

MIAMI BEACH

Miami Beach can be a tough place for millennials to live. This program aims to help

BY KYRA GURNEY

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Tatiana Bezer, a resident of downtown Miami, walks down South Pointe Park Pier in Miami Beach on Monday, Jan. 28, 2019. Miami Beach is trying to attract more young people to the city. [MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM](mailto:MATIAS.J.OCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM)

When Nicole Martinez and her husband started looking to buy a home a few years ago, the couple began the search in their Miami Beach neighborhood.

“We really wanted to stay on the Beach. We loved living there,” Martinez, 32, said.

But after hunting for months, Martinez, a freelance writer, and her husband, a mid-level corporate executive, realized that it didn’t make financial sense for them to stay on the island. For the price of a 950-square-foot condo in South Beach, they could get a much bigger place on the mainland. And so, after several years as a Beach resident, Martinez left the island and settled in North Miami.

It wasn’t just housing prices that made living on the mainland easier. Martinez found that she spent a lot less money overall in her new neighborhood. “There aren’t a ton of affordable places to eat or drink or hang out on the Beach anymore,” she said.

Martinez and her husband aren't alone. **The percentage of young people in Miami Beach has been steadily declining over the past two decades, from 27 percent of the population in 2000 to 22 percent in 2017, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. In comparison, young people now make up more than a third of the population in the greater downtown Miami area — which includes Brickell, Edgewater, Midtown and Wynwood — according to a report from the Miami Downtown Development Authority.**

Although plenty of mainland Miami-Dade neighborhoods are filled with pricey real estate, housing in Miami Beach can feel **especially out of reach**, particularly for young people paying off student loans and struggling to scrape together a down payment. In 2015, Miami Beach had the most unequal housing market in the country, **according to national real estate brokerage Redfin**, which compared the average price of a typical home in Miami Beach to the prices of the island's luxury properties.

Housing prices aren't the only factor driving young people away from Miami Beach. Millennials are drawn to areas where they can get from home to work to a restaurant or a bar without ever getting into their cars, said Sari Libbin, 28, a residential Realtor who grew up in Miami Beach but now lives in Brickell because it's closer to her work. "I think the live-work-play phenomenon is definitely something that everyone benefits from, but I feel like young people have seen the importance of it," she said. "I think that's something that Brickell is starting to figure out and Miami Beach needs a little bit more of that."

And while Brickell has its fair share of expensive apartments, residents can often get more space in a newer building for the price of a smaller, outdated Miami Beach apartment, Libbin said.

Living in the downtown area, which is filled with office buildings, also shortens the commute for many young professionals.

"Law firms in Miami Beach are becoming rarer and rarer," said Daniel Smith, 31, a lawyer who lives in South Beach. "Lots of businesses from less tax-friendly places in the Northeast are starting to come down here. They're looking at Florida for those reasons. Why not look at Miami Beach over Brickell?"

“Perhaps we can activate areas that aren’t traditional business hubs,” added Smith, who worked at a law firm in Brickell before finding a job in Miami Beach. “Five years ago nobody thought there were going to be offices in Wynwood, but here we are.”

But young people typically don’t have a seat at the table where decisions about housing, transportation and business incentives are made. Finding the time and resources to participate in local politics can be a challenge for someone who is just starting a career.

Take Libbin, for example. She briefly sat on Miami Beach’s transportation committee, which advises city officials on mobility issues. But she had to leave the committee because she couldn’t make enough of their afternoon meetings. “I’m not my own boss. I have a boss,” Libbin said. “For these boards that have meetings on a Monday at 3 p.m., it’s very hard to even attend.”

Now, Miami Beach is trying out a new approach. The City Commission recently created a Next Generation Council for people between the ages of 18 and 36 to advise elected officials on the issues that affect young people who live or work on the Beach.

The idea for the council, which meets for the first time this month, came from a similar group affiliated with the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce. Jamie Maniscalco, co-chair of the chamber’s [Millennial Action Council](#), said the group had been trying to find ways for young people to participate in Miami Beach commission meetings. The problem is that the meetings typically start at 8:30 a.m. and don’t finish until the evening.

“A lot of people have full-time jobs and they can’t sit there all day waiting for an opportunity to speak,” said Maniscalco, 28, who works in commercial land sales. “It’s pretty old-fashioned.”

One day, while watching a commission meeting online, Maniscalco heard elected officials propose a new advisory committee for senior citizens. She thought, “Why can’t we have one based on young age?”

Commissioner Ricky Arriola liked the idea and sponsored legislation to create the advisory council.

“Given the fact that so many of the decisions we’re making are long-term in nature, I think it’s important to hear from the younger generation,” Arriola said. The commissioner worries that young people are leaving Miami Beach, causing a brain drain that could negatively affect “the long-term future and health of our city.”

Many of the city’s major initiatives — including a massive resiliency program aimed at mitigating the impacts of sea level rise and [\\$439 million in general obligation bonds](#) to fund public projects — will have a significant impact on future generations.

The council’s 11 members, most of whom were appointed by the mayor and city commissioners, were selected because they had backgrounds in transportation, resiliency, affordable housing, entrepreneurship or technology. Rather than meeting once a month during work hours, like many of the city’s committees, the council plans to meet once every quarter at 5 p.m.

The council isn’t specific to millennials, however. As millennials age out of that 18-to-36 age bracket, the idea is for the council to continue serving as a vehicle for the next generation. “Rather than getting millennial input it’s about getting a younger generation’s input and participation in local politics,” said Jordan Kramer, 30, co-chair of the chamber’s millennial council and a member of the new advisory committee, speaking at a commission meeting last fall.

One of the Next Generation Council’s goals is to come up with strategies to attract more millennials to Miami Beach and keep the ones who currently live on the island. That means finding ways to create more affordable housing options for young people and tackling transportation issues, including newer modes of transportation such as electric scooters and bike share programs.

“I think we need a little bit more of a diverse transportation system,” said council member Michael Thoennes, 23, a campaign consultant. “We’ve put in place these trolley systems that are in favor of I don’t know who. They cause a lot of traffic.”

But Martinez, the writer who left the Beach for North Miami, said she was skeptical that the new council will have an impact on the Beach’s affordability problems.

“I think it’s really naïve to think that any type of council formed in Miami Beach will make it more affordable,” she said. “That’s not what Miami Beach is. That’s not the image they want to project.”

Martinez added that local officials are likely limited in their ability to make Miami Beach more attractive for first-time home buyers. “I don’t think there’s necessarily a good solution to that,” she said. “The market demands what the market demands.”