Miramar feeling short on restaurants
Attracting more eateries moves to front burner

By Ariel Barkhurst, Staff Writer
February 13, 2011

MIRAMAR

The city is hungry for restaurants.


The 30 square miles of Miramar contain only 55 non-fast food restaurants, according to city data.

To compare: Pembroke Pines, which is roughly the same size and has just 36,000 more residents, has around 190 non-fast food eateries. And Miramar's restaurant-to-population ratio is less than half the state average, according to the National Restaurant Association.

Fort Lauderdale, the city with the highest concentration of restaurants in Broward or Palm Beach counties according to the most recent U.S. economic census data, had 252 in 2002.

For Miramar, the dearth means lost tax revenue. For its 113,000 residents, it means a lack of variety and a struggle to find gathering places in their own communities.

"There's no Indian restaurants," said Gentle Walkin, a resident for 11 years. "There's no Bahamian restaurants. There's American food, but you get tired of that. You can only go to Chili's so many times."

The low number of eateries created a pleasant surprise for Luci and Enrique Rosende. They aimed to cook for take-out in a shop with no wait staff and just a few tables. But customers just started sitting down and staying while they ate, Luci Rosende said.

It only took a few months for the couple to give in. They moved to a larger location and opened Elle, a full-scale restaurant in Miramar Square.

"There's a huge market for restaurants in Miramar," Luci Rosende said. "People wanted us to be a restaurant."

City officials since the recession have launched a campaign to attract full-service restaurants, said Gus Zambrano, director of the Economic Development and Revitalization Department.
The city belongs to the International Council of Shopping Centers, which allows officials to network with restaurateurs. Miramar has lowered water and sewer fees for developers. It expedites the permit processes for new restaurants. It provides free advertising for restaurants in city publications, including the Visitor's Guide.

Seventeen restaurants have opened in the city in the last two years, and the commission recently approved plans for a 12,000-square-foot Bokamper's Sports Bar and Grill.

The goal is to gain the city more restaurants with more variety and a "local focus," Zambrano said. That means local restaurateurs serving primarily Miramar customers, he said.

"We lack all kinds of retail, but a desire for more restaurants is what we've had feedback about from the community," he said. "People look at whether there are places to gather together in their own community when they rate how good they feel about their homes. People need that cohesion. It brings us back to a time when people knew the shop owners."

The dearth is a growing pain, said City Manager Robert Payton. During the city's population explosion in the early 2000s, Miramar attracted mostly industrial and office building development. Pembroke Pines, especially Pines Boulevard, got the restaurants.

"Pembroke Pines already had everything, and we were still developing, and they're right there, so there wasn't always a market in Miramar," Zambrano said. "There's probably more restaurants in the mall in Pines than in all of Miramar."

But the city may be running the risk of worsening urban sprawl in their quest to attract restaurants if they don't do it right, said David Prosperi, a professor of urban and regional planning at Florida Atlantic University.

No sense of community will come from more chain restaurants setting up shop in strip malls, he said.

"They should think big," Prosperi said. "They should create a sense of place, something special. They should look for innovative restaurants, concept restaurants."

That means emulating places like Lincoln Road in Miami Beach and Mizner Park in Boca Raton, places with restaurants of all income levels and varieties together in one place, he said.

"I don't say, 'I'm going to Chili's for dinner,'" he said. "I say, 'I'm going to Las Olas for dinner.' I have no idea what I'm going to actually eat."

Miramar's leaders, though, are focusing at the level of the neighborhood restaurant.

"People want a place where you know your waitress, maybe the owner," Zambrano said. "It may even be a chain, but you know the employees, and that makes you feel good."

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