

Western Coconut Grove leaders eye revitalization

By Samantha Joseph

Developers and public agencies in western Coconut Grove want to build homes, encourage business growth and draw former residents back as part of a campaign to revitalize South Florida's oldest community.

The area's main economic development group, the Coconut Grove Collaborative, has applied to the city of Miami for a \$500,000 grant to renovate 50 storefronts. The group also intends to add public parking by fall and to build 13 affordable homes by March.

A Boca Raton financial institution planning to open a Grove branch in November is a partner in the effort. Pointe Bank is committing nearly \$1 million for affordable homes in the West Grove and has pledged to finance \$1.45 million in mortgages.

Coconut Grove dates to the 1830s, when seamen from the Bahamas established the state's first township.

The western part of the area is poverty-stricken, according to public records. One-fourth of all residents in the neighborhood between Bird Road and McDonald, Marler and Brooker streets have less than \$12,000 annual incomes.

Residents who have found success have been leaving in recent years, weakening the West Grove's economy and future, said Jihad S. Rashid, chairman of the economic development group.

To buck the trend, promoters plan a Come Back Home to the Grove campaign for October. The effort will encourage homeownership by creating affordable housing and financing through public and private ventures.

A City of Miami plan for the area outlines public ventures to rehabilitate existing housing and provide social services to residents and incentives for businesses.

"This is a place where there can be some pride," Mr. Rashid said.

A wave of investors in western Coconut Grove is breathing life into Miami-Dade County's oldest neighborhood and pumping up real estate prices.

In addition to fresh funds, the area has a new name. Now called the Village West Island District, its property values are approaching those of surrounding upper-middle-class and affluent neighborhoods.

Land prices have quadrupled in the past two years, according to Mr. Rashid. Modest lots that in 2002 brought \$35,000 now sell for \$150,000, he said.

Homeowner Jason Bush said a house he bought for \$100,000 four years ago is now worth three times that.

Developers echo similar stories of escalating land values.

"When I first started in 1994, I never paid more than \$10,000 for a lot," said Andy Parrish, a developer whose company, Wind & Rain, has built affordable housing in the Grove for about two decades. "Land here was so undervalued back in 1994, it was probably one-10th or less the value of all the property in Coconut Grove on a per-square-foot basis."

The Village West Island District, commonly known for years as the West Grove, dates to about 1834 and sits between Bird Road and McDonald, Marler and Brooker streets.

About half of its residents are of Bahamian ancestry, and many are descendants of the island seamen who settled Coconut Grove.

The district borders Cocowalk, an upscale shopping center, and downtown Coconut Grove, where Realtors say small residential lots can cost \$300,000.

Just blocks from Coral Gables' multimillion-dollar homes are dilapidated Village West Island residences. Public records show that one of every four Village West residents earn \$12,000 or less annually.

A June 10 draft of the City of Miami's consolidation plan cites the disparity between the district and the plush communities it borders. "Although millions have been spent trying to revitalize the West Grove, it still contrasts sharply with its affluent neighbors," according to the report.

But district leaders say land scarcity in Coral Gables and the more affluent parts of the Grove have led developers to turn their attention to the once-overlooked community.

"Everywhere you look in the West Grove there are new things going on," said Beame Architectural Partnership vice president Hobi Linhares.

Mr. Rashid agreed. "Already, people from outside are looking at this area and making moves at a rapid pace," he said. "The rapid growth is like an explosion."

A boom is especially noticeable in an estimated \$10 million in residential construction, he said. The newcomers "think they've discovered a new area," Mr. Parrish said.

But the growth is worrisome to some who fear that interest from outside developers will change the face of the historic community.

"There's a lot of resistance to change. Some of it is a fear that improvements will bring increased costs and taxes," said Richard Shepard, director of the University of Miami's Center for Urban and Community Design. "There is some truth to that."

As head of the outreach arm of the university's School of Architecture, Mr. Shepard directs students designing affordable single-family housing that reflects the community's Bahamian heritage.

"Here's a neighborhood that has its own history, and that's quite evident. This is very special in this country where so much history is forgotten because people move about so much," Mr. Shepard said.

Miami officials acknowledge the concern, saying that displacement of original residents is the biggest fallout of efforts to redevelop the area.

City Commissioner Johnny Winton, who is credited by residents with leading the multimillion-dollar effort to rehabilitate the West Grove, said last month that small developers are instrumental in revitalizing low-income neighborhoods. He said small-scale investors refurbishing single-family homes and small storefront properties accounted for about 80% of development in the community.

In the new Village West Island District, developers have invested \$200 million on Grand Avenue in the past five years, Mr. Rashid said.

Boca Raton-based Pointe Bank intends to open a branch in the neighborhood by October. The bank will refurbish and occupy property that once was a tavern at Grand Avenue and Douglas Road.

But what concerns longtime West Grove supporters is large-scale development they fear will turn the historic community into a replica of its more flashy neighbors.

"Downtown Coconut Grove is paying the price for its rapid growth," said Mr. Rashid. "It couldn't sustain the development because it was all focused on glitterati and tourism. It wasn't residential-friendly, didn't have a strong local base and wasn't pedestrian-friendly."

To avoid a repeat, Mr. Parrish said, homeowners should hold onto their property despite attractive offers to sell.

"What would happen is that their houses would be bulldozed and big 'McMansions' would be built," he said. "That's the shame of an area that has waited nearly 50 years to see any development at all. When it happens overnight, you don't get a good result at all. If homeowners refuse to sell, this will be a huge success. We might still get a good result in the Grove."

Fears of losing residents to rapid development are not lost on Pointe Bank, which is teaming with the Coconut Grove Collaborative to finance nearly \$1 million in affordable housing.

"We're pretty keen on this," said Gordon Fales, Pointe Bank's vice president of business development who has worked on other community redevelopment projects in Coconut Grove.

Like others with a stake in the neighborhood, Pointe Bank officials have encouraged development and architecture reminiscent of the area's Caribbean heritage. They suggest architecture with porches, shutters and other features that resemble Bahamian homes.

Mr. Bush, who first visited Coconut Grove as part of his studies at UM, helped design and build a single-family home that reflects the area's character. He said the experience and his exposure to the Grove's history led him to purchase his first home in the community. Today, he works as an architect at Devon Construction in the Grove.

"There's a lot of new people taking an interest in the area," he said. "It's contagious in a good way."