

Bayfront redevelopment brightens Grove's tourism picture

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Regatta Park is taking the place of the city's former exposition center on the Coconut Grove waterfront. Photo by John Charles Robbins

BY CATHERINE LACKNER

"The Grove was South Beach before South Beach was South Beach," says Rolando Aedo, executive vice president and chief marketing officer of the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau. He grew up in Miami and now lives in the Grove.

"It's had its ebbs and flows, but there are elements that are timeless. It attracts not just residents but tourists from all over the world. Visitors always want to go where the locals go."

He hailed "a lot of positive energy in the past year" in the community, some of it generated by the Coconut Grove Business Improvement District. "There's a lot of momentum." New businesses are moving in, including Michael Schwartz's Harry's Pizza and the high-end retailer Kit and Ace.

The purchase of the CocoWalk shopping and entertainment complex by investors Michael Comras, Grass River

'Back in the day, on the weekends everybody was in the Grove.'

Carole Smith

Property and the Federal Realty Investment Trust will bring more local tenants into the mix, he predicted, and even the fate of the long-shuttered Coconut Grove Playhouse seems to be improving. "It's going to take awhile, but it's moving in the right direction."

Last week's Coconut Grove Art Festival, founded in 1963 and one of the nation's best-attended art shows, is always a sure draw for locals, tourists and artists, he said. "Miami is tough, because there are so many events, which is a good problem to have," Mr. Aedo said. "But the art show resonates with the DNA of the Grove."

The Barnacle, built in 1891 as the home of early settler Ralph

Middleton Munroe, is seeing new life as an event venue, and a new restaurant is coming to the long-vacant glass building in Peacock Park, he said. The site of the former Coconut Grove Exhibition Center is being transformed into Regatta Park, a waterfront green space, he added.

"At the bureau, our role is to put Greater Miami on the map, and all of the sub-destinations compete for a slice of the business," he said. "But the Grove, frankly, is hard to replicate."

"The tourism industry in Coconut Grove has declined in recent years as a result of the redevelopment of Brickell, downtown and Miami Beach, as well as the emergence of the Design District and Wynwood," said Chad Friedman, an attorney with the Weiss Serota Helfman Cole & Bierman law firm who has participated in many land-use cases.

"However, I believe the Grove has a bright tourism future with the redevelopment of the waterfront and implementation of the Coconut Grove Waterfront Area Master Plan. Once redeveloped, the Grove waterfront will become a destination not only attracting locals but also tourists."

"Back in the day, on the weekends everybody was in the Grove," said Carole Smith, an associate with EWM Realty International who has lived in Coconut Grove most of her life. "Then we started having options — Lincoln Road, Miami Beach, now Wynwood and the Design District."

Even with all of the competition, there is something about Coconut Grove that is unique, she said. Residents have multiple restaurants and cafes nearby, and there is an ample supply of luxury real estate, but it's more than that.

"It's a mosaic," Ms. Smith said. "It's the walkability, the natural beauty, the quality of the sunlight, the trees, the water. It's ephemeral; it's one of those things that can't really be defined."