

How a Citizen-Led Initiative Transformed Downtown Boca Raton

In 1980, the Boca Raton City Council appointed members of the community to create the Boca Raton Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), an independent special district focused on addressing an aging downtown. The 344 acres that make up the Boca Raton Community Redevelopment Area were blighted, deteriorating and stagnant with an insufficient infrastructure and a dilapidated mall.

The creation of the CRA was the foundation for the development and implementation of many laws, guidelines, land use controls and governance measures that would stimulate and regulate the smart growth and redevelopment of [Downtown Boca Raton](#).

The vision for Downtown Boca Raton originated from a planning workshop of citizens, downtown property owners and downtown merchants who wanted a vibrant, live- work downtown. That vision then became the plan that was developed and modified throughout the years by community leaders, with input from residents, volunteers, developers, architects, regional agencies and the State of Florida.

In 1982, the CRA created the “Downtown Boca Raton Redevelopment Plan” which was adopted by the Boca Raton City Council. Although the purpose of the plan was to stimulate private development in the redevelopment area, the private initiatives didn’t materialize

as hoped. The plan did, however, generate early beautification efforts that included the expansion and refurbishment of Sanborn Square as a model for streetscape elements and architectural themes, which then spurred renovations in the surrounding areas. The vision for shaded, tree-lined, decorative walkways, benches and streetlights to create a pedestrian oriented downtown eventually grew into a formal Beautification Plan adopted by the CRA in 1986. It was in this Beautification Plan that the Arts Park concept, which eventually became Mizner Park, was first introduced. The Beautification Plan provided an illustration of what Downtown would look like and it served as a Master Plan for the downtown area.

Encouraged by the results of the beautification efforts, the independent CRA leaders were determined to provide additional incentives to lure new development to the area, and decided to address the infrastructure problems downtown. In keeping with the state’s comprehensive approach to growth management, the CRA proposed that the City seek approval at the state level for a Downtown Development of Regional Impact (DDRI) for the entire downtown. The Development of Regional Impact (DRI) process provided state and regional review of the potential impacts anticipated by large developments, such as the downtown, which because of its character, magnitude or location, would have a substantial effect on health, safety, or welfare of the citizens throughout the south Florida region. It was the

Tax Increment Revenues

In 1982, the City authorized the establishment of a Redevelopment Trust Fund financed through Tax Increment Revenues on downtown properties. The Fund, along with other income generated by the CRA, provides funding for the CRA’s operations and participation in redevelopment projects.

For additional information regarding the Tax Increment Revenue of the CRA [click here](#).

Beautification Plan that provided the basis for the CRA to submit an application and pursue approval for an area-wide DDRI.

The DDRI application was completed in January 1988 by the independent CRA and a Development Order was approved by the City Council in March of 1988 by [Resolution No. 28-88](#). The Downtown Development Order (DDO), which is the primary controlling document for the DDRI, established the conditions, restrictions and limitations for development in the downtown. It allowed for approximately five million office equivalent square feet of new development in the downtown, in addition to approximately three million square feet of existing development. It established the [Individual Development Approval \(IDA\)](#) process for development projects, and it designated development rights by category of use and [equivalency factors](#) for determining maximum building thresholds. The DDO streamlined the planning process by removing the need for individual developers to make multiple planning applications to various local and regional planning authorities and it ensured measurable, controlled growth into the future under the DDRI.

As required by state and regional authorities in order to support the additional development proposed in the DDO, the City and CRA approved an Infrastructure and Financing Plan called [Visions 90](#) in 1989. The Plan outlined necessary infrastructure and proposed funding sources to support the development of approximately five million additional office equivalent square feet as determined in the Development Order. The improvements through

The vision for Downtown Boca Raton originated from a planning workshop of citizens, downtown property owners and downtown merchants who wanted a vibrant, live-work downtown.

Office Equivalent Development

Office Equivalent development is the number of square feet of office development necessary to generate the same number of peak hour vehicle trips as the proposed development.

For additional information on Office Equivalent development in the downtown [click here](#).

Visions 90 provided the downtown with efficient access to the regional road networks, expanded roads with improved intersections, upgraded water, sewer and drainage facilities and transformed the downtown streets into attractive tree-lined ways with distinctive sidewalks, street lights, traffic signals and outdoor furniture. This 45 million dollar capital improvements program was funded and built by the cooperative efforts of the Florida Department of Transportation,



Before

Palm Beach County, the City of Boca Raton and downtown property owners. Major projects completed include Federal Highway, Palmetto Park Road, Mizner Boulevard and numerous side streets.

In May of 1989, the CRA and the City of Boca Raton partnered with Crocker & Company to develop the former Boca Mall site as a mixed-use redevelopment project. The project was approved by the voters in January 1989, involved the issuance of \$68 million dollars in bonds specifically for the Mizner Park Project, the acquisition of the Boca Mall site (30 acres), demolition of the mall and construction of a mixed use “urban village” incorporating public park facilities, mixed-use development and cultural facilities. **Mizner Park** opened in January of 1991. That same year, voters replaced the seven appointed members of the independent CRA board of commissioners with the five City Council members, and the CRA became a dependent special district of the City. The City Council members currently serve as the CRA Board.

The CRA vision started to take shape with Mizner Park completed and with more new development anticipated. Updates and revisions to the existing Development Order were amended in 1992 with Ordinance No. 4035 which recognized Mizner Park as the model for downtown redevelopment. It eliminated inconsistencies between the DDO and City Codes, eliminated



After

duplicative conditions, and improved the clarity and effectiveness of the DDO based on four years of experience in developing Mizner Park. **Ordinance No. 4035** also eliminated additional infrastructure improvements that were found to be unnecessary to the Downtown after a detailed analysis. The Ordinance was subsequently approved by voters on May 4, 1993.

The next decade would see significant residential and office growth in the downtown. Demolition of existing buildings made way for new projects which were inspired by urban design characteristics and would follow the design guidelines carefully defined in Ordinance No. 4035, thereby, keeping in line with the spirit and intentions of the CRA vision.

Through the early part of the millennium and through the years of the recession, additional amendments to the DDO were adopted by the City and incorporated in response to market demands as the downtown came alive.

After two decades of development in the downtown, leaders decided it was time for a review of the redevelopment area. On September 9, 2008 the City Council approved an agreement with Urban Design Associates (UDA), a firm that specialized in the revitalization and expansion of cities worldwide. UDA's purpose was to build community consensus through design by hosting workshops, developing common goals and



Sanborn Square groundbreaking ceremony 1984



Northbound Federal Highway & Palmetto Park Road 1980



Restoration of Sanborn Square and Old Town Hall 1984

finding ways to coordinate the design of individual buildings with public spaces, neighborhoods and regional culture. These goals were to be realized through the development of revised design guidelines for downtown buildings. Work on these revised guidelines ultimately resulted in the [Interim Design Guidelines \(IDG\)](#) which were adopted on November 12, 2008.

The IDG would improve the design of downtown development projects by creating a continuous, interconnected network of congenial, pedestrian-oriented streets and public spaces through improved articulation, or varied building heights. In order to address the public concerns over large bulk and flat top buildings which lead to a loss of scale and character, the IDG outlined a method for determining building setbacks and height requirements based on street types. In allowable areas, and with certain criteria met, eligible buildings would be allowed additional height, based on greater setbacks and without an increase in building volume and floor area. These optional guidelines, if used by developers, would create articulated facades, a varied skyline and improved streetscapes.

The first building project completed as a “test case” under the new Interim Design Guidelines was the 208 apartment complex, the Mark at Cityscape located at 11 South Plaza Real. While the IDG guidelines were implemented on the new project, the improved articulation and building design were met with mixed reaction at a subsequent CRA public workshop in April 2015.

With professional and public input, the CRA and the City are continuing their efforts to move forward with the creation of a [Pattern Book](#) for enhanced downtown design that can be implemented to carry on the vision of the CRA.