



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

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Only way to save struggling Shops at Sunset Place: De-mall it, new owners say

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Once hailed as the salvation of a struggling downtown South Miami, the landmark Shops at Sunset Place is now itself on life support and fading, a massive pink-and-yellow elephant on one of the most prominent corners of South Dixie Highway.

To save it, new owners propose to drastically de-mall Sunset Place, whose failing fortunes they attribute to a dated, theme-park-like design that walls it off from the surrounding streets, today a thriving urban shopping and dining district that straddles the dividing line between Coral Gables and South Miami.

They plan to save most of the half of the mall structure facing Sunset Drive, albeit with a cleaner, contemporary look that strips off much of the gaudy 1990s detailing and multi-color paint scheme. But they will take jackhammers to the interior of the open-air but enclosed mall, removing the big sunbaked staircase and the grotto-like fountain in the central plaza as well as the bridges and staircases that make navigating the mall a confusing chore and give it the look and feel of a tunnel.

Then, if the city approves an extensive suite of zoning and planning changes, they will undertake radical surgery, demolishing everything from about the halfway point on Red Road to South Dixie Highway, much of it already vacant. On that chunk of the nearly 10-acre property would rise a pair of apartment towers and a high-rise hotel crowning the corner of Red and South Dixie, which will have tree-shaded, 30-foot-wide sidewalks along both flanks.

The result, the developers say, should be everything the old mall promised but never quite delivered: A lively, open and pedestrian-friendly “living room” for South Miami and neighboring Pinecrest where families can live, stay, play, hang out and shop that’s not apart from but integrated into its surroundings.

There would be more ways for pedestrians to enter the modified Sunset Place, which under the new blueprint developed by Miami’s Zyscovich Architects would look and function more like an urban neighborhood than a mall. A new public plaza on Red Road would replace existing shops. The pedestrian “street” that starts at the Sunset Drive entrance would extend all the way to South Dixie and be lined with restaurants as it cuts through the new apartment and hotel towers. Shops along Red Road will for the first time open to the sidewalk.

One key new ingredient, the developers say: Extensive copses of canopy trees will be planted along the edges and the inside pathways of the remade Sunset Place to reflect and extend the shady canopy for which South Miami is known.

“Getting Sunset Place right is important to us,” said George Spillis, principal at Coconut Grove’s Grass River Property, one of three partners in a venture that purchased the mall last year for \$110 million, and who grew up nearby and recalls riding his bike to the old Holsum Bakery that once occupied the site to buy day-old sweet rolls for a nickel. “It’s personal for us.”

The developers recently submitted their plans to the city and hope to have an initial public hearing before the end of the year, with a city commission vote in early 2017. The same partnership also purchased Coconut Grove’s Cocowalk and is planning an extensive makeover, though they say those plans won’t be ready for several months.

Spillis and his partners, Miami Beach-based Comras Company and national developer Federal Realty Investment Trust, also plan to overhaul what they say is Sunset Place’s unsuccessful mix of mall-type shops and restaurants, which they hope to largely replace with a combination of fresher national and regional retailers and unique local operators.

“Sameness is what we’re trying to avoid,” said Comras Company’s Michael Comras. “The day of the mall and the strip of boring stores is over.”

What will almost certainly remain are the linchpins that have helped the mall survive economically, Spillis and his partners say — the AMC movie theaters, the LA Fitness gym and the GameTime arcade, though the last will be rebuilt and moved closer to the theaters. There has been no decision on whether the Barnes & Noble bookstore, one of the last in the area, will remain. Spillis noted the chain is struggling but promised that a bookstore would be part of Sunset Place’s future mix.

The mall's dark, hard-to-navigate garage will also stay, but will be re-engineered to improve circulation, and two stories will be added. All visitors coming out of the garage would arrive at a new second-story plaza that would provide a sense of formal arrival and a clear sense of direction as they venture in. Two levels of underground parking, meanwhile, are planned for the three towers.

The developers acknowledge they're sure to face questions about the potential impact of their proposed towers, which range in height from 155 feet to 192 feet, both visually and in terms of traffic. But they say such densification is appropriate at that spot, which sits on the broad right-of-way of South Dixie across from the South Miami Metrorail Station.

Neighboring Coral Gables has adopted a similar template for two key properties along South Dixie, approving new denser, taller mixed-use projects for the site of the old Gables Ford dealership and the Holiday Inn across from the University of Miami, though a lawsuit by neighboring residents over the impact of the latter has stalled its progress.

Spillis, whose company has also just completed a residential tower behind the Coconut Grove Metrorail Station and won a bid to redevelop its parking lot with a large, mixed-use project, said such transit-oriented development is smart planning, and especially popular with millennials who don't want to depend on a car for every outing, preferring to use public transit when possible.

That same clientele, the developers say, would be attracted to the Sunset Place towers because of its proximity to transit and the welcoming walkability of the surrounding neighborhood, which has both grocery stores, banking and other basic services in close proximity. That same dynamic would temper the project's impact on traffic, they argue.

"You could live here and do everything you need to do on a daily basis without a car," said the developers' attorney, Jeffrey Bass.

The developers have already started talks with state transportation officials, Miami-Dade County's transit director and Coral Gables officials to figure out better, safer and more inviting ways for pedestrians and cyclists to get across South Dixie and to move along Red Road, which demarcates the Gables-South Miami line.

The developers also note there are no homes anywhere near the high-rise buildings, which are critical to both to finance the substantial improvements to the rest of the property and to draw people who will patronize its businesses and enliven the place.

Sunset Place replaced a failed enclosed mall, the Bakery Centre, which was demolished in 1996, just a decade after opening. The Bakery Centre replaced the old Holsum Bakery, which longtime residents still recall fondly because the smell of baking bread would waft through the area.

Sunset Place's open-air design and big-name shops, which upon its 1999 opening included a sleek Nike superstore, a Virgin records mega-store, a Ralph Lauren boutique, an IMAX theater and a Rainforest Cafe with a massive, artificial banyan tree at the entrance, were supposed to draw crowds to revive South Miami's desolate downtown.

But few of the big-name businesses lasted, as shoppers found the mall's self-contained, maze-like layout confounding and largely stayed away. For years, the mall was known for its crowds of sometimes unruly teenagers who spent little but kept adults away. Lately even the teens have deserted Sunset Place, where it's no longer considered cool to hang out.



An architectural rendering shows a proposed cleaner new look for the entrance to Shops at Sunset Place on Sunset Drive. Zyscovich Architects