

## **Biscayne Boulevard landscaping: Royal Palms or Oaks?**

### An objective analysis of the choices.

Stately royal palms have lined Biscayne Boulevard for 80 years. When word first surfaced that Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) was planning the removal of the royals, several concerned citizens contacted them. FDOT said the royals needed to be removed to allow for the construction, that the landscaping had not been decided, and that it was quite possible that royal palms could be chosen to return. FDOT further said a public hearing would be held to decide the landscaping.

*This was not true*, as was shown at the FDOT meeting and public hearing of Dec 14, 2006. FDOT had already drawn up a plan that completely eliminated full-grown royal palms from Biscayne Boulevard's sidewalks, replacing them with oak saplings.

On December 18, 2006, the Morningside Civic Association board of directors voted unanimously to request that Biscayne Boulevard be designated a Scenic Transportation Corridor, in order to return the royal palms to their previous locations, fill in the missing gaps, and protect them in the future. Scenic Transportation Corridor status has already been granted to Coral Way, South Miami Avenue, South Bayshore Drive and Old Cutler Road.

Here is an analysis of royal palms vs oaks, a comparison using 7 parameters, and a compromise.

### **Historic:**

Here there is no comparison. Royal palm-lined Biscayne Boulevard has been given three separate layers of historic designation.

1. As reported in the Miami Herald, "On Thursday, Nov. 11, 1926, Biscayne Blvd. was dedicated at combined Armistice and Arbor Day celebrations... Mayor Romfh planted the last of the royal palms that were to become Biscayne Blvd.'s trademark. The thoroughfare was dedicated to the veterans of all wars."

Biscayne Boulevard opened for traffic on February 12, 1927, from the Royal Palm Hotel to NE 55<sup>th</sup> street. It would later be continued to the city limits at 121st street. (A celebration is anticipated for the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary on Feb 12, 2007.)

2. Shortly after World War 2, Biscayne Boulevard was further dedicated as a Blue Star Memorial Highway, "A tribute to the Armed Forces that have defended the United States of America," sponsored by The Florida Federation of Garden Clubs in cooperation with State Road Department of Florida and Tropical Garden Club.

3. Furthermore, *the Biscayne Boulevard / MiMo historic district was enacted on June 6, 2006*. Royals are not only an integral part of that history, they are an integral part of the whole tropical-tourism ambiance that MiMo architecture celebrates and promotes.

Historic preservation is an important part of NE Miami since 1984; the Morningside and Bayside historic districts abut the newly designated Biscayne Boulevard / MiMo historic district.

Most importantly, it is very disturbing that any Veteran's Memorial would be taken down, especially at a time when America's sons and daughters are falling daily in war.

**Legal:**

Here there is also no comparison. Royal palms are *required* by law:  
(from Miami Zoning Ordinance 11000)

Sec. 609.3.2 (1) "Along Biscayne Boulevard, the pedestrian open space and the ground floor frontage **shall** be so designed, improved and located to provide an attractively landscaped appearance using royal palms and other types of tropical plants suitable to its gateway role."

(Note that oaks are not tropical plants, they are temperate.)

*Important note:* FDOT's plan is severely handicapped because of the constraints of their Highway Design Standards. (Note they are standards, not laws.) As a result, there are far fewer oaks planned than would be needed to provide meaningful shade along the sidewalks. Very little shading of asphalt would take place. By declaring Biscayne Boulevard as a Scenic Transportation Corridor, the FDOT design standards can be waived, as was done to preserve the banyan trees on Coral Way (planted after 1935), South Miami Avenue, South Bayshore Drive and Old Cutler Road. It is important to note that none of those streets would be allowed to be landscaped the way they are today under FDOT design guidelines, and yet they are the most beloved streets in Miami.

(Some proponents of oaks mention Miami City Commission resolution 03-679 as a repealing of 609.3.2. Examination of that resolution shows that it does not call for the removal of the royal palms; rather, it requests that FDOT shorten the interval between shade trees or palms from 130 feet to 30 feet.)

FDOT has a design philosophy that is all about moving traffic. Neither historic preservation nor landscaping are their goals or their forte.

**Economic:**

In the same way that coconut palms do not hide, but instead compliment the Art Deco architecture of Ocean Drive's Art Deco Historic District, so too royal palms do not hide, but instead compliment, the MiMo architecture of the Biscayne Boulevard Historic District.

The MiMo district is Miami's first commercial historic district. It needs our help to thrive, and the business owners prefer royals. They know oaks would block their visibility, their signage and their architecture. They know the vast majority of their business will come by car, not on foot in the middle of the day.

As a case in point, Eric Silverman, the entrepreneur taking great risk on Biscayne by renovating the Vagabond Motel, and a strong proponent of the MiMo district, favors royal palms over oak trees. He is someone who has "put his money where his mouth is", and as a businessman he knows the importance of visibility for economic success.

And where is the economic sense in removing full grown trees in order to replace them with young saplings?

**Botanical:**

Although being a "native" should not be a reason to accept or reject a tree, both royals and oaks are considered natives.

Royals are fast growing. Oaks are among the slowest growing of trees.

FDOT's plan is to cut out a 5-foot square in the sidewalks for tree planting, with no continuing irrigation, with root guards on the sides and root shields below (to protect fiber optic lines). Royals have thrived in such a small root area for 80 years. Oaks will not, as they would be stunted by such a small root area.

Royals have much better hurricane survivability than oaks, especially given the small root area allowed.

An oak can provide more shade than a royal, especially if it is allowed to thrive with a large root area and irrigation, neither of which will be provided here. However, FDOT's plan has several blocks where it takes out royals and puts no trees back, and other blocks where it takes out 8 or 10 royals and replaces them with only one oak sapling, so there would be a net loss of shade with oaks. Again, even if oaks did thrive and provided shade, the businesses would lose visibility. Royals would enhance business visibility.

### **Social:**

How many people are willing to give up their cars to walk along Biscayne Boulevard under the shade of oak saplings?

Sociological studies have repeatedly shown that the farthest people are willing to walk, rather than take their car, is a quarter mile, about 3 blocks.

At the FDOT meeting of Dec 14, 2006, I asked how many people in attendance had walked to the meeting. None had. This was an evening meeting, so shade was not an issue. Why had so few people walked? Time. There is nothing more precious than time, and it takes much longer to walk somewhere than it does to drive there.

Shade from oaks would only happen during midday. Few people have the time to take a long, leisurely walk for lunch.

Retail is not well served by pedestrians. How much can a pedestrian carry, and how far is he / she willing to carry it?

### **Shade:**

The main reason given for substituting the royals with oaks is to provide shade for pedestrians. That sounds good on paper, but the reality is that Biscayne Boulevard is a long automobile corridor, with 40,000-plus cars per day. The vast majority of customers will be lured from passing cars, not passing pedestrians, and the aesthetic and visibility offered by royals help that to happen.

Furthermore, one of the most heavily walked streets in South Florida is Ocean Drive. It has no shade trees, only palms.

Most ironically, the goal of creating a shady walkway along Biscayne is not possible under FDOT's plan, because they are not planting enough oak trees, due to FDOT being handicapped by its own Highway Design Standards.

For example, the 6300 block of Biscayne had 10 full grown royal palms before the project, and afterwards will have only one (1) oak sapling. Several other block fronts have no oak saplings at all.

Making Biscayne Boulevard a Scenic Transportation Corridor will allow the preservation and protection of the royal palms as they were planted 80 years ago, by circumventing FDOT's excessively limiting Highway Design Standards.

FDOT's plan calls for very little shading of asphalt. Indeed, if someone wanted to create a plan that would shade the asphalt of Biscayne as little as possible, the FDOT plan would do just that. Again, because of FDOT's Highway Design Standards, no shade trees are planned for the medians of Biscayne Boulevard, only very small diameter trees, such as solitary palms (*ptychosperma elegans*), as was done on Grand Avenue in Coconut Grove. Ideally, large canopied shade trees should be placed in the medians, to provide shade.

### **Aesthetic:**

Beauty is in the eye and mindset of the beholder.

A planting of Royal palms along a street have long been described as 'a row of marble columns in a Greek or Roman temple.' Perhaps they were described as a row of soldiers at attention when the Boulevard was dedicated as a Veteran's Memorial. Now, wanting to get rid of the royals, some are describing them as telephone poles or concrete poles.

Others have described oaks as scruffy looking. Compare the pictures of Biscayne's royals vs Miracle Mile's oaks and decide for yourself. Beauty is subjective.

(Also, while this discussion is about trees, note that the FDOT plan calls for no grass along the sidewalks on Biscayne, only concrete. Biscayne's sidewalks used to have grassy swales in many areas, but now there will be no greenspace. How pedestrian friendly is that?)

### **Compromise:**

In a token attempt to placate the advocates of keeping royals on Biscayne Boulevard, the FDOT plan calls for the planting of clusters of royals at several nearby medians, specifically at 55 Terrace, 58 street and 59 street, and in the median in front of Bay Point. Royal palms are best enjoyed as a row planting, not as a cluster. Furthermore, those medians are exactly where large canopied shade trees should go, not royal palms, so the canopy can shade the asphalt and buffer the residential neighborhoods from the street noise on Biscayne.

As a compromise, a Scenic Transportation Corridor would allow royals to stay on Biscayne, as they were, and shade trees should go on those intersecting medians. In other words, take FDOT's so-called compromise and flip it around. Furthermore, because of their slow-growing nature, oaks would not be the best choice for those medians. A faster-growing tropical flowering tree, of which there are many possible species, would be a better choice. A banyan tree would be an excellent choice for 59<sup>th</sup> street on the west side, as there are already 2 others to the west, that should be declared historic, as they were planted in 1911, during the Lemon City era by students of the Lemon City School.

### **In Summary and Closing:**

Analyzed historically, legally, economically, botanically, socially, aesthetically and for shade, royal palms are by far the more appropriate choice. Even if FDOT did plant enough oak trees for continuous shade, the oaks would block business visibility and cause economic harm,

completely disregard 80 years of Miami history, destroy a memorial to the veterans of all wars, and be illegal under Section 609 of the zoning ordinance.

We urge our elected officials to cut through the bureaucracy and enact Scenic Transportation Corridor legislation that will restore, preserve and protect Biscayne Boulevard's royal palms to their original splendor as a living memorial to America's veterans of all wars.

Elvis Cruz