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Young to Rescue Miami's Little Havana

The team of nine Urban and Regional Planning students proposed better planning to improve the quality of life for residents of this Miami neighborhood.

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Partial view of the central vehicular artery Calle Ocho. (J.HDEZ.)

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After several months of research, consultations and targeted studies, School of Urban and Regional Planning students from Florida Atlantic University (FAU), under the direction of Professor Frank Schnidman, presented a series of papers that are intended to help the municipal administration devise better planning to improve the quality of life for residents of Miami's Little Havana neighborhood, while promoting the area that in recent years has shown some degree of revival.

"We have seen the change from a neighborhood where people were afraid to come to one that has improved. We know we have many challenges, especially to change the negative perception that still exists about this area " said Miami Mayor Tomas Regalado, in opening remarks before the presentation of the papers, which took place at the Cubaocho Museum.



Mayor Tomas Regalado

Then he added: "In the history of Calle Ocho, this is where the 'new Miami' started. This was where the Cuban exiles began creating their new life. We can not let this history be forgotten. We must remember those who paved the way to build the international city we have today. "

Presentations

The series of papers covered nine key topics of socioeconomic and urban planning impacting the neighborhood, from the visual display of current challenges through maps to the preservation of

buildings to economic development. These presentations were prepared by the nine Florida Atlantic University students, an academic institution based in Boca Raton. These students had to cross the cultural barrier that characterizes Miami to understand the needs and make the necessary analysis.



Student presentation team, with Professor Frank Schnidman (center).

"We defined the geographic boundaries for our research, covering the urban area that runs from I-95 and the bank of the Miami River and 836 to NW 37th Avenue on the west, and 11th Street SW on the south," explained Allison Goldberg presenting her study *Visualizing Little Havana*.

Goldberg presented a thorough investigation that yielded important data such as that unemployment fluctuates between 12 and 1.8% from one extreme to another and in certain sectors of the neighborhood, where, surprisingly, the area next to the 836 freeway, between avenues 22 and 27, is the most affected.

Then, Sylvia Miller discussed the results of a limited survey conducted among residents of the area and titled *Desires for the Future*, describing wishes for the future to meet certain economic conditions and desires for prosperity.

Thanks to the young student Miller, we now know that 60% of the area's surveyed residents were born abroad, most of them Cubans, about 64%, followed by Hondurans, Nicaraguans and other nationalities.

Today we also know that 47% own the property where they live, 40% share the rent and 77% drive cars to travel every day to go to work.

"One of the things they like about the Little Havana neighborhood is the proximity to work, easy to walk in the area, housing prices and cultural activity, although they are very concerned about the increased traffic and would like see more trees, parks, parking lots and less criminal acts," Miller reported.

Ekaterina Yagodina in her presentation on *Vacant Land Issues*, raised the issue of the impact of vacant lots, relating the issue to the construction boom in surrounding areas such as Downtown, Brickell and Coral Gables.

"There are 813 vacant lots available that could attract the attention of developers and alter the architectural balance of the neighborhood," she said.

Fadia Jawhari discussed the need to create more public spaces, while Tori Golden raised the abundance of small food markets and the absence of supermarkets. Branden Conley presented the topic of religion and tolerance, mainly Santeria, although he did not state specific data on practice.

Alexander Biray defended the need to preserve the historic identity of architecture against the advance of new construction.

"It is time that residents, business owners, the City Commission and developers meet and address these issues to protect older buildings that symbolize the history of the neighborhood," he said.

Then he urged creation of more economic incentives to encourage investors to renovate old buildings, respecting their facades, and re-create them as small hotels, homes or other businesses.

"We must also establish design guidelines, especially for facades, height and common areas, to maintain a specific urban uniformity," he said.

Meanwhile, Lauren Gratzner presented *Affordable Housing*, analyzing the housing inventory and the cost of living in Little Havana.

"We understand that affordable rent or mortgage, including services such as electricity and water, should not exceed 30% of family income," she warned, before exposing that only 9.34% of the homes of Little Havana are considered affordable.

"This is untenable for a population of over 91,000 inhabitants," she said.



Professor Schnidman

Professor Schnidman described the student team that prepared the papers and said: "These students have done a very professional job."

To conclude the series of papers, Kent Walia presented his research on *Economic Development*, including that an average of 6.1% unemployment in Little Havana, when the country reports 5%, 4.9% in the State of Florida, and 5.6 % in Miami-Dade County.

In fact, while incomes in Little Havana range between \$9,500 and \$110,000 a year, the average is only just over \$20,000.

"We recommend you increase the supply of job training, to attract investors to create more jobs and increase the area called an *enterprise zone*, which provides economic incentives to investors," he said.

In addition, Walia stressed the need to loosen certain municipal codes, facilitate procedures for investors and increase certain benefits that would also stimulate investment.
