

Chamber a key player as Coconut Grove business on rise

BY REBECCA SAN JUAN

The sounds of street construction and ongoing renovations in CocoWalk indicate the transformation taking place in Coconut Grove. Signs point towards a healthy, growing business sector.

"It's been through its own metamorphosis for the past 20 years," said Camila Sharp, a director at the Coconut Grove Chamber of Commerce. "Currently, it's going through a very exciting time with new business, new look, new connections between the center, south and west Grove."

Revamping Coconut Grove's identity seems to rest largely in the Village West. Another director of the chamber of commerce, J.S. Rashid, said, "It's very rich in history and culture. We can build on that. The market forces are coming here. That's where the greatest potential lies."

The shift in focus towards the Village West doesn't need to draw attention away from other gems, according to Mr. Rashid. He said he believes that the community — especially members of the chamber — can highlight a few spots around town for other residents and visitors to the area.

"We need to come up with a theme and say we need a great seafood place, a great steakhouse and," in doing so, Mr. Rashid said, "promote this concept of village life."

The chamber already sheds light on its local businesses as best as it



Camila Sharp: very exciting time.

The chamber also features new businesses on the header banners on its webpage. Mr. Kane understands the importance of marketing. He acknowledges that marketing strategies can be costly to business owners, especially those handling smaller stores and restaurants.

"That complimentary opportunity to market their businesses will have a bottom-line effect and that's what is most important," he said. He uses funding exclusively from membership dues to pay for all of the marketing.

More visibility on the Internet, Mr. Kane expects, can further improve the Grove's business community. He hopes to work with an organization that specializes in website optimization programs. The resource would be available to members of the chamber and of the community. Businesses in the Grove would pop up first on search engines for people looking for whatever service, whether to dine out or visit a salon



J.S. Rashid: we can build on that.

at Florida International University and the University of Miami hold forums with business owners and assess how the area could improve its business sector.

Mr. Gale also said the chamber can lean more on the Coconut Grove Business Improvement District. He's not alone. "The BID does a fantastic job from the social media standpoint, promoting all the different businesses that are in the Grove," he said.

Bob Fitzsimmons, another chamber director, also wants to see more interaction between the two organizations. "I think we should attend each other's meetings or have a representative attend each other's meetings," he said.

Mr. Fitzsimmons hopes that with a new BID director recently in place there can be more collaboration. "I think there's an opportunity to use their resources, which are more than the chamber's," he said, "and the chamber can give more of a personal touch with the merchants



Bob Fitzsimmons: add interaction.

industry workers taking advantage of parking outside the edges, the fringe of Coconut Grove, and [using] our trolley service as a local transportation mode to bring them to their places of employment," he said.

Mr. Kane still sees a need for better parking options for those opting out of public transportation.

"Parking is huge challenge in Coconut Grove," he said. "Anything that removes parking lots or creates a barrier for either the tourist, visitor or the resident is a challenge that our county commissioner needs to focus on as well as the commission board."

Wendy Zane, another member of the board of directors at the chamber, says that in organizing networking events for members and local business she often hears complaints about parking. "The thing we probably hear the most about is 'we want more parking.'"

At-large officer for the chamber Lilia Garcia said the community



Ken Russell: parking a challenge.

spots in the Grove," Ms. Garcia said. "Now we just added valet parking in a couple of corners. That was a challenge and we're meeting it."

Ken Russell, the Miami city commissioner for the area, agrees that more can be done for parking solutions.

"Parking is a huge challenge in the Grove, particularly with all of the construction currently underway," Mr. Russell said. "I've been advocating for a variety of solutions to help abate the parking challenges, including having the Coconut Grove BID coordinate with the Miami Parking Authority, which is largely responsible for public parking in the city."

CocoWalk's new facelift is expected to help the business sector grow even more.

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theme and say we need a great seafood place, a great steakhouse and," in doing so, Mr. Rashid said, "promote this concept of village life."

The chamber already sheds light on its local businesses as best as it can. Howard Kane, the executive director at the chamber, provides over 4,000 contacts on an e-mail list to its members. Members reach locals and other businesses in the Grove and nearby areas.

to members of the chamber and of the community. Businesses in the Grove would pop up first on search engines for people looking for whatever service, whether to dine out or visit a salon.

A former member of the chamber, John Gale, said he thinks the chamber could do more to optimize the business sector. Take for example the chance to have doctoral students from business programs

there can be more collaboration. "I think there's an opportunity to use their resources, which are more than the chamber's," he said, "and the chamber can give more of a personal touch with the merchants and the other commercial people."

Mr. Kane notes that some efforts thus far by the BID, such as purchasing two trolleys, help the business sector grow stronger. "We are seeing more hospitality service

and local business she often hears complaints about parking. "The thing we probably hear the most about is 'we want more parking.'"

At-large officer for the chamber Lilia Garcia said the community continues to work on the concern about parking.

"Some people consider parking a challenge in the Grove, but if you look at all of the parking that is available, there are about 6,000 parking

"The success of the business community will require a little bit of partnership between those businesses to understand what the market is and utilize the extra traffic they're going to get with office people, and also at the same time attract the residential people that are around it," Mr. Fitzsimmons said. "They have a successful, wealthy district around it so they should capitalize on that."