

A Decade of Planning for the Florida Department of Transportation's Biscayne Boulevard Improvement Project, including landscaping.

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The City of Miami & FDOT's first public meeting to address improvements for Biscayne Boulevard was held in August 1996 at the American Legion Post 29. The three-day "Biscayne Boulevard Charrette" was an initiative of Miami's (then) Upper Eastside N.E.T. Administrator Ana Gelabert-Sanchez, and with FDOT's cooperation, Jack Luft, chief of Miami's Department of Community Development, chaired it.

Four of the original co-founders of the Upper Eastside Miami Council (UEMC), David Treece and myself included, attended this meeting along with many of our neighbors.

With the image of local serving roads Coral Way, Bird Road and Brickell Avenue in mind, a consensus for better landscaping was developed for Biscayne's planned new medians and wider swales. We specifically mentioned that we did not want the look or the feel of South Dixie Highway, a major traffic artery. Our vision includes native shade trees and smaller palms with xeriscapic properties that would be safer, easier to maintain, and would heighten *pedestrian friendliness* on the Boulevard by adding shade and beauty.

In 1998, Miami-Dade County's Metropolitan Planning Organization (M.P.O.) named UEMC as FDOT's "design partner" for Biscayne Boulevard, and in August 1999, UEMC co-hosted the "Biscayne Boulevard Blue Ribbon Landscaping Committee" at FDOT's regional headquarters.

Committee's members included *Jonathan Barnett, F.A.I.A.*, a nationally known transportation expert and advisor to Miami-Dade's Performing Arts Center (PAC), *Donald Evans, Chief Horticulturalist* of Fairchild Tropical Gardens, *Kampong horticulturalist Larry Schokman*, and representatives from the *Native Tree Society*, the *Flowering Tree Society*, and *Steve Stern, past president* of the South Florida Chapter of the International Palm Society.

The meeting's agenda included a review of FDOT's mission and landscaping guidelines, a review of the Biscayne Boulevard Improvement Project, and a summary of design and plant material suggestions.

Within the *federal highway guidelines* provided by FDOT's environmental and landscape architect Steven Craig James, the committee's suggestions were framed by the safety and maintenance issues and the Upper Eastside community's desire for improving Biscayne's *pedestrian friendliness* and beauty.

All (including federal law) deemed royal palms inappropriate for Biscayne's narrow roadway and the primary reason is vehicular safety. When an automobile strikes the massive trunk of a royal palm, it's "Palm Tree 1, Vehicle and Occupants 0".

Royal palm fronds weigh up to 75 pounds, and present a serious road hazard that cause accidents when they fall, striking a moving vehicle, or puncturing tires.

Maintenance was also a factor. Royal palms are natives of the Everglades and need large amounts of water in order to grow properly, something that has been missing for years from Miami's maintenance program for its roadway medians.

Beauty. When royals grow to maturity on a roadway as narrow as the Boulevard's, their cement gray trunks resemble the dull concrete light poles that dot both sides of the roadway. Nor do royals offer shade for pedestrians waiting for a bus or walking to their neighborhood restaurant.

On December 19, 2000, Miami's Planning Department held the Biscayne *Boulevard Review Committee Meeting*. The review committee's report supports the Upper Eastside's desire for "*Landscaping on the swales and the medians creating a pleasant, safe, pedestrian-friendly roadway including barrier swales*". "In areas where there are medians, shade trees as opposed to palm trees – to rebuild the canopy." As Shane Graber, then president of the Bayside Residents Association stated, "We add shade trees up against the Boulevard to protect pedestrians (instead of palm trees on the outside of the sidewalk)."

Concerned by the possibility of (then) allowable 23 story high-rises being built on the Boulevard, in 2003 UEMC partnered with the Morningside Civic Association and with Miami's Planning Department hosted a series of neighborhood charrettes to draft the "Biscayne Boulevard Design Code Position". The May 19, 2003 report addresses all aspects of the commercial lots bordering on Biscayne, including the landscaping, "Front Setback:A.) 10 feet from property line: no step back. B.) Landscape requirements to include shade trees at the swale."

After a decade's worth of work and collaboration on the Biscayne Boulevard Improvement Project with FDOT and the City of Miami, it is very clear what the Upper Eastside vision for their roadway is, and it includes shade and palm trees, not the huge out-of-scale royal palms. When they are carefully removed by FDOT to allow the reconstruction of the road, they will be safely and appropriately replanted in other areas, including Watson Island.

Finally, the Tyler Bridges Miami Herald article published Monday, June 26, 2000 and titled "Biscayne Boulevard Moving Along" third paragraph said, "*A landscaped center median strip where possible; Shade trees for pedestrians.*"

Documents that verify the time-line of the above facts can be provided upon request from the files of UEMC.