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Downtown Miami revitalization continues despite recession

By Jennifer LeClaire



Downtown Miami office vacancy rates keep rising. Sales of downtown condo units keep slowing. But the Miami Downtown Development Authority (DDA) still has a single focus: completing the metamorphosis of the Magic City's urban core.

Downtown Miami's revitalization is a six-year quest to reverse the trend to suburban sprawl and make the city a world-class metropolis, a vision that's clear for Alyce Robertson, director of the agency.

Robertson, who became DDA interim director in 2008 following widespread criticism of downtown conditions, expanded enhancement teams, pushed for better code enforcement and took on the task of transforming Miami.

She sat down with The Real Deal to discuss the city's progress, what needs to happen next, and how long before the complete revitalization becomes a reality.

Downtown Miami has come a long way, but we've still got a long way to go. Using a baseball analogy, what inning are we in the game that is the revitalization of the Magic City?

We're still early in the game -- the first or second inning. Miami is a very young city. It's just barely over 100 years old. Other cities, like Boston, New York and Chicago, have a much longer history. We've caught up in terms of development, and we're really at a place in the game where we're coming up on the opponents.

When you say opponents are you talking about other cities?

There's competition economically worldwide. Building up a vibrant area where people want to work, live and play is certainly a way to keep yourself competitive on a worldwide scale. That is what we're doing. We have built high-rise condos and helped usher restaurants into an area that was previously shut down after dark. From an urban development standpoint, we're in prime position for long-term, sustainable growth while other metropolitan areas are scratching their heads trying to figure out how to curb urban sprawl.

If the real estate market hadn't crashed, how would that have changed the game at this point? Where would Miami be?

The residential development that has taken place has been successful in driving people to downtown Miami: by 2010, our population will have nearly doubled this decade, according to estimates. But there is room for growth. Were it not for economic factors, we would be further along in filling up our downtown environment.

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There has been \$13 billion in development investment in the urban core since 2002. What's the next step?

One of the things we're working on is improving the experience for people who live and work in Downtown Miami. That means more green spaces, more pedestrian-friendly areas. We're conducting a pedestrian transportation study for better crosswalk marking, planting more trees, greenery along the pedestrian walkway. We have built a residential infrastructure, so the bulk of the heavy lifting is behind us. Now we need to focus on absorption, and that will come with due time.

Beyond the real estate market bust, what do you see as other major challenges to Miami's revitalization?

We need to invest more in our transportation infrastructure, which has the potential to reduce traffic and congestion throughout the region. This is an environmental issue, a business issue, and a convenience issue. While we have the best mass transit in the county, we need to make more investments so people can get around without a car. Miami-Dade County is also working hard on the homeless issue. Miami-Dade County is a model community for dealing with homelessness, but being a model community isn't good enough. We need to end homelessness here, and that includes in Downtown Miami.

What do you see as the tipping point for Downtown Miami?

What we need to see happen right now is an end to the economic crisis so people can once again buy homes and fill up this urban environment. With a recovery, Downtown Miami is poised to fill up and become what we call a 24/7 urban community.

How long before we see the home run?

It's difficult to predict because the depth of this recession is unprecedented in my lifetime. I have confidence that we are going to get out of this crisis -- but it's a big one. We are looking at what we can do for our stakeholders to help them through this crisis. We're forming a retail advisory group, and we'll continue to work toward what we see as the future of Downtown Miami.