

West Palm Beach building boom surges

By Tony Doris
Daily News Staff Writer

On South Flagler Drive, there will be three new condo towers in a row.

A few blocks off on South Dixie Highway, Palm Beach Atlantic University will add a dorm for 510 students, as the Norton Museum of Art inaugurates a \$100 million expansion and the demolished Carefree Theatre readies a rise from the dust as an art film multiplex wrapped in boutique apartment buildings.

Nearly a dozen projects are under construction or planned just south of downtown, adding bigger, contemporary structures, not to mention residents and cars, to low-slung coastal neighborhoods that once housed some of West Palm Beach's early settlements.

As West Palm Beach officials see it, blossoming buildings add vitality, and property tax dollars to spread services and infrastructure improvements throughout the city. Others worry what's to come.

To one opponent of recent projects, who spoke at the Jan. 28 city commission meeting, it's as if West Palm Beach has adopted a motto of, "No developer left behind." Another resident, Nancy Pullum, founder of Citizens for Thoughtful Growth, lamented of the waterfront tower up for approval that day: "Way too many waivers and what-have-you."

Wherever you stand, change is coming quickly to downtown's southern approach roads, in a variety of building sizes, shapes and functions, as a still-rising economic tide spreads West Palm's urban environment in an era of increasing business and busy-ness.



The Bristol luxury high-rise, seen here in October, is just one of the many approved projects of late in West Palm Beach. [DAMON HIGGINS/PALMBEACHDAILYNEWS.COM]

Those in South Flagler's new multimillion-dollar condos may find serenity in their ocean vistas, but at ground level, the city is preparing for a bustling mix of cars, buses, trolleys, bikes and pedestrians.

Already in motion: plans to redesign South Dixie, U.S. 1, from Okeechobee Boulevard to Albemarle Road, reducing the number of travel lanes to slow traffic, adding landscaping, central turn lanes, bike lanes, wider sidewalks and better lighting and road drainage. The expected increase in traffic was taken into account, using projections as far out as 2035, City Traffic Engineer Uyen Dang said. Construction on the road redesign is scheduled to start in 2021, with completion in 2023.

Bike lanes, meanwhile, are being enhanced on roads parallel to South Dixie. Supplementing PalmTran bus service, the city's trolley network will extend toward the South End as well, as far as the municipal golf course that borders Lake Worth.

All the changes are meant to provide alternatives to single-passenger cars crowding the area as it develops, and to make the road network safer for cars, bikes and pedestrians, city officials say. The condo

towers on South Flagler will give the skyline its most dramatic change, each of them rising 24 stories or more, near neighborhoods of single-family homes just to the south.

Critics of the projects urged the city to downsize the towers and, in the case of 1309 S. Flagler, which came before the board for initial approval Jan. 28, to uphold setback provisions requiring it to be spaced farther from neighboring property lines. The 24-story tower, atop a two-story parking garage pedestal, will be among the city's tallest buildings.

All three, the Bristol, La Clara and 1309, got the go-ahead.

The 25-story Bristol, nearing completion on the old Chapel by the Lake site, has attracted the highest prices of any condo tower in the city, with the 24th floor going for \$44 million, according to the developer. La Clara also is targeting millionaire buyers for its condos, with a sales office in Palm Beach.

To offset its request for setback variances, the 1309 developers are contributing \$341,000 toward a city fund for transit improvements, and will create a pocket park along Flagler and a public "art walk" along its northern perimeter.

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Two years ago, two smart candidates worked hard for votes from Palm Beach Inlet to the Lake Worth border. It came down to the wire, but on Election Day.... Julie Araskog won a seat on the Town Council.

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- MARTIN KLEIN
CHAIRMAN, PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION



Paid for by Julie Araskog for Town Council.

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