anchored at a neighboring strip mall.

The city commission's

slowed progress on the Paseo. It also created a political backlash. Although a slate of Gables commission candidates backed by a neighborhood association that bitterly opposed Paseo failed to win election in recent balloting, local leaders say they still believe the project is too tall and dense for its location.

That doesn't mean they necessarily oppose other redevelopment proposals along the corridor, one association officer said.

"We're not against development," said Sue Kawalerski, vice president of the Riviera Neighborhood Association. "We like to see pretty things also, and we would like more amenities. All we ask for is, con-

"If you're on Red Road, that's already a downtown area. Have at it as far as height. That's an appropriate place."

Some critics have also said the new projects will add to congestion along South Dixie. Even if they're connected to transit, they contend, residents will still get in their cars.

But Reynolds said well-balanced, transit-oriented mixed-use development can begin to reverse traffic congestion by "capturing" trips internally — to work, to the wine shop or the dry cleaners — that would otherwise be made by car.

"Outside of downtown Miami, it's a new concept for the area," he said. "But if you get the mix of uses right, you really can reduce

who grew up in what's now Palmetto Bay and serves as chair of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's transportation committee, there may be no other viable choice for South Dixie if Miamians want the long traffic nightmare to end.

"This is the direction we should be going in," Bierman said. "We're waking up to the fact that we are facing traffic Armageddon if we don't start adopting a lifestyle that allows alternatives to getting in a car."

"What you want is a walkable community connected by transit. People want that lifestyle, and the real-estate market is meeting that demand. That's why you're seeing this now."