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Urban Forum

The (second) rebirth of Marina Mile

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The ship has come in for Broward County's Marina Mile, and Margaret Croxton is the marine district's dockmaster of sorts.

The Marina Mile Association, headed by Croxton, the executive director, has grown from eight founding business owners to 70 corporations with 30,000 employees.

The misnamed three-mile strip comprises marinas, boatyards and related businesses along State Road 84 touching Fort Lauderdale, Davie and Dania Beach.

Once struggling to survive, the area now has hundreds of millions of dollars of projects in the works. Developers are expected to discuss their projects at the association's July 19 meeting at the Ramada Inn on Marina Mile.

The rebirth began in the 1980s when a group of business owners dismayed by languishing properties, the effect of I-595 construction and unwanted projects such as a proposed Wackenhut jail decided to take action.

Change came slowly as companies struggled to stay afloat, buffeted by transportation, real estate and maritime industry changes that made many waterfront locations more lucrative for condo and mixed-use developments than diesel-engine repair shops and boat storage.

"Everyone wanted to dump projects no one else wanted in Broward in the middle of Marina Mile, which we admit had fallen into disarray," said Croxton, a maritime consultant and lobbyist.

The former director of the Port Everglades Association was hired as executive director of the Marina Mile Association in 1994 to "stop all the bad stuff and start good stuff," she said.

Croxton spoke with the Daily Business Review this week about what's in store for the Marina Mile.

How would you describe what's going on along Marina Mile?

We are becoming where people want to be. These are rebirths happening. I've been at city commission meetings almost every week. It seems to be our second renaissance.

What happened to the first one?

We had excellent facilities, 40 and 50 years old, that are very expensive to keep as a working waterfront. The biggest thing I can say about the marine industry right now is that shipyards don't make money unless you do it really well.

The [state] government has made it so environmentally expensive that we have seen the demise of working waterfronts, and everyone wants to turn them into condos and then leave town.

How do you mean environmentally expensive?

The Department of Environmental Protection and [Army] Corps of Engineers have made it difficult to do marina projects. There are concerns about manatees and mangroves, dredging, building docks and water quality. These old marinas face new standards they didn't have to before.

Maintaining working waterfronts has been a key legislative push in recent years. Are these projects in response to that?

The economic push for these projects had nothing to do with legislative bills. They [properties] are on the market for reasonable prices, and people can't afford to fix up older places.

That's my mission: To keep these as they are. All these projects we're talking about are going to stay as working waterfronts and be fabulous. I credit that to smart investors.

What are the projects?

The \$30 million Marina Mile Business Park was our biggest venture, and that was completed about six months ago.

The Trivium at Marina Mile office-condo project began construction in June. That's a five-acre project about a block from the Marina Mile Business Park.

The Fort Lauderdale Shipyard, Jack Rodgers' property, is under contract and closing in about 60 days. I can't say who the buyers are, but they will leave it as a wonderful world-class shipyard — but spend money.

It was up for auction, and no one bid on it I think because of a huge amount of money to bring it to present standards. Some people estimated \$30 million to rehab it in addition to the price and make it a functioning shipyard with larger berths for larger boats.

The next one is the New River Dry Dock [sold for \$12.25 million in June in a bankruptcy auction], the gateway to Marina Mile — the only way to get by boat to the other areas.

On Tuesday, the Fort Lauderdale City Commission approved the Yacht Haven mixed-use project of two dozen buildings including 329 residential units and 75,000 square feet of office space and a waterfront restaurant plus a new yacht basin for mega-yachts by Azurite Corp. It was controversial because the mayor [Jim Naugle] said it should be a working shipyard.

It'll be on a 20-acre RV park next to the Ramada Inn on State Road 84, one of our signature properties.

The next one is the old Paigo's Boat Yard, renamed the New River Boating Center several years ago underneath the State Road 84 bridge across from New River Marina.

It was sold to **Aqua Marine Partners** of Aventura, the people developing Thunder Alley. It'll be the Vertical Yacht Club where he'll do vertical yacht storage.

It's an unbelievable project still under review by the city of Fort Lauderdale. And Pier 17 [a former shipyard] at the Ravenswood Road bridge is being rebuilt. It'll be an all-new yacht club and marina, a country club atmosphere.

Would the Miami River area be considered competition to what Marina Mile wants to do?

It's apples and oranges. That's really working boats and shipyards and dock rats. I love them, and I've talked to those people about how to form an association and do what we're doing. They do have some rejuvenation going on but it's a very different waterfront.

How so?

It's grittier. It's industrial. I'd say we're a higher-scale marina, shipyard, office park, service district.

Of all my members, maybe only 22 are marinas or shipyards. We're the businesses who support them. It's a huge group there. I don't think you see that in Miami. I often say we're a one-stop marine district. You can get your engine serviced, have your boat painted and put your people in an office park.

Going forward, what's the biggest issue facing Marina Mile?

My vision is that all of these projects prove to the rest of the community that you don't have to sell your property for some massive development, but that there is money in the marine industry. We should be encouraged, supported and congratulated.