



**ON OFFENSE
TO JUMPSTART
MIAMI'S
URBAN
CORE**

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Alyce Robertson

DAILY BUSINESS REVIEW

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MIAMI'S DDA HEAD ON OFFENSE TO REVITALIZE URBAN CORE

by Eric Kalis
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As the biggest promoter of downtown Miami, Alyce Robertson says the time is ripe for retailers and other business to invest in the city's commercial center.

Otherwise, she says, they risk being left behind as an influx of residents, an economy some experts say is showing early signs of revival and a long-awaited master plan recast the area.

One year into her tenure as executive director of the Miami Downtown Development Authority, Robertson has focused much of her time boosting downtown Miami's profile to retailers and reaching out to nearby businesses and residents.

Robertson, the former Miami-Dade County community image manager and 10-year veteran of the Department of Environmental Resource Management, has pushed forward several beautification projects. She also is preparing a long-term master plan designed to shape downtown's future. That plan will be completed and presented to the public within the next 60 days.

With thousands of condominium units built and waiting to be occupied, more retailers are beginning to rent space in the central business district. The DDA expects the area will show a net gain of 17 retailers in the coming months. New downtown residents will create a need for more retailers and restaurants, Robertson said.

But Macy's, downtown's most prominent retailer, is threatening to leave if the city and DDA do not clean up the area surrounding its Flagler Street store. Robertson and the authority are in the middle of discussions with Macy's.

These issues come during an economic downturn that forced the authority to eliminate several administrative positions and divert resources to staffers who are expected to be out on the street helping business owners and communicating with key officials. About one-third of the authority's staff is new, Robertson said.

Robertson spoke with the Daily Business Review about the issues she confronted in her first year on the job and her goals for the rest of 2009.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

When will the downtown Miami master plan be unveiled to the Downtown Development Authority board and the public?

We're looking at a late May or early June look at the master plan. What we have done is take the earlier work that has been done and cherry-picked ideas from it. We're going to use that as the basis for what we will implement for the future.

There was a draft plan known as the [Bernard] Zyscovich Plan. We're looking at that and what the



A.M. HOLT

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plan did for parks and open space. We're also looking at other area master plans that have been done and incorporate from all of those different elements.

There were a lot of big ideas in [the Zyscovich] Plan, some of them more controversial. What we are looking at now is a totally different economic situation than when that plan was done. We're looking at today's reality and the most practical and implementable ideas. We have had \$13 billion in infrastructure improvements on the private-sector side. There were some missing elements to that plan. For example, what is going on with Museum Park was not addressed in the previous plan. There was a whole master plan effort going on for the park.

What aspects of downtown Miami's future will the master plan cover?

Many of the key elements, such as streetscaping, signage, parks and open space. We are already working on those things. The point of a master plan is to get everybody on the same page. How do we activate the waterfront, create more green space or improve

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The DDA board recently passed a resolution supporting Miami 21 but included 11 concerns with the zoning code rewrite. What were some of the board's main concerns? (Miami 21 is a new zoning code that has been in the works for years. The code focuses on protecting low-density neighborhoods from high-density development.)

They wanted to take a stand. This is an important issue for downtown. One of the main concerns is how do you transition from the initial zoning code to the new code without harming the development rights that are already in place? A lot of the concerns were about the transition from the existing code to the new code.

One of the things the board wanted us to do is make sure we are part of the discussion. They do think Miami 21 is good for the city. That's why they wanted to go on the record as supporting it. But they also had those transitional concerns.

How has the DDA contributed to the expansion of retailers in downtown Miami and the Brickell Avenue area?

One thing we do is provide technical assistance as people are coming in. They may have concerns about permitting or site selection or what demographics of what exists in downtown. We create a situation where they can come to us and find some guidance as far as what the market is going to be.

A lot of our beautification efforts are creating an environment that is business friendly and clean, safe and attractive.

What is remarkable about this whole thing is that, in these economic times, we're looking at an expansion of businesses in downtown when in many cases other businesses are closing (Downtown Miami is projected by the DDA to have a net gain of 17 new retailers in 2009). The economic times that we are in are difficult enough, but there are still businesses willing to take a chance because we have new residents coming to downtown.

We also have programs that enhance the actual physical plans of these (businesses), such as the shutter removal program in which we take out the steel doors that are on some of the businesses and replace them with new shutters.

Also, we have grants to improve properties, especially in the Central Business District where there are older buildings that need a face-lift.

I think that the private sector sees an opportunity in that there is obviously more activity going on in the CBD. All of those people moving in need day-to-day types of services, like restaurants, dry cleaners and other kinds of basic businesses.

Mary Brickell Village has done a great deal to enhance that area as far as the amount of people on the street and expanding the opportunity there.

One of the things I am doing is reaching out to all of the stakeholders, especially in Brickell, and saying what do you need to get things done? It's really listening to the stakeholders and going out and actually addressing their concerns.

'how do we get this done?'

Has the DDA been involved in the discussion between Macy's and the city concerning the downtown store?

We have been engaged with them. We want to see Macy's stay in downtown. They have some corporate issues going on that are separate from the physical issues in downtown.

On the physical issues, the city and DDA have worked together on the beautification program that has brought lighting, new sidewalks, signage and planters in the central business district at a cost of \$12 million. Those are actual industry improvements. We are greening up downtown to make it a more walkable environment, adding new crosswalks to make it safer to walk.

We certainly have reached out to Macy's. This retail surge in downtown, they, too, can experience some of that growth. We are trying to ensure that they understand this growth is happening. We are in the process of doing an occupancy study to show who is actually living in downtown. There are renters in downtown who are users of retail services. We need to get that message out about who is in downtown.

How has the economic downturn affected the agency's operations and allocation of resources?

One of the priorities I had was to get money out on the street and not sitting in the office. So we have reduced some administrative positions and put (the agency's funds) to direct use for our stakeholders. The tax information will not be known until June, but we are looking at getting the most bang for our buck from our dollars.

One of the things we will continue doing is our Clean and Safe program, which is improve the streetscape so it is more inviting to come to downtown.

The board would like us to expand our concert series that we are doing in conjunction with the Knight Foundation. The last concert had 1,500 people in attendance.

Another thing we are looking at is expanding our research arm and how we do our marketing.

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