

## **A New Vision for Old 41**

After years of groping in the dark and repeated failures it is time to rethink the unimaginative, come-what-may kind of development plan that the Bonita city leaders and Barron-Collier Company currently have in mind for the former Bamboo Village site on Old 41. I, for one, do not want to see a repeat of Fifth Avenue in Naples nor another vanilla gentrification like downtown Fort Myers. We have a chance to make the Old 41 area truly unique; not just another set of shops we can find in a mall. Festering opposition to the current city plans is already reflected in letters to the editor and the fast growth of Facebook groups like "Citizens for Preserving Downtown Bonita Springs"

[https://www.facebook.com/groups/864169891050336/?multi\\_permaLinks=900139597453365&notif\\_id=1656344599357494&notif\\_t=feedback\\_reaction\\_generic&ref=notif](https://www.facebook.com/groups/864169891050336/?multi_permaLinks=900139597453365&notif_id=1656344599357494&notif_t=feedback_reaction_generic&ref=notif)

Bonita Springs is at the center of a growing metro area from Fort Myers and Cape Coral to Naples and Marco. Home rule could take advantage of this centrality to create a place that would attract Southwest Floridians from a wide area. We could aim for a Local-Bohemian-Ethnic flavor with a variety of specialized boutique and craft shops and eateries with local or ethnic flavor. Similar areas exist on Lincoln road in Miami Beach, Las Olas in Fort Lauderdale and Bleeker Street in New York City. We can adapt these ideas and add our own Bonita flavor.

Fashion and food should be comfortable, exotic or South Florida style. Boutiques could sell clothing made with local designs and organic dyes, customized and finished by local tailors. A cobbler-run sandal shop could bring relief to weary feet using alternative materials such as burlap and hemp fiber. A tropical food store could sell produce from our local backyard fruit growers clubs. Guavas, star fruit, loquats, lychees, jackfruit, sapodilla, eggfruit, papayas, black zapote and rare mango varieties and others come to mind. The Wonder Gardens Restaurant could perhaps be restored as a sweets shop that sells tropical-fruit-flavored desserts, smoothies, herb teas, customized coffee brews and some locally baked goodies. Perhaps the sweets shop could also double as a chess/internet cafe. A middle-eastern joint with falafel and Kebab smells wafting would draw hungry walkers to specialized shops that spill over to side streets.

The Old 41 Corridor could be an anti-mall with a sense of culture and intellectual life. Galleries could display trendy and insightful art by our numerous artists. Craftsmen could make and sell their unique wares on site. A bookshop could stock Florida and off-beat books, newspapers and magazines as well as some hip ones (like Rolling Stone, Mother Earth News and local publications) and feature discussions, speakers, and authors for periodic signings. A musical instrument shop would fit in as would a shop selling recorded music. A night club/cafe could feature local amateur and paid performers. Blackboard tabletops with colored chalks would allow an outlet for stymied creativity. Old timey black and white films (Flash Gordon, Buster Keaton etc.) could be projected silently on the walls.

Some of the existing businesses fit in or would not clash with this character. Others may have to be hidden from the street (perhaps by a vine wall on a trellis) or induced to move. Some of the establishments across from the Shangri-La are an example of a clashing business. The Wonder Gardens should be more inviting and more open to view from the street. Maria's has genuine Mexican food set in

an English pub style layout. Benson's Grocery and the Fire Station enliven their corners with Murals on sidewalls. Engel's bike shop is a friendly locale and the bait shop could lure gardeners looking for earthworms. Grandpa's Pizza is a ten and their Gelato is superb! The Survey Café is charming with genuine French flavors, Florida plants and reasonable prices! The downtown coffee and wine company offers innovative fare and outside seating.

I would not have condos at the former Bamboo Village site. Perhaps a small hotel and some cafés and curio shops would work while allowing full public access to the river. The Bamboo Village area is prone to major flooding so we should solve that, as well as the parking and traffic issues before any major development there. Perhaps a trolley shuttle from nearby parking lots at the library and Riverside Park would help. My water plan could reduce flooding and add cheap irrigation water. <https://www.news-press.com/story/opinion/2022/01/29/bonita-springs-utilities-should-consider-advisory-board-water-issues/6621237001/>

We need to improve the walkability and bikeability of the area. Bike parking stands should be added along Old 41. Kayak and canoe rentals could be enhanced with pedal boats. A hurricane safe, thermally efficient 3 story, geodesic dome could anchor the area, and attract sightseers. In an emergency it could also serve as a hurricane shelter. The seedy welfare motel could be redone as a courtyard of small specialty shops and the welfare folks housed elsewhere. What I have provided here is not ironclad; these are simply examples to fire the imagination of our city leaders and potential entrepreneurs.

We should turn such a vision into a clear multi-faceted plan that would encourage this kind of local development in the area. Perhaps the city should not sell the Bamboo Village property to Barron-Collier but merely have them or another company build it to city specs. In the long term the city would make more money by following a coherent vision and rent it out to shops that conform to that vision. Light rail development should be solicited with a stop at Riverside Park. Some apartment buildings could be allowed 2-3 streets away from Old 41 to provide more locals to patronize the area.

A city is the evolving synergy of its living people and places. It is its history ingrained in its old time inhabitants. It is this synergy and this history that defines its character and makes a downtown appealing. Such businesses as I outlined above, could be attracted by advertising, preferential financing, and more adaptive regulation and zoning. Over a few years' time the area could be a unique place for SW Floridians and tourists to gather, explore, play and shop.

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