

## Chinatown or Bust

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer  
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### City councilman says with or without investors, North Miami will have its Chinatown



ueled by catered food and fruit drinks, and motivated by energetic consultants, dozens of people gathered at the Joseph Celestin Community Center in North Miami on March 1 to discuss how to transform a drab commercial corridor, in a predominately African-American and Haitian area, into an exciting Chinatown that would attract real estate investors, entrepreneurs, and tourists.

The corridor in question consists of 93 acres of privately owned land between NW 119th and 135th streets along NW 7th Avenue, a stretch of territory dominated by one-story retail centers. Since February 2016, the City of North Miami, at the behest of Councilman Alix Desulme, has been on a quest to turn NW 7th Avenue into a new Chinatown Cultural Arts and Innovation District.

To help make this happen, Keith and Schnars, an engineering consulting company based in Fort Lauderdale, was given a \$175,000 contract to help draft a master plan that would make the street actually *look* like a Chinatown.

And that was the purpose of the March meeting -- to give Keith and Schnars suggestions on how to craft that master plan. So the crowd of real estate agents, business owners, and North Dade dwellers were divided into teams, handed markers and pads, and given an hour to brainstorm while being taped by a camera supposedly live-streaming to potential investors in China. The ideas this crowd came up with included towers adapted to sea level rise, parking

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garages, canals, flashing lights along I-95, artistic murals, nightclubs, student housing, international language schools, and pocket parks.

But one team, made up entirely of North Miami residents, rebelled.

Rather than dream up big ideas, the table's representative, Belkis Zarate, said they weren't qualified to provide guidance on creating a Chinatown because "none of us are Chinese." Instead they complained that Desulme -- whose district includes the Westside/Sunkist Grove area on the west side of NW 7th Avenue, and Alhambra Heights on the avenue's east -- had declared Chinatown "a go" without giving many residents enough notice. Zarate also asked a number of questions.



"What we would like to know is, how is the City of North Miami going to pay for this master plan should there be no investors?" asked Zarate, a resident of North Miami's Central neighborhood. "What about the existing culture in the corridor? Will they be helped to stay? Or moved along? Or do you not care?"

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Elaborating for the *BT*, Zarate notes, “They should have properly notified us from Day One a year ago, when they went to China,” referencing the China tour that Desulme and other North Miami officials undertook in May 2016 at a cost of \$45,700 to taxpayers.

Regardless of how Zarate and her compatriots feel, Desulme and other city officials continue to pursue a Chinatown master plan for NW 7th Avenue. The city set up a website called NorthMiamiFuture.com that explains the aspirations for a Chinatown district and asks for suggestions for what people want in a Chinatown. Another design workshop is being planned for some date in May, states Francisco Medranda, the city’s constituent services aide and public records liaison.

A final Chinatown report will be presented in June to the city’s Community Redevelopment Agency, which is governed by North Miami’s mayor and city council, Medranda adds.

Desulme insists that the Chinatown concept is only meant to make the street more attractive for real estate developers and entrepreneurs who will bring jobs to a mainly depressed area. Residents and current business owners, Desulme declares, will not be forced out by the city.

Instead Desulme envisions a scheme that uses Chinese architecture -- plus a pair of Chinese archways at the district’s entrances -- to attract new restaurants, shops, companies, and wealthy Chinese investors.

“I think everybody wants to see this area moved up,” he tells the *BT*.

Desulme has been championing NW 7th Avenue’s conversion to a Chinatown soon after meeting with representatives from American Da Tang Group, a real estate company headed by Shan-Jie Li that, according to its website, “provides a membership-based and comprehensive set of real estate services to the Chinese elite that are about to arrive in the United States and those who have already settled in the States.” (For more on the origins of North Miami’s quest for a Chinatown, see “ [Chasing Magic Dragons](#) ,” January 2017, and “ [North Miami’s Fortune Cookie](#) ,” June 2016.)

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