After 54 years of shopping pleasure, the Publix at 127th Street may soon bid farewell

If you think shopping is already a pleasure at the 127th Street Mall Publix, just wait.

If all goes as planned, it will eventually get even better, after it gets worse.

Should the Publix dream come true, sometime around 2015, crews will tear down the store building and the deserted medical center behind it, and move an expanded, brand-spanking-new Publix to the south side of the mall property, facing north.

U.S. 1 Fitness will get a new building in the northwest corner. The businesses in the Publix building -- H&R Block, Manley’s Jewelry, General Nutrition Center -- will also get new quarters in the north building.

Meanwhile, shoppers will get a clear view across the parking lot to the Johnson & Wales University buildings, especially the big parking ramp with the basketball court on top.

Pedestrians walking along NE 17th Avenue -- now closed to traffic, thanks to Johnson & Wales and the City of North Miami -- will not have to look at Publix loading docks. Under the plan, those will front the north side of 127th Street, just behind the red-bricked Wells Fargo building, with its 20,000 square feet of offices.

Publix and officials from the burgeoning Johnson & Wales campus have quietly worked on this for about a year and sprang the news widely at the October 16 North Miami Board of
Out with the Old, in with the New

Written by Mark Sell -- BT Contributor
November 2013

Adjustment meeting.

It’s not a done deal, but Publix has more clout than it used to. It bought the ground land lease, including the shopping center and former medical-imaging building in the back, at foreclosure about three years ago, and that lease has about 45 years to go.

As customers know, the market is getting tired. It opened in May 1959 and is therefore one of Publix’s oldest stores in South Florida. “It’s an old store in desperate need of getting remodeled,” says Publix spokeswoman Nicole Krauss.

The new store would be 49,000 square feet, rather than 41,000. That compares with 45,000 square feet at the relatively new Biscayne Commons Publix (14641 Biscayne Blvd.) and 51,000 square feet at the expanded Miami Shores Publix (9050 Biscayne Blvd.). The Whole Foods just south of NE 123rd Street, opened in May, is 36,000 square feet.

Reaction to the plan is divided, both on the Board of Adjustment and in the community. In fact, at the October 16 meeting, the board rejected 4-3 Publix’s request for a number of variances, and then reversed itself and decided to reconsider later, in hopes that its next meeting would include a workshop.

The biggest bugbear among the variances is that the expanded new store would not face the street, as city code mandates, but would sit sideways.

Developer Bernard “Barney” Danzansky, president of Equity Development Group in Boca Raton, said that if the city won’t grant a variance on the positioning of the store, the deal is off. He has built 13 Publix supermarkets. This would be number 14.

Kenneth Each, the former North Miami police chief and current planning commissioner who owns three properties on Emerald Drive right across from Johnson & Wales, loves the plan.
“I have looked at the back of that shopping center for the past 30 years and it is despicable. It is absolutely a disgrace,” Each told the Board of Adjustment. He said the Publix markets in Miami Shores and Surfside face sideways to the street, and that Johnson & Wales “did a beautiful job” in closing the adjoining NE 17th Avenue to traffic and turning it into a landscaped brick walkway. He therefore asked for a variance to “this tired, old, dilapidated property.”

Ellen Abramson, a Keystone Point activist and prolific e-mailer, begs to differ. “This is insane,” she says. “You’d see the Johnson and Wales parking garage with the basketball court on the roof. And you couldn’t just walk to Publix from the stores. You’d have to go across the whole parking lot. The northern end would just turn into a strip mall. You’re asking for blight.”

After the Board of Adjustment reversed course and agreed to reconsider at the December workshop, Danzansky wasted no time making his case. The following night, he met with the Keystone Point Homeowners Association, where his plan was generally well received.

For most tenants in the adjacent four-story Wells Fargo bank building, all these big plans were news. Those happen to include Board of Adjustment member and lawyer Holly Cohen, who voted against the plan, and Councilwoman Carol Keys, a fellow attorney who appointed Cohen to the board.

Although Danzansky said that notifying tenants was not typical this early in the process, he would be glad to do so between now and the next Board of Adjustment meeting, tentatively on for 6:30 pm, Wednesday December 18, at North Miami City Hall, but subject to change.

**Biscayne Landing update:** At the October 22 North Miami City Council meeting, Oleta Partners executive vice president Herbert Tillman gave his usual smooth presentation on developments at Biscayne Landing, though the subject was rough: contaminated soil.

Yes, he said, Oleta Partners had trucked 194,000 cubic yards of fill from the Brickell CityCentre construction site to Biscayne Landing with the permission of the Miami-Dade Department of Environmental Resources Management (now called the Department of Regulatory and Economic Resources, or RER), which authorized a shipment of 300,000 cubic yards in February and ordered a stop in May when it found aluminum levels well above permissible limits.
None of that particular fill, Tillman said, had been put into lakes, although other “clean” fill has. He also said that Oleta Partners had paid $1.7 million for that fill because it could not find fill in that quantity anywhere else, as it was being commandeered for a runway project at the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood Airport. He did notice the fill looked a little “greenish” but said that is not so unusual.

Vice Mayor Scott Galvin then caught everyone’s attention when he said he got a call from Oleta Partners developer Michael Swerdlow, who told him that the city said Oleta would have to pay North Miami $1 million to keep the contaminated fill on the site and asked if he should pay it. Galvin told him No.

City manager Stephen Johnson said that he’d brought this up to Swerdlow as a “tax,” and apologized profusely for not telling the whole council about it.

This should be a teachable moment. Communications between management and council are spotty, and the city manager should keep each member fully, and not selectively, posted, and return calls without fear or favor, whatever the likely vote. This is causing needless trouble on the dais.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com