

### What does forlorn NW 7th Avenue need to perk it up? A brand-new Chinatown!



Picture two Chinese-style arches over North Miami's NW 7th Avenue, one at NW 119th Street, the other at NW 135th, beckoning visitors to a 16-block, 92-acre Chinatown Arts and Innovation District, where today car repair shops, hardware stores, fast-food joints, and the occasional Haitian storefront church jostle for drivers' attention.

Imagine traditional Chinese architectural themes, with sweeping pagoda-style roofs accenting not only the strip malls, Pollo Tropical, and Burger King, but also stores, businesses, restaurants, and perhaps hotels built for Chinese clientele, with landscaping and gardens designed to make Chinese visitors feel at home.

Fantastic? Improbable? Not to North Miami Councilman Alix Desulme and a growing legion of city officials and staff, six of whom returned May 16 from a 12-day, \$25,000-plus, meet-and-greet tour of three Chinese cities armed with marketing brochures in English and Chinese.

"It will be beautiful!" exclaims Desulme of the arches, which he hopes will break ground within the next 18 months. "I've lived off 7th Avenue for more than 20 years, and I am so excited that a few years from now, I will see 7th Avenue transformed. We'd thought the transformation would take 15 years, but I'm starting to think you'll see a real difference in five to seven. There's serious money involved, and serious interest."

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Desulme is the prime mover of the plan for the commercial, nonresidential district near his house in the predominantly Haitian and West Indian Sunkist Grove neighborhood. Even Councilwoman Carol Keys, from Keystone Point on the east side, a self-described watchdog who began the trip as a skeptic, returned a true believer.

While the Chinatown idea is today a resolution without investors or master plan, Desulme has two formidable allies. One is American Da Tang Group of New York, a real estate development and concierge company catering to Chinese elites, founded by CEO Shanjie Li, who has shifted his attention to Miami in the past 18 months, spearheading a \$113 million investment in two big property purchases in Brickell and Miami Beach.

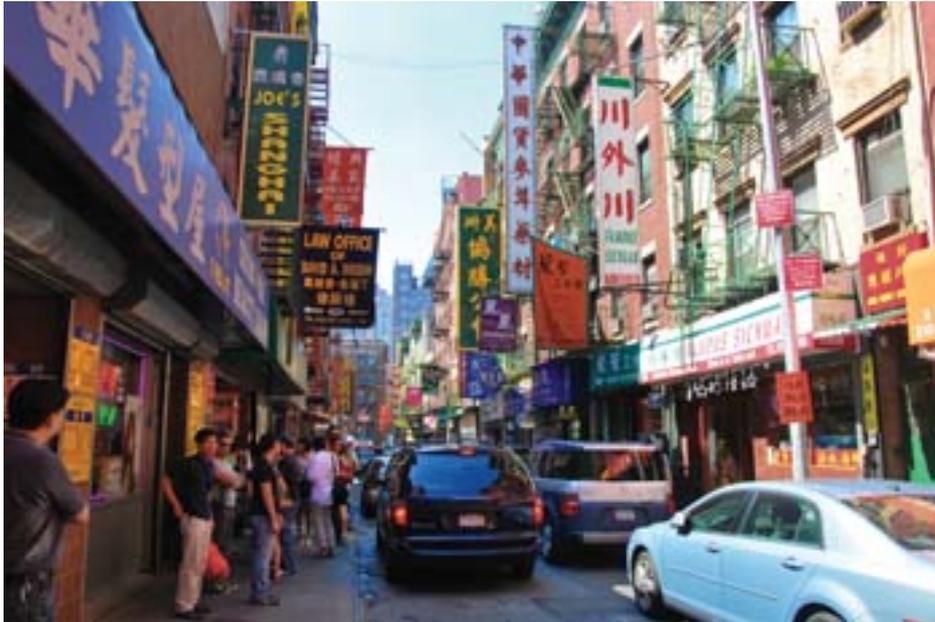
The second ally is Florida International University, with 500 Chinese hospitality students on its Biscayne Bay campus in partnership with Tianjin University of Commerce.

Three months after the city's February 23 resolution creating the district, events have moved quickly. In the last week of May, the city sent out requests for proposals for a master plan (estimated cost: up to \$45,000) and will spend the summer seeking architects and soliciting ideas from businesses and residents, with a possible vote on the plan in November.

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On May 26, Desulme was summoned by Shanjie to Los Angeles to meet with prospective Chinese investors. One idea on the table: a nine-acre Chinese-themed park on the north side of NW 135th Street by the city's western boundary at NW 17th Avenue, financed through a public-private partnership.

For now, the 16 blocks along NW 7th Avenue are hardly a model of feng shui, with such businesses as Payless Suits and Dresses, the Original Pam Pi Gou restaurant, Miami Finga Licking soul food, E-Z Payment Center and EZ Rentals -- and three small Chinese takeout places, where neither customers nor the people behind the counters had heard anything about a Chinatown.

North Miami plans to get the word out soon. "This area badly needs a B-12 shot," says city planning, zoning, and development director Tanya Wilson-Sojour, who was also on the China trip. "If not this way, how?"

Why North Miami and not, say, North Miami Beach with its string of long-established, Chinese-focused businesses?

"This NW 7th Avenue area has a lot of potential," says Wenjun Lin, Miami director of American Da Tang Realty. "It's a busy street, and the city controls development on both sides. Dr. Li has

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expressed interest in this area and wants to bring some key businesses from China. North Miami showed great interest in a Chinatown. We did not get that level of interest from North Miami Beach.”



The plan comes with risks. Investment programs, such as North Miami's Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) and EB-5 visas, are undergoing sharp scrutiny. The city has been in protracted negotiations with the county to extend the CRA's life from its scheduled September 30 sunset to 2045, and Chinatown is now part of those talks.

The EB-5 program -- a big potential source of funding for the Brickell and Miami Beach projects -- is under pressure from both parties in Congress for an overhaul or abolishment. The program assists foreign investors and their families by granting provisional resident Green Card status for them in return for a minimum \$500,000 investment and the creation of ten jobs.

In addition, some major property owners along NW 7th Avenue have no wish to sell, a number of residential neighbors are suspicious or opposed, and Miami's real estate market can lurch sharply.

Further, no Chinatown plan has succeeded in Florida. One local example: In 1990, New York developer Isaac Shih tried and failed to build a Chinatown near Biscayne Boulevard and NE 18th Street. Even as the City of Miami bent rules to accommodate him, Shih succeeded only in demolishing historic apartment buildings.

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Yet Chinese money is turning to long-overlooked South Florida, attracted by the clean air, ocean, glamour, greenery, and prices far cheaper than New York, San Francisco, or Vancouver. Wealthy Chinese -- with an estimated 3.6 million millionaires in 2015, according to the Boston Consulting Group -- continue to park their money outside the country, notably in U.S. real estate. According to a 2015 survey from London's Barclays Bank, as many as half the richest Chinese want to move elsewhere.



When it comes to bargains, commercial property along North Miami's NW 7th Avenue is about as cheap as it gets so close to the Miami center and its beaches.

In December 2014, Da Tang acted as representative, according to news reports at the time, for then state-owned China City Construction Holding Group, which paid \$74.7 million for 2.4 acres in Brickell, at 1430 S. Miami Ave., for an 80-story luxury condo-hotel-retail development. Then in October 2015, Da Tang represented China City Construction for the \$38.5 million purchase of the old Bath Club site at 6747 Collins Ave. for an 18-story luxury condo.

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China's opaque business methods can cause heartburn. In late April, China City Construction Holding Group rattled bond markets when the company was restructured from state-owned enterprise to private equity. The value of its bonds plummeted.

Da Tang's Wenjun Lin says the restructuring will have no bearing on China City's Brickell and Miami Beach projects, that China City Construction has "no relation" to the North Miami plans, and that Da Tang's Chinatown role thus far is advisory, working to match Chinese investors with the City of North Miami.

Peter Kwong, a professor of urban affairs and planning at Hunter College in New York, and author of several books on the American Chinatown experience, tells the *BT*: "There's not a large Chinese population in Miami and there has never been a Chinatown in Miami, so this is simply an idea to attract Chinese investment.

"People are trying to get their money out of China as fast as possible because the economy is going sour," he adds. "I would avoid using the 'Chinatown' term. You're talking about a Chinese investment zone. There's a lot of competition for these. They will need a commitment from a large department store or supermarket chain. There already are many cities with 'Chinatown' complexes with huge malls."



Kwong's skepticism is matched by Judy Brown, president of the Sunkist Grove Homeowners Association. "Tell me what kind of economic development are they talking about," she says. "Are you telling me that people are going to come from South Beach to North Dade? It sounds a little like selling snake oil."

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Buying up land on NW 7th Avenue could also be tricky. (The City of North Miami owns about ten percent of the property along the zone, including easements.) One significant commercial property owner, Gator Investments Inc., has no wish to sell.

Three years ago, the North Miami Beach-based giant, with operations in 22 states, bought a string of properties along 90 blocks of NW 7th Avenue, including three in the planned Chinatown zone. "We buy properties, renovate, and fix them up," says Gator's Robert Nussbaum, who had not heard of the Chinatown venture. "We rarely sell anything. We're about a hundred percent leased, and our rental rates are up 20 to 25 percent from three years ago.

"We worked with the North Miami CRA to fix up our properties," he says. "We have some leases for 20 or 25 years, so we're here to stay. If we get a nice Chinese restaurant or Chinese artifacts store, we would welcome it."

Chinatown quiz answers: Authentic #1 (San Francisco), #3 (New York), #5 (Seattle). Fake #2 (Las Vegas), #4 (Austin, TX), #6 (Raleigh-Durham, NC).

Feedback: [letters@biscaynetimes.com](mailto:letters@biscaynetimes.com)