

## Team effort: Leaders come together to improve downtown

By ZACHARY S. FAGENSON

When the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's Bruce Jay Colan took over as chairman in June, he set as a primary goal to help downtown transform from the center of a sprawling suburban county to the skyward-reaching urban core it's becoming.

The chamber's New World Center committee, chaired by Coral Gables attorney Joseph Serota, oversees that ongoing effort and has spent several months getting an idea of exactly where downtown's infrastructure, real estate market and businesses stand.

And in the future, according to Mr. Colan, the chamber will have to do whatever it can to minimize adverse effects of hundreds of millions of dollars worth of construction.

"The bottom line is we've got the port tunnel going but it's not yet a real issue," he said. "One of the things we've got to do and will do is to work with the users of the port to ameliorate any potential adverse effects on [them] and surrounding property owners."

Meanwhile, the New World Center committee recently got a bit of good news from an assessment of downtown's real estate market.

"We had one meeting called 'The Real Story About Downtown Real Estate' where we had a whole variety of people on the panel: realtors, developers and bankers," Mr. Serota said. "There [were] a lot of issues that came out of that including the fact that the unoccupied units [are] becoming occupied at the rate of 500 units a month."

"And at that rate, the inventory would be eliminated in a year and a half," he added.

Although the occupants are renters, they're also young professionals, which gives hope to chamber and political leaders who'd like downtown and the Brickell Avenue area to develop into full-fledged neighborhoods where people live, work and play.



Photo by Mariene Quaroni

**Bud Park Jr. chaired the master plan taskforce, which concluded a study identifying several recommendations to improve downtown.**

"We recognize that if people are moving [there], and most of them are younger people, there's great potential for downtown and Brickell," Mr. Serota said.

But fulfilling that potential, he said, would require massive changes in the Biscayne Boulevard corridor. While in the Brickell area Mary Brickell Village now offers residents shopping, eating and nightlife, downtown is still perceived as a place people go for work and little else.

Changing that perception falls partially on the New World Center committee's Livability and Downtown Master Plan taskforces.

The master plan taskforce, chaired by Dabney "Bud" Park Jr., recently wrapped up its three-year study of how to solve downtown's problems.

The livability taskforce, chaired by CNL Bank's Miami CEO Raul G. Valdés-Fauli, is still in its infancy but will deal with "all the issues that go with [downtown] being a residential area," Mr. Serota said.

The master plan taskforce, Mr. Park said, brought together about 20 young professionals who dissected skyscraper-lined Biscayne Boulevard and came up with a slew of recommendations that were added to the Downtown Development

historic Freedom Tower.

And "south of that," Mr. Park said, "take out all of the parking space but put in grass, shade trees and make it an interesting park with kiosks and fountains."

Additionally the chamber pushed for completion of a bay walk and river walk as well as installation of more transient dock space so boaters can have easier access to a more pedestrian friendly downtown.

The chamber also advocated a downtown convention center, which in a 2002 study by CSL International was deemed "not supportable ... from a market perspective." But the facility, dubbed the Convention Center of the Americas, is again on the mind of the Downtown Development Authority.

Along with the rest of its master plan, the authority this fall approved plans to study the possibility of a convention hall.

Renewed talks have riled Miami Beach interests that feel the

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**Joseph Serota**

current facility must be improved first. Already a master plan is underway for a multimillion-dollar renovation of the Beach convention center.

But downtown advocates have no remorse.

"The reality is conference centers drive an enormous amount of business," Mr. Park argued. "Even if they're big or medium-sized, they become an important engine for economic development for a downtown area."

But the chamber's concern for downtown in coming years will be on quality of life for its residents.

"We have issues," Mr. Colan said.

Among them are the city's traffic plan, which Mr. Colan said is decades old, and the need for more uniformed police officers on downtown streets.

But chamber officials, Mr. Colan added, have met with newly elected Mayor Tomás Regalado "and he well recognizes downtown is a neighborhood."

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**Bruce Jay Colan**

