

PARKS

50-year blueprint for Dade parks is all green

Planners will roll out a 50-year master strategy for creating interconnected parks, walkways and bikeways in Miami-Dade.

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Scraggly canal banks transformed into scenic public pathways. Tree-shaded, pedestrian-friendly "greenways" replacing barren streetscapes. Bikeways and walkways linking far-flung neighborhoods to local, state and national parks. An inviting public space -- park, natural area, cultural or recreational facility -- within a safe, five-minute walk of every resident.

Miami-Dade County on Friday will roll out an extraordinarily ambitious parks and open-space master plan that aims over the next half-century to re-green and reconnect a community that has spent much of the previous 50 years carving up and paving the natural landscape.

"This is probably the single most important thing that Miami-Dade Parks and Recreation has been involved in in decades," said county parks director Jack Kardys. "It really is about leaving a legacy for the community."

The plan, approved last month by the County Commission, lays out new principles to guide development not only of parks and public places, but also streets and sidewalks to encourage more people to walk and bicycle.

"The idea is to create a community in a garden," said Maria Nardi, special projects administrator for the parks department. "The moment you step out of your house, you're in the parks system."

Among its most ambitious elements: a 40-mile-plus bikeable loop along Southwest 328th and 344th streets in far South Miami-Dade, connecting Biscayne and Everglades national parks, and a vast north-to-south recreational and ecological zone along the eastern edge of the Everglades.

The plan will be the focus of a county parks summit Friday at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, in which national experts will discuss how parks and public spaces act as catalysts for community revitalization.

Will Rogers, president of The Trust for Public Land, which has worked with Miami and Miami-Dade on greenways and access plans along the Miami River and Biscayne Bay, said communities across the country have seen similar park initiatives improve the quality of life for residents -- and the local economy.

ECONOMIC PAYOFF

Dallas, Atlanta, Chicago and Chattanooga, Tenn., are among cities that have poured billions into improving open spaces, he said, in part to attract or keep major employers and development.

"The cities that follow through are far more competitive economically. There is absolutely a payoff in this investment," Rogers said. "If you don't do it, you risk not being a first-class city."

The ambitious plan will require development of new guidelines and rules for the design of streets and other public facilities, park planners say, as well as close coordination with individual cities and county agencies that now often work separately. The county has jurisdiction over only unincorporated areas, but it has formed a joint city-county committee to help encourage municipalities to adopt the plan's strategies.

The massive 2004 county bonds issue set aside millions for county parks, but there is no specific budget attached to the new blueprint. The plan would be executed gradually, as opportunity arises -- as when parks, streets and public facilities such as libraries are built or renovated, or in new developments.

The department must draw up an implementation plan within a year.

"It's not impossible," said Nardi, county planner for the blueprint. "It's a 50-year vision. We have to start somewhere. We have to start now."

Planners started two years ago with the county's vast but scattered system of parks -- the third-largest in the nation, with a \$100 million budget and 250 parks and recreational facilities encompassing nearly 13,000 acres. The agency also manages 12,000 acres of publicly owned, environmentally sensitive land.

The county's premier parks -- including dazzling gems like Crandon Park on Key Biscayne and the Charles Deering Estate in South Miami-Dade -- are in many cases underused, often reachable only by car, and unevenly distributed. Some neighborhoods lack so much as a local playground.

In addition, Nardi said, public spaces often seem ill-designed or poorly placed: a tot-lot jammed next to a parking lot; an unshaded sidewalk along a retention pond.

The plan embraces the idea of interconnecting green space as a way of reshaping the community, much as the famed Emerald Necklace of parks shapes the city of Boston. It marks the rough locations for new community centers and local parks in areas now lacking them. It also identifies publicly owned ecological lands, now largely inaccessible, that could serve as hubs of new Eco-Zones -- networks of small parks and greenways linked to surrounding neighborhoods.

Canals, paths and roadway corridors are delineated to form an interconnected network of green and blue linkages all across Miami-Dade.

EARLY VISION

In doing so, the parks department has come full circle to its original 1929 mission of beautifying roadways, a time when the county's winter population peaked at just 143,000. In 50 years, that number could hit four million.

As the county grew, the department's mission rapidly evolved. Founding Superintendent A.D. Barnes oversaw the development of Crandon Park, Matheson Hammock and other regional parks that today form the backbone of the system. But relatively little parkland has been added during the past 25 years, even as suburban development exploded to the west, eating away at open space and stripping the landscape of shade.

One result, Kardys said, is that parks in western suburbs are focused on athletic fields, leaving outlying communities disconnected from natural areas more easily accessible along the coast.

But with land for sprawling new regional parks increasingly unavailable or unaffordable, the parks department turned to the concept of the linear park or greenway -- a landscaped path, usually paved, that links parks or runs along roadways and waterways.

The aim is to reduce the need to drive while bringing attractive spaces and pathways closer to people.

"If they're designed properly, if you put the right stuff in place, they're going to use it," Kardys said. "Everybody is oriented toward the car. It's the model we have followed for too long."

Some of the first projects will cater to bicyclists, who have been among the plan's biggest supporters.

A key element is the loop that would link the county's two national parks -- and eventually, Biscayne Bay to Florida Bay -- by converting rocky canal and road rights-of-way to accommodate both bikers and hikers.

The county has set aside \$4.5 million for the first 3.7-mile leg leading from Old Cutler Road to the entrance of Biscayne National Park, a route already popular with weekend cyclists. Work is expected to begin in the next few years.

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