

Eric Silverman and his Vagabond Motel may soon be in the market business



Market reports have dominated the headlines for months now. Bad debts, rising inflation, housing bubbles, and government bailouts have become topics of conversation for even the most financially illiterate among us. But along the Biscayne Corridor, there's been market talk of a different sort -- talk that has more to do with orchids, honeydews, and organic vegetables than mortgages or Wall Street.

We're speaking, of course, about farmers markets.

On September 17, in a 6-2 decision, the Miami Planning and Advisory Board (PAB) approved the creation of a special "Market District" along Biscayne Boulevard from NE 51st Street to NE 77th Street. The proposed district, which now must be ratified by the city commission, would allow qualifying property owners to operate outdoor markets in front of their businesses on Saturdays and Sundays from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Until recently, a temporary special-events permit was required for such activity, and it had to be renewed weekly.

The new ordinance aims to bring more visitors and much-needed revenue to Boulevard businesses, while also taking a step toward creating a more pedestrian-friendly environment, similar to neighborhoods in other U.S. and European cities.

To qualify for an open-air market, a property must measure at least 15,000 square feet. Very few properties in the designated area are that large. Exactly how many remains unclear -- maybe three, maybe four. But one man whose property *does* qualify, and who plans to take full advantage of the new law when it takes effect, is Eric Silverman. His historic Vagabond Motel at 7301 Biscayne Blvd. is considered the premier property along the Boulevard's Upper Eastside, and he is fervently working toward opening an outdoor weekend market in his large front parking lot by Saturday, November 1.

Further Adventures of the Boulevard's Big Man

Written by Terence Cantarella Photo by Silvia Ros
October 2008

Silverman expects that other businesses eventually will set up shop indoors at the Vagabond. A vintage store, a fish market, bookstore, coffee shop, and artists' spaces are just some of the enterprises he imagines in his revived venue (see *BT*'s September cover story, "Big Man on the Boulevard"). Silverman's ultimate goal is to create a bustling gathering place, complete with indoor retail, the outdoor market, a swimming pool, and even a pool bar. The Vagabond, he claims, holds the only full liquor license on the east side of the Boulevard from downtown to at least NE 132nd Street. "That's the drive-home side," he reasons. "So the opportunity is there."

Silverman was the leading proponent of the Market District, and as the only property owner with concrete plans for an outdoor market, his motel has been a major focus at public meetings. The overwhelming majority of neighboring businesses and residents support Silverman's plan, as evidenced by a petition he circulated, as well as a show of hands at recent meetings of the MiMo Biscayne Association and a September 4 community meeting at Legion Park. Some locals have even billed him a visionary set to transform the MiMo Historic District, the strip of Biscayne Boulevard from NE 50th Street to NE 77th Street known for its midcentury motels designed in the unique, modernistic style known as Miami Modern (MiMo).

Some local preservationists and homeowners associations haven't been so easily sold on the idea. Among their concerns are traffic, sanitation, and a fear that an outdoor market would provide Silverman and other owners of historic properties with a convenient way to avoid costly restoration work, generating income instead from open-air markets.

Teri D'Amico, a local interior designer who shares credit for coining the term "MiMo," voiced her objections at the September 4 community meeting, taking many residents by surprise with the intensity of her opposition. "This is *not* a good thing for the neighborhood," she insisted. Her fear was that the area will become something akin to a flea market or junk bazaar.

That issue was addressed at the September 17 PAB meeting. Discussion mainly centered on enforcement of the terms of the proposed new law, which contains lots of specifics. For example, the markets are limited to the sale of handmade crafts, fresh fruits and vegetables, prepared raw foods, and drinks derived from fresh fruits and vegetables. No outdoor market may be located closer than 1500 feet to another outdoor market, and display areas can only be along the Biscayne Boulevard frontage and 25 feet from any residential property.

The ordinance also states that market hopefuls must obtain a Class 2 Special Permit, issued by the city's planning department. Among other things, the permit requires any applicant to provide

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a detailed business plan. "We work closely with the NET office to help us get feedback," explained Assistant Planning Director Carmen Sanchez. "We issue the Class 2 permit. If they [property owners] don't behave, we'll get the complaint and we'll refer it to the enforcement department." If owners fail to comply, the permit is revoked and the market is instantly out of business.

Board member Betty Gutierrez still felt there weren't enough limitations in the ordinance and warned that good intentions sometimes go awry. Nina West, another board member, believed a review period should be included in the ordinance. The proposal passed 6-2, and then was amended to include a review after four years.

Arva Moore Parks, the PAB chairwoman and respected Miami historian, concluded the meeting on a positive note. "I hope in four years we'll have a totally revived MiMo District and no one will want to waste time with this," she said of the review provision.

"You have the best people there," noted board member Janice Tarbert, speaking of the Upper Eastside generally. "You're going to be enormously successful."

Tarbert just may be right. The Biscayne Corridor lacks a focal point similar to Miami Beach's Lincoln Road or Coconut Grove's CocoWalk, an oft-heard lamentation from residents. The Vagabond market project may prove to be a testing ground for what could become a very popular idea.

Now, if we could only do something about those *financial* markets.

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