

Local perspectives

DOWNTOWN NEEDS SPRUCING UP

Call it the arched eyebrow effect. Two recent reports about downtown Miami highlight the city's potential and its nagging challenges on its way to becoming an inviting, livable place. One draws an outrageous conclusion about the amount of money street beggars can scrub from willing donors. The other insists almost two-thirds of new highrise condos are bustling with people.

The Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust's estimate that people give around \$40 million a year to panhandlers is farfetched -- based on vastly lower estimates in other urban areas around the nation. The Downtown Development Authority's report of a 62 percent occupancy rate for condos built since 2003 signals much more needs to be done. These new urban dwellers -- mostly renters -- seem to be hiding inside.

Downtown streets at night still clear out -- maybe because retail shopping is so limited that downtowners have to resort to Dadeland or Aventura Mall. Between the Brickell Village south of the Miami River and Midtown at 36th Street there is not a lot outside of Macy's to entice higher-end retail spenders. But a lively restaurant and club district is taking shape west of Biscayne Boulevard northward, partly trickling down from the Design District's revival, and new restaurants are drawing people to Brickell.

The DDA plans to use the occupancy figures to launch a push to bring retailers downtown. That may prove a tough sell, but the recession won't last forever. American Airlines Arena, the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts and completion of the Museum Park in Bicentennial Park can help make downtown a hub for urban living.

One stubborn problem remains: panhandlers at busy intersections. In its 16 years, the Trust has done a remarkable job of reducing homelessness -- with the help of a 1 percent food and beverage tax.

The Trust now wants to install donation boxes around the city so that people could contribute toward homeless programs instead of giving to panhandlers. Fine, but experience in other cities with boxes suggests modest giving.

A commitment to well-lighted and clean streets, leafy walking and biking paths, increased police presence that maintains safety and continued efforts to steer the homeless to shelters will do much more for the Magic City than boxes begging for money.