SOS from Little Havana residents

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East Little Havana needs urgent help.

No doubt about it. The Marlins Park, which looks like a flying saucer stuck in a blighted and squandered neighborhood, has come to highlight how impoverished the surrounding area is, populated by residents living in deplorable conditions.

What is doubtful is the political will of City of Miami officials to improve the awful conditions of this neighborhood. Granted, officials have resolved two or three of the neighbors’ problems — an attempt to show off, at least before the media, as guardians of the people. But what I am talking about is the need for the type of urban redevelopment accomplished in Midtown and the Omni area.

Even in Overtown, the poorest neighborhood in the city, there is a sense of improvement. Recently, Commissioner Michelle Spence-Jones pushed the commission to approve $50 million to build and repair housing in the core of her district, as well as other mix-use projects.

Midtown, Omni and Southeast Overtown Park West benefit from urban redevelopment projects fostered by the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), a government entity established to collect almost all increased property tax revenue from Miami and Miami-Dade County in these designated slum and blighted areas, and spend these funds to alleviate these problems.

The Omni CRA, for example, spent $5 million for drainage and road improvements on North Bayshore Drive to enhance the quality of life of residents who have moved into the luxurious bayfront skyscrapers.

The Overtown CRA gave $2.2 million in residential rehabilitation grants. It also renovated the Northwest 3rd Avenue corridor and helped preserve several churches.

Many citizens are concerned about focusing tax increments in these districts because the funds are diverted from use for city-wide expenses. However, it’s time to explore the possibility of establishing a CRA in East Little Havana to direct efforts on redevelopment.

Based upon observable conditions, the boundaries, as a starting point, could be: NW
Seventh Street on the north, Eighth Street on the south, Eighth Avenue to the east and 17th Avenue to the west.

The graphic images that have been published of the decrepit and substandard housing in some Little Havana apartment buildings should be sufficient reason to designate the area as slum and blight to meet the criteria for the establishment of a CRA.

This area has needed help well before the construction of the Marlins stadium, and this facility alone is not going to solve these problems. Other public investment is needed. Why has there not been a coordinated effort to improve the neighborhood?

“The city has no commitment to the community, no commitment to ease the lives of those people,” said Frank Rollason, former assistant city manager. “They are committed to the Miami port tunnel, the Marlins Park and the performing arts center, but, where is the commitment to low-income residents?”

Rollason, who later worked as CRA executive director from 2003 to 2005, proposed the creation of a CRA in Little Havana and an additional one in Allapattah, another area defined by its poverty and blight.

“At that time there was no support from the city commissioners who also serve as the CRA board members,” he said.

County approval is required to create a CRA because county tax dollars are involved. Unfortunately, there are examples of abuse of redevelopment funds by many CRAs in Florida.

Still, Frank Schnidman, director of the Center for Urban Redevelopment Education at Florida Atlantic University, asserted that CRAs that act in an open and transparent manner according to state law are effective.

“The value of a CRA is that its goals and objectives are the implementation of a specific redevelopment plan just for the area,” Schnidman said. “It’s also a financial mechanism for the city and the county to use targeted tax dollars to improve the quality of life for its poorer residents.”

During the construction of the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts — which now receives more than $5 million a year from the CRA to pay its loans — the city invested $5 million to upgrade the adjacent streets, including adequate sidewalks and better lighting. It had to make sure that the patrons have a pleasant experience walking into the theater.

The city had the same concern for the ballpark patrons going from the parking garage to the stadium but neglected pedestrian improvements in other areas surrounding the
stadium. Therefore, it is time to provide a true redevelopment plan for Little Havana.

If tax money can go to millionaire baseball team owners and to subsidize those who can afford to attend the game, it is not fair for the problems of residents to be ignored.

Marlins president David Samson, when asked about how the parking restrictions affected Little Havana residents, said simply that residents "would eventually get used to walking a few blocks to get home on game nights."

That, sadly, is the same attitude that many powerbrokers have about the defenseless residents of Little Havana: “They’ll get used to it.”