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RETAIL

Construction set to begin on downtown Whole Foods

■ Downtown residents and workers will be getting a place for organic and gourmet shopping. Whole Foods is to open at Metropolitan Miami.

BY ELAINE WALKER
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Plans for a Whole Foods in Downtown Miami are officially back on track, offering another vote of confidence in the area's rebirth.

The upscale organic grocery chain confirmed Friday that it will open a 37,000-square-foot store at the Metropolitan Miami complex. The grocer had originally committed to open at the project back in 2004. But the deal fell apart a couple of years ago when plans for the Met 3 building got put on hold amid the real estate collapse.

Florida Whole Foods President Juan Núñez said the company never wavered in its interest, but had to wait to see the

new plans.

"We always liked the downtown site," Núñez said. "These are some of the greatest densities. We really think that the customer demand is here."

The new plans call for a store about 25 percent smaller than originally envisioned. Whole Foods customers will have free, dedicated parking under the store and above will be a public parking garage with room for more than 1,200 cars.

Construction will begin sometime next year with an opening likely in late 2013.

"We're excited that Whole

*TURN TO WHOLE FOODS, 4C

Downtown Whole Foods project back on

• WHOLE FOODS, FROM 1C

Foods is back," said Tim Weller, vice president of MDM Development Group. "We think it's an extremely important element of the Metropolitan Miami community. It completes the vision we had of creating a neighborhood in an urban setting."

NO CONDO UNITS

Part of the Met 3 site will also be saved for Phase 2, which would

likely include a hospital company, Weller said. Unlike the original plan that called for a 74-story building with 650 condos above Whole Foods, this time there are no condo units involved.

The Whole Foods is the beginning of the expected retail and entertainment component for the Metropolitan Miami project, which already includes condominiums, the new Wells Fargo Center office tower and the J.W. Marriott Marquis

and Hotel Beaux Arts. The Whole Foods announcement came Friday, as the J.W. Marriott Marquis celebrated its grand opening with a lunch that attracted about 600 people to downtown.

Alyce Robertson, executive director of the Miami Downtown Development Authority, hopes the Whole Foods will be a sign of other major national retailers to come.

"What it says is that companies are recognizing what's happening

here," she said.

Helping Whole Foods and others to make that decision is certainly evidence that the majority of new downtown condominiums are filled with either renters or buyers.

"When Whole Foods enters a market, it says that this is a real credible educated demographic," said Lyle Stern, a Miami Beach broker, who represents Whole Foods and the Met. "It's a signal to the world that all of this is real."