After centennial, city looks ahead to its future

By Scott Wyman, Sun Sentinel

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FORT LAUDERDALE

As the city marks its first 100 years this weekend, officials are planning what the future should look like.

Downtown will expand with more offices and shops as well as more nearby condos and townhouses. The New River would be abuzz with entertainment and activity. Rail service and streetcars would shuttle commuters. The beach would continue to be remolded into an upscale resort destination. At the same time, the old Florida charm of individual neighborhoods would be preserved.

But there are major challenges. Will plans for mass transit falter and traffic become so bad that key roads are in gridlock? Will drinking water remain inexpensive and readily available? Will the ocean rise so much that some of the city is underwater?

"I really am excited about the next 100 years," Mayor Jack Seiler said. "We start off with so many natural advantages — the weather, the beach, the river. And we just have to stay focused that this is the best place to live, work, play and raise a family."

The development of Fort Lauderdale stalled as a result of the national recession and the collapse of the housing market. But developers see it as restarting and say the pace will increase in the next couple of years.

City leaders and developers don't envision Fort Lauderdale becoming akin to Miami, but more a mid-size community styled along the lines of places like Portland, Ore., or Charlotte, N.C.

Jaap Vos, the director of the school of urban and regional planning at Florida Atlantic University, said Fort Lauderdale is at a crossroads. If it plans for the long-term properly, he said, the city can position itself into being a significant urban hub in South Florida. The western suburbs are now built out, and Fort Lauderdale has the advantages of both name recognition and being central in air, sea and land transportation networks.

"It is time for Fort Lauderdale to be bold," Vos said. "Look out on a 50-year timeframe. Fort Lauderdale must rethink who it is and who it wants to be on a much larger scale than before."

Downtown
Under current plans, development of downtown Fort Lauderdale will expand through the adjacent Flagler Village and South Andrews Avenue areas. Both will likely become an urban mix of new homes, offices and shops.

Just in the South Andrews area between Broward General Medical Center and the courthouse, the city envisions more than 1,500 residences and more than 1 million additional square feet of office and commercial space in the next two decades.

The county plans a new courthouse downtown, and there is talk of a new federal courthouse as well. The city wants to continue to remold the Riverwalk into more of an arts and entertainment hub, reorienting the community back to its roots along the New River.

There are issues that lie in the way of that vision of an increasingly vibrant city center.

The Las Olas Riverfront entertainment complex is nearly deserted. The Hyde Park Market site next to the historic Stranahan House on Las Olas Boulevard remains in limbo because of a court fight over plans for a high-rise condo. The expansion of the Riverside Hotel has been stalled even though surrounding businesses were demolished in preparation.

"The downtown will be a prime location for development," real estate investor Alan Hooper said. "We are in such a predicament right now because of the economy that it will take a while for the gas to start flowing again, but when it does, it will happen quickly."

**Beach**

On the beach, officials expect the trend toward upscale hotels to continue.

Developers are in the midst of negotiating with the city to redevelop the Bahia Mar complex to include a five-star Waldorf Astoria hotel, shops, restaurants and a public park along the Intracoastal Waterway. A Swedish investor has been buying small, older hotels in the North Beach area with plans to transform the interior of the barrier island into a mix of posh resorts, restaurants, cafes and boutiques.

*Broward County*’s tourism czar, Nicki Grossman, said the city must continue to improve the beach to remain competitive with other vacation destinations. She said that particularly will require better parking and more tourism attractions.

"Fort Lauderdale beach has a very bright future, and the city can't lose sight of its vision for the area," Grossman said.

The city plans to commit about $71 million to a major revamp of the beachfront over the next eight years. That will include a bolder entrance at Las Olas, a promenade along the Intracoastal, a visitors center and more parking. The city is also negotiating a rehab of the International Swimming Hall of Fame complex with new Olympic-size pools, an aquatic theater and artificial surf machines.
There are questions about the future of the beach, though.

One is whether the state Legislature will expand gambling to allow beachfront casinos as some lawmakers want. Some see casinos as a potential boon by drawing more visitors. Others fear it could detract from Fort Lauderdale's carefully crafted family-friendly image.

Another issue is what happens if Cuba is reopened to American tourists. The island nation could become a major competitor to Fort Lauderdale in luring vacationers seeking sun and fun.

**Neighborhoods**

Change is in the air in other neighborhoods as well.

The city has been rewriting rules to ensure new housing will not be big, boxy and bland like some of the McMansions and townhomes built in the last decade. Long-range plans also call for new commercial projects to be more attune to preserving green space and creating a community atmosphere.

One significant neighborhood is in the midst of a major makeover now: Sistrunk Boulevard, the historic center of the city's black community. The city in rebuilding the street with landscaped medians and new sidewalks as well as purchasing property and seeking developers for new shops and homes.

"We have to remember what gives us charm and personality," longtime civic activist Mary Fertig said. "Development must be compatible and cannot overwhelm. Strong neighborhoods are the backbone of a good city, and I can only hope over the next 100 years we remember that."

**Challenges**

Seiler sees two major challenges ahead for the city: transportation and water.

The city wants to build a light-rail streetcar system through downtown to cope with the growing population. There are discussions of commuter rail service along the Florida East Coast Railroad. Both projects are massively expensive, with the commuter rail requiring a new bridge or a tunnel to cross the New River.

Fort Lauderdale and other South Florida cities have struggled with how to deal with water needs. That's because the main water source — the Biscayne Aquifer — is important to restoring the Everglades and regional water management officials have pushed cities to find alternatives.

Fort Lauderdale has a 20-year permit to withdraw water from underground aquifers, but eventually may have to look at such options as the desalination of ocean water.

Developer Charlie Ladd said the answers will determine the pace of Fort Lauderdale's growth.

"There will continue to be migration to the area because of the sunshine and the overall low taxes
in the state," Ladd said. "It takes decades to change a city. Part of the equation is how conducive government is to growth. Do they accelerate the process or slow it down?"

Further on the horizon, Fort Lauderdale must worry about rising sea levels.

Low-lying coastal areas, such as parts of the ritzy Las Olas Isles neighborhood, already flood during extreme high tides. Environmental experts expect sea levels to rise as much as seven inches by 2030 and as much as 24 inches by 2060.

"The biggest hurdle has always been the fact that we don't have consensus on what the city is supposed to be," said former City Commissioner Tim Smith, head of a task force drawing up a long-term vision for Fort Lauderdale. "The city can be schizophrenic — it wants to progressive and then is afraid when it happens."