

After years and a false start, the makeover of downtown Miami's main street has begun

BY JOEY FLECHAS | MAY 04, 2021

A long-stalled \$27 million makeover of Flagler Street finally kicked off this week, marking the first days of an estimated 2 1/2 years of construction Miami intended to eventually attract businesses, locals and tourists to the struggling center of downtown Miami.

Contractors hired to completely rebuild the historic downtown street from Biscayne Boulevard to the Miami-Dade County Courthouse closed off the two easternmost blocks in recent days. The new streetscape, which includes replacing aged utility lines, upgrading drainage and topping underground improvements with a sleek, curbless street covered in concrete pavers, is [designed to encourage street festivals](#).

Business owners hope the pedestrian-friendly design will revitalize a business district that has struggled to reinvent itself. But on a street where dozens of businesses have closed since the dawn of the pandemic, some shopkeepers and property owners also worry that the timing couldn't be worse.

"I do think this project needs to happen. I think our businesses will benefit from this," said Aaron Hyatt, one of the owners of [Jar+Fork](#), a healthy eating restaurant at the corner of Flagler and East First Avenue.

But, he says: "I do worry about this happening on the back end of the pandemic."

TRYING AGAIN (AGAIN)

Plans to redo Flagler have been discussed for a decade, after a poorly executed 2004 makeover failed to revive the street. Another streetscape plan flailed in 2017 after business owners complained the previous contractor, FH Paschen, understaffed the job and worked too slowly. The city [fired the firm](#).

Those with a stake in Flagler Street's success hope this time will be different, as a new contractor begins work on a streetscape design paid for by prominent landowner [Moishe Mana](#) and drawn up by Zyscovich Architects. A mix of taxes from the city and county, parking fees and bond dollars are funding the construction. Property owners are also taxing themselves to help pay for the project.

Crews are expected to begin by uprooting trees and replanting them in Bayfront Park. After nine months, they're scheduled to move to the block immediately to the west.

The reinvention might be even more crucial after the economic blow from the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 1 An architectural rendering shows how a remade Flagler Street in downtown Miami will look under a blueprint backed by entrepreneur and arts mogul Moishe Mana. ZYSCOVICH ARCHITECTS

Flagler Street’s businesses suffered greatly through stay-at-home orders and commercial restrictions, said Terrell Fritz, executive director of the Flagler District Business Improvement District. Super Bowl 54 brought tourists and optimism to downtown, but the good vibes evaporated when the novel coronavirus upended daily life.

Many businesses in the district have not survived. Out of 134 businesses that fronted Flagler Street pre-pandemic, 72 closed. Only 62 remain open. Some that remain open, like Jar+Fork, have struggled with reduced foot traffic as COVID restrictions shrank the number of downtown workers and completely eliminated cruising tourists.

“I wish to convey excitement, but the immediate devastation is very real,” Fritz told the Miami Herald. “And we’re not out of it yet.”

Still, Fritz said if there’s a logistical consolation, it’s that the remaining proprietors will have the attention of the city, contractors, the businesses district and Miami’s Downtown Development Authority. Commissioner Manolo Reyes, who serves as the DDA’s chairman, said he considers it a top priority to ensure customers can still reach existing businesses.

“It’s extremely important for all businesses to have accessibility,” Reyes said.

City officials scheduled an official groundbreaking at 10:30 a.m. on May 19 at the intersection of Flagler and Southeast Third Avenue. Given the wallop downtown’s commercial sector received from the pandemic, restaurant managers and shop owners hope the work moves as fast as possible.

Hyatt, of Jar+Fork, said he personally spoke with Reyes when the commissioner recently went door to door to assure proprietors their concerns would be heard and signal that financial help might be on the way. Reyes' office said he intends to propose a new grant program to aid businesses who have to endure construction over the next few years. The DDA board is expected to consider a plan soon.

“We have to invest in it. We have to do this, and it’s going to be amazing when it’s done,” said Commissioner Ken Russell, whose district includes downtown. “The trick is how to help businesses through this phase, and I’m confident that the DDA will support business, and I will be very supportive of commissioner Reyes.”

Owners wish the city could’ve broken ground earlier last year — the original plan was to begin work a month after Super Bowl festivities took over Bayfront Park. But after the pandemic derailed both private and government operations, permits were delayed.

“We wish it had started last November, but the final permitting just took time,” Fritz said. “Everyone worked diligently and constantly.”

A CHANCE TO RESET

Now, as the economy recovers, the district’s owners see a moment to reset. Gary Ressler, principal at Tilia Companies, said the street’s business owners have waited years for this project to be done correctly. He’s bullish on the street’s future, especially with the Mana-backed design.

“This is the best time. There’s no day like today, and we’ve been waiting for this project for a decade now,” said Ressler, whose company owns the 1937 [DuPont Building](#), across from the Olympia Theater.

Boosters want Flagler to be a destination for the area’s increasing residential population. James Torres, president of the Downtown Neighbors Alliance, said the makeover is long overdue and the design is attractive to neighbors.

“We ask that the city of Miami and the construction contractors include the residential communities on Flagler in the planning and implementation process, to ensure minimal disruption to vehicle traffic, pedestrian traffic and residential life during this lengthy project,” he said.