

From Today's Editions Of The News-press

Downtown dreams

Cape Coral is latest to envision an area where retail, homes thrive

By Pete skiba

pskiba@news-press.com

Originally posted on August 20, 2006

Imagine a couple in Fort Myers talking about a night out and suggesting downtown Cape Coral as the place to go.

Imagine a family in Bonita Springs talking about a shopping trip to a few fine stores — again in downtown Cape Coral.

If the vision of people leading a push to turn the Cape's downtown into a place to live, work, shop, dine and play comes true, those scenarios could play out repeatedly in coming years.



Instead of people east and south of the

• Donna Henriques, 53, left, owner of Donna's Cards and Gifts, and Marie Sweeney, 73, owner of Milton St. Barbershop, talk during a break recently in Cape Coral. The two own business in the Milton Plaza. Sweeney said about the possible redevelopment of downtown Cape Coral: "I think it will be nice, I just wish it would be done tomorrow."



Photos by Andrew

Dave Black, West/news-press.com

left, is one of the owners of Bead, Bones & Stones, a place to buy supplies to craft jewelry. The business is set to open soon along Cape Coral Parkway. Black discusses sign-placement options with project manager Red Durlacher.

[Order Picture](#)

ALSO FROM NEWS-PRESS.COM

- ▶ [City of Cape Coral](#)
- ▶ [A soon-bustling downtown Fort Myers envisioned](#)
- ▶ [Bonita's rebirth hopes lie on 4 nearby properties](#)
- ▶ [Exhibition Hall area revamp gains momentum](#)
- ▶ [Naples offers blueprint to success](#)
- ▶ [New urbanism: the Strada at Mercato](#)

DELIVERING YOUR WORLD

- [Subscribe to The News-Press](#)
- [Join our reader panel](#)
- [Printer friendly version](#)
- [Email this article](#)

..... ADVERTISEMENT

Caloosahatchee River joking about the Cape's "downtown," they could make it a favored destination.

What is the vision? It's of a true downtown.

Where once there were dilapidated strip malls, the vision calls for three- to 12-story, pastel-hued buildings with individual character and landscaping.

Plans call for a mix of condominiums, offices, retail shops, movies, sit-down restaurants and more such as a concert hall and hotels.

The architectural scheme could bring visions of Mediterranean seaside-city streets lined with tables and people eating biscotti, enjoying a Campari and going online via wireless Internet connection.

Once it's finished, more than 11,000 people could live downtown in 432 acres along Cape Coral Parkway. The area runs from the Cape Coral Bridge on the east to Tudor Drive on the west and north on Del Prado Boulevard to Southeast 44th Street.

"I really like the homey feel, the personal touch and the way that looks," said Cape Coral resident Jane Edwards, 45, while looking at an artist's renderings of projects planned in the area.



"I'd like to go shopping at that place. As long as it isn't big skyscrapers."

Developers already have invested millions in land acquisition.

Smaller buildings such as Coronado Terrace, a four-story, 80-condominium project with 30,000 square feet of office and retail shop space on the ground floor, could be open in a couple of years.

Larger projects will take longer.

More than 10 projects, including residential condos, offices and retail space, are in the process of getting permits or ready to apply for permits.

The goal is to give people opportunity to live and work in the area.

"I think they'll want to have all ages coming downtown," said Cape Coral resident Bob James, 72. "You'll want to keep younger people from going to Fort Myers and spending their money."

Most new downtown residents probably won't be retirees, city officials have said.

"It makes sense to have people of all ages who work here live here," said Cape resident Mark Hyland, 48. "It is about having a vibrant downtown."

Using the city's Economic Development Department rule of thumb for number of jobs per square foot of office space, the 120,000 square feet of offices planned in one project alone could bring in 400 jobs.

"With what we have coming to the downtown we can offer hundreds of jobs in offices along with shops and residential areas," said Suzanne Kuehn. She heads the Community Redevelopment Agency, the organization that oversees the area's pending rebirth.

"It will all be within walking distance of homes and free parking," Kuehn said. "It will look beautiful."

The Cape remains the fifth fastest growing city in the country behind Elk Grove, Calif., North Las Vegas, Nev., Port Lucy and Gilbert, Ariz. The

closest city to the Cape was Moreno Valley, Calif., at sixth.

City officials estimate Cape Coral's population has passed 155,000, and it continues to add about 10,000 per year.

Growth in the Cape has created a market hungry for office space, shopping and restaurant destinations. That demand is driving the downtown reformation.

"We have a plan. We have willing investors. We have willing customers," Kuehn said. "This is not a gamble. It is a prudent investment."

A resurgent downtown also could fill city coffers from increased property-tax values.

"Business real estate can escalate at market value without limitations, unlike a homesteaded residence," said Mike Jackson, Cape Coral director of economic development.

Homesteaded residences have a 3 percent cap on how much assessments can be raised in one year. Business property has no cap.

Cape Coral will benefit, too, from sales tax collected from shops, restaurants and other businesses.

In 2005, city government received about \$12 million from the sales tax. Officials expect to top \$16 million in 2009.

A convenient downtown has other financial benefits. It would mean people could live and play downtown at a time when gasoline costs \$3 per gallon and it's \$2 in tolls to cross the bridge to and from the Cape.

CURBING BLIGHT

In addition to keeping people on the Cape side of the bridge, a growing downtown would prevent blight, Kuehn said.

Blight in Cape Coral isn't boarded windows, burnt-out Chevrolets and walls covered with graffiti.

It's broken sidewalks and curbs, inadequate street layout, unpaved parking, failing businesses, insufficient utilities and low property values.

Cape Coral's downtown blight became official, according to a City Council vote, 20 years ago. To fix it, the city formed the Community Redevelopment Agency.

The agency started small. It launched a street landscaping program, helped widen Cape Coral Parkway and began to court developers.

As demand has grown for housing, offices, restaurants and amenities, bigger projects have become realistic.

Examples include the \$211 million Village Square project on Cape Coral Parkway and Southeast Eighth Court and the 14-acre, more than \$500 million Piazza di Venezia off Cape Coral Parkway at Atlantic Court.

Village Square plans 156 residential condos, retail shops and professional

offices with more than 1,000 parking spots.

Piazza di Venezia's plans call for a hotel, movie theaters, a concert facility and maybe a canal with gondolas to accompany its condos and offices.

Other housing, office and retail projects could add almost 1,000 residential condominiums and about a million square feet of office space and retail shops.

More projects are expected to follow with residences on the top floors, offices below, parking on lower floors and stores in front of the garages hiding them from the street.

Other developers such as Dave Nogaki have plans for smaller properties. Nogaki's Coronado Terrace at Coronado Parkway and Southwest 47th Terrace proposes 28,000 square feet of offices and shops with 80 residential condominiums above the businesses.

The Coronado Terraces site sits next to Elmer Tabor's recently completed Hampton Inn.

That could be the way development continues in the downtown, Tabor said. One project attracts another until the area is complete.

"Everyone waited for the hotel to come out of the ground to see if the CRA was serious," Tabor said. "Once we got that done, Dave (Nogaki) jumped in. One development will bring another and two will bring four in over the next five years."

Developers and officials all said the run to build a downtown is more of a jog than a sprint.

"If most of the half-dozen projects we have posted on our walls are finished in five years, I'll count it as a job well done," Kuehn said. "I'm 99.9 percent sure they'll be built."

<<
[Back](#)