BOYNTON BEACH

City leaders want to tear down a mostly vacant building on a budding marina, but Palm Beach County commissioners again stalled their plans to make way for a park at the water's edge.

In Boynton Beach, redevelopment has been slow to take root, outpaced by its Palm Beach County neighbors. The marina, local officials say, is a keystone project that will attract people downtown.

From Jupiter to Dania Beach, waterfront development is a way to drum up business, tourism and jobs, urban planners say. In South Florida, where extensive canals let boat owners dock in their backyards, water access is paramount.

"It's a lifestyle," said Frank Schnidman, director of the Center for Urban Redevelopment Education at Florida Atlantic University.

A massive hotel and marina project in Jupiter has been in the works for years. In Dania Beach, a canal dredging effort is underway to make room for bigger boats. And Riviera Beach has authorized millions for marina-area redevelopment.

Boynton Beach, too, has spruced up its marina over the years. Since the Community Redevelopment Agency purchased it in 2006, it has spent more than $9 million there, officials said. They renamed it the Boynton Harbor Marina, hung light-post banners and renovated an entryway lighthouse.

The city has made other development progress in the last month. The CRA reached an agreement with a restaurateur to put an eatery in the historic Ruth Jones Cottage. And a developer is trying to restore a decrepit, unused high school near City Hall.

At the moment, it seems city redevelopers have one main hurdle: the old former dive shop.

"We're continuously trying to improve that marina, and this dive shop is not conforming to that vision," said City Commissioner Bill Orlove said.
The city redevelopment agency and the City Commission have been trying for months to demolish a quaint, decades-old building. They want to landscape the area and turn it into a park as part of their effort to increase public access to the water.

"This is a magnet for putting feet on the street," said Schnidman, the Florida Atlantic professor.

But a former tenant, Lynn Simmons, is fighting back. She says the city drove her from the 3,000-square-foot building, something city commissioners deny.

Simmons moved her business, Splashdown Divers, into a strip mall across the street in January, but business has plummeted, she said.

"Last month my big sale was a snorkel," she said.

She'd like to move back into the old dive-shop building, but the rent is too high, she said. Her charter boat is still docked, along with four other commercial vessels, in the 19-slip marina.

The County Commission has questioned whether tearing down the building is a job-friendly move.

Palm Beach County voters in 2004 approved borrowing $50 million to protect public access to "working water fronts." Boynton Beach secured $2 million of that money to renovate boat slips and design a master plan for the marina.

On May 1, the County Commission again tabled the demolition and asked Boynton Beach officials to work with Simmons.

"Best-case scenario, the people who have the power will realize the best solution is to save the building, renovate it and make it a pretty little building like the lighthouse," Simmons said.

The CRA denies any effort to stall a business or stamp out jobs. They point to available commercial space steps from the old dive shop, insisting the aesthetics of a waterfront park will entice people into a nascent Ocean Avenue entertainment corridor.

"We're very supportive of the dive industry," said CRA Marketing Director Margee Walsh, who, along with CRA Development Director Mike Simon, declined to speak in detail about Splashdown Divers. "We also encourage all of our small businesses in the CRA district."

Boynton Beach — a city without any actual beach access — recently began a branding effort to recast itself as a destination, emphasizing its on-the-water heritage. One city slogan begins, "Catch a wave, catch a fish."

Simon called the marina project an "anchor" to the city's rebirth.

"It is an obstacle to our redevelopment effort at the marina," City Commissioner Marlene Ross said. "Now the marina is in limbo."