

CRA puts spotlight on reviving downtown

Group seeks ways to create inviting, viable city center

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Originally posted on May 20, 2006

Sometimes little downtowns grow up to be suburbs.

Back in the 1950s Cape Coral was a speck on a map, but now that tiny dot is a burgeoning metropolis of more than 150,000 residents with a healthy growth rate. Unfortunately, the city's forefathers had no way of knowing that the small businesses that started the city would give way to big box stores, giant parking lots and a need to rethink how the city operates.

Enter the Community Redevelopment Agency.

"A CRA is like a focus group for an area of a town," CRA board chairman Bob Greco said. "The Cape Coral City Council has to think about 117 square miles, but the CRA focuses on just 400 acres."

The Cape Coral CRA was started around 20 years ago as part of the city council. In 1994 the council created and appointed a board of commissioners as the CRA, giving the organization more freedom and opportunity to pursue matters related only to the city's downtown area.

"We're trying to convert a suburban downtown to a more urban friendly downtown," Greco said. "I've been a downtown business owner for 30 years. That helps me in my decision-making process because I have to live here every day."

The area the CRA oversees stretches from the Bimini Basin on the westside to the Cape Coral Bridge on the eastside. A small part of the north boundary extends to

1. Bartlett office complex
 - Description: 8,032-square-foot office building
 - Location: 1322 S.E. 46th Lane
 - Status: In permitting
2. Cape Shore Plaza
 - Description: 5,220-square-foot office building
 - Location: 4503 S.E. 16th Place
 - Status: In permitting
3. Coral Palms office building
 - Description: 15,859-square-foot office building
 - Location: 4645 S.E. 11th Place
 - Status: In permitting
4. Chamber of Commerce
 - Description: Welcome center and office building
 - Location: 2051 Cape Coral Parkway
 - Status: In permitting
5. Orchid Commons
 - Description: 12,800 square feet of space for mixed-use residential and commercial
 - Location: 4356 S.E. 16th Place
 - Status: Completed
6. Hampton Inn and Suites
 - Description: 75-room hotel
 - Location: 619 S.E. 47th Terrace
 - Status: Completed
7. Huggins/RMS Management Group
 - Description: Six-story retail and office building with internal parking structure. 10,000 square feet for retail; 38,000 square feet for office; 18,00-square-foot private club
 - Location: 815-827 Miramar St.
 - Status: In design
8. Leone Restaurant
 - Description: 16,000-square-foot mixed-use restaurant, office and residential
 - Location: 915 Miramar
 - Status: In permitting
9. Piazza di Venezia
 - Description: Hotel, convention center, movie theater, condos,

Southeast 44th Street but most of it runs along Southeast 46th Lane. The southern boundary jogs from Waikiki and Del Prado to Miramar.

The area is home to about 1,000 area business with about 3,500 employees.

The board addresses numerous issues, including lot size, diversity of ownership, defective or inadequate street layouts, low property values, sidewalk placement and new development, all of which affect the people who work and live downtown. The board does not have the authority to create codes and laws. Rather, it makes recommendations to the city council and developers. It's up to the council to pass ordinances, and to developers to voluntarily adhere to any suggestions that haven't been adopted by the city as part of the code structure.

The vision is to make the area one where people can comfortably live, work and play, CRA Executive Director Suzanne Kuehn said.

"It's really about taking the whole downtown and making it accessible to everyone," she said.

Kuehn, who spent 19 years working on community redevelopment in Daytona Beach, joined the CRA in January 2005. Since then, she has worked to bring the vision of what the downtown could look like in the future to Cape Coral residents and business owners.

"It's an incredible master plan," she said. "It completely transforms the city into almost a European vision."

Kuehn has been at the forefront of meeting with members of the community at large to sell the vision and assure residents that the plan is meant for everyone, from small business owners to future residents.

parking garage

- Location: Four blocks from Coronado to Triton Court
- Status: In design and land acquisition

10. Terraces at Rosa Vista

- Description: 22,216-square-foot office building

- Location: 452 S.E. 47th Terrace

- Status: Permit issued

11. Cape Villagio

- Description: Mixed-use, 236 residential condominiums; 60,000 square-foot office; 60,000-square-foot commercial space

- Location: Southeast 47th Street, Southeast 17th Place and Southeast 46th Lane

- Status: In permitting

12. Cape Vincent

- Description: 236 residential units and 46,000-square-foot retail and restaurant space on 8 acres

- Location: Bimini Basin

- Status: In design and land acquisition

13. Coronado Terrace

- Description: Mixed-use 28,000-square-foot office and retail; 80 condominium units; 130 structured parking spaces

- Location: Coronado Parkway and 47th Terrace

- Status: In permitting

14. Village Square

- Description: 156 residential units; 330,000-square-foot office, residential and commercial space; 1,056 parking spaces

- Location: Cape Coral Parkway between Southeast 8th Court and Southeast 9th Place

- Status: In design and land acquisition

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"It's trying to get everybody to walk into that piazza with you," she said, referring to the plan's Mediterranean style.

Kuehn believes that more people will understand what the CRA is about when more large projects come to fruition.

"We need to get one, if not two, major projects started within the next couple of years," she said.

The seven-member board already has had success. The first two projects — The Hampton Inn and Suites on 47th Terrace and Orchid Commons at the corner of 16th Place and Southeast 46th Street — already are in place and open for business.

"In this day and age we'll be lauded as brilliant," board member John Jacobsen said. "As oil becomes an increasingly expensive commodity, this will be a place where you don't have to have a vehicle to get around. You'll have it all at your fingertips."

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