

MADE IN WPB, a City on the Move | The Sequel

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PHOTOS: ADDIEL PERERA

Lots of things have happened since my West Palm Beach Magazine digital story *West Palm Beach: A City on the Move* was released in the summer of 2018. A worldwide pandemic, for one.

The outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic caused an economic shock three times more devastating than the 2008 financial crisis. It spread like a wildflower, causing the deaths of almost 6.8 million deaths worldwide. In the spring of 2020, half of humanity was put on lockdown as a result of the threat posed by the disease. Businesses and schools were closed and borders were closed.

It seems impossible to imagine that only three years after a significant unpleasant event, West Palm Beach has seen explosive economic growth. This is mainly due to the influx of people and capital that has come into the area. It very quickly changed the dynamic of where the city was headed as we continued with

former Mayor Jeri Muoio's plan to keep this city on the move.

"We already had a lot of interest and investments coming in, but it took on a whole new level post-pandemic, particularly with the flood of New Yorkers who have been investing in the area," explained Armando Fana, Assistant City Administrator for the City of West Palm Beach. "I think a lot of that had to do with folks who were here during the pandemic's difficult moments and decided to stay here and leave New York for a while."

Fana refers to the snowbirds who went past the normal season and stayed through the summer of 2020. They realized that the quality of life here surpassed everything else, even Florida's summer heat.

Under Construction

In 2021 and 2022, there was a big rush in construction, Fana observed. The City's building permits and site approvals reached skyrocketing levels during this

time, shattering previous records even during the last boom. So, what's the huge interest in West Palm Beach?

We will come to that in a moment, but Fana said, "In terms of public investment, right before the pandemic hit, the City had the initiative to get a park bond approved for \$30 million. Obviously, we didn't know the pandemic was going to happen, but over 75% of the residents voted in favor of the park bond."

Since then, the City has embarked on an effort to update our parks, particularly Curry Park in the Northwood Village area. Along with Dyer Park on Haverhill Road and Gaines Park on Australian Avenue, Curry stands to gain bonds set aside for \$8 million. That security allowed the city to leverage about another \$17 million in state and federal grants, bringing that sum to about \$25 million to spend on Curry Park. That's great news for our city, as Curry is one of the few parks that sit on the water's edge in



The Square (previously known as CityPlace and Rosemary Square) has become a dynamic shopping, dining, and entertainment destination with a focus on community events and an elevated quality of life for all.



The recently opened Icon Marina Village offers the best of waterfront living, combining the convenience of rentals with the impeccable service and luxury more commonly associated with high-end condominiums. The interior also includes designs by V Starr, an award winning South Florida based interior design company founded by tennis superstar Venus Williams.

From left to right: Jorge Perez, Keith James (Mayor of West Palm Beach), Steve Patterson, and Arturo Pena at the swanky new apartment tower at the water's edge in West Palm Beach. Perez, who has been entrusting day-to-day operations to his two eldest sons John Paul and Nick, sees significant growth in West Palm Beach, especially north of the city.



Palm Beach County. This park has spectacular views of Palm Beach Island on the other side.

“The only drawback is, because we’re using federal and state dollars, there are a lot of strings attached and environmental requirements that come attached to it,” said Fana, explaining why this initiative is taking a lot longer to get the project started.

Already entering the full design phase, the City expects to break ground on the actual construction by the end of this year after getting all the permits in place. This includes permits to renovate the sea wall through the intercoastal. This requires the long permitting process and approval of the Army Corps of Engineers, and the revamp of its neighboring streets in Northwood Village.

Revamping the North End

New York has Greenwich Village; West Palm Beach has Northwood Village. And each has its artists, poets, and peasants. A combination of the past and present with landmarks and breathtaking cityscapes. For years, West Palm’s village residents and business owners have identified this as “the bohemian side of the city” (a phrase coined by WPB Magazine in 2011), filled with a European and artistic ambiance, but also racked with high crime and drug-related incidents nearby. Unfortunately, this has pushed people away and caused some business owners to close shop.

While some improvements occurred throughout the years here and there, no real progress had been made until now. Not surprisingly, with a vision to build beautiful places and renovate urban

spaces is Argentine-American Jorge Perez, CEO of The Related Group, a real estate development company he started in 1979.

Known as the “Condo King,” the son of Cuban parents has overseen the development of at least 80,000 condos, mostly in the Miami area. In our city, he is widely known as the real estate wizard behind CityPlace [A.K.A. Rosemary Square, and now The Square]. He’s doing it again in Northwood Village and in other parts of the north end side of town.

“We visualize where growth is going and make long-term decisions based on where we think the city and society at large are going to be,” explained Perez as he proudly looked out at his latest creation: Icon Marina Village, a two-tower luxury apartment complex located at 4444 North Flagler Drive, overlooking the intercoastal, and roughly a mile from Curry Park.

“Curry Park needs to become a park again,” he added. “But in order for that to happen, we have to have a solution for those people who are homeless and live there. The solution is not just to provide them a shelter or a bed, because they will leave the shelter and the bed. So, this is an issue that we love to work with cities to solve. We like to invest in communities because the better the city is, the better that you do, and future generations will do.”

As a true South Floridian, Perez resides in Miami but has an apartment in Palm Beach. He comes to Palm Beach quite a bit, he said, as he has many friends in both West Palm Beach and Palm Beach. “We have made a commitment to the City of West Palm Beach, and we’re talking to Mayor Keith James and his wife Lorna and some of the commissioners to see how we can improve the standard of living in this beautiful city.”

Celebrating Perez’s two-tower beauty, Mayor James said during the Icon Marina Village grand opening ceremony in March, “What we have here is the result of Jorge’s incredible leadership. When we see projects like this become real, it is very special for our community. What I love about these projects is that the neighborhood is not stopping. Related is creating these wonderful buildings because they are committed to our community. And my commitment to the City of West Palm Beach is to bring opportunity to all.”

Expanding the City

When you look at West Palm Beach, it doesn’t appear that it has much more space to grow, particularly east of I-95. But if you look at The Square, who knew that would become the city’s gathering hot spot? Perez did.

Because of its central location, he knew that it would become the center of the city. And it really has. On the one side, you have Clematis Street, which continues to be the city’s Main Street. It has become the place where people go to walk around, dine, or see a play. It’s where the community gathers on Saturday mornings at the GreenMarket or at Clematis by Night on Thursday nights. At The Square, there’s a plethora of events, pop shops, dining, and live entertainment, and The Related Group has filled it with residential spaces all around. A thriving place to live, work, and play.

One apartment building under construction and receiving lots of attention is the old Macy’s department store building. As part of a negotiation between former Mayor Muoio and Related, this 30-unit project is set to become a workforce housing complex, with other affordable housing projects that are in pre-development stages.

When Perez looked at the site where Icon Marina Village was built in the Northwood Village area, he also looked at other sites on the water, quickly realizing that there are not much more waterfront

spots left around Palm Beach County or even around southeast Florida. Anything that’s on the intercoastal or the ocean that is fairly priced, he and his team are jumping on it.

“Walkability continues to be extremely important,” he said. “People don’t want to drive their cars for an hour or an hour and a half to go anywhere. They want to be near a family restaurant or a bar. They want to be near the excitement, which translates to the downtown area. A place where people shop, ride their bikes, or go for a run or walk, living without the constant use of an automobile.”

“Northwood Village has good bones,” added Perez. “And while there’s been a decline over time because of crime and houses being rundown by their owners, I can tell you, ten years from now, the Village will be unrecognizable. You’re already seeing the change. Young couples are buying houses, moving in, and redoing them, and they’re doing it at prices that in the future will be unaffordable. So, we look at those things, and where the growth is, and then explore the neighborhood’s dynamics.”

A city on the move needs people like Perez, who sees himself and The Related Group not merely as building builders, but as community builders. They have bought two more pieces of land that rest on six acres near Transit Village, where more than one million square feet of new construction has already started. Once finished, Transit

Village will offer easy access to the nearby historic West Palm Beach train station. The 986 apartments are spread across three high-rise buildings, 40 of which are set aside for workforce housing, and 165 micro-apartments are offered at below-market rates.

Culture, Housing & Community

For a city with a multicultural dynamic, most especially in the Hispanic, European, and American African cultures, The Related Group has committed to bringing a 6000-piece art collection with particularly strong Hispanic, Latin American, and African American art, with very strong Latina artists.

Keep in mind, Palm Beach is 25% Latin and 33% African American. So those percentages are probably going to grow with time. “We need to serve all the community here, and I think art presents beautiful pieces that make people proud of their culture,” said Perez. “We are working with the city to bring great art and exhibitions and maybe even working with the Norton Museum to do some joint exhibits. For us, it’s not about how we build this project or that project, and how it’s doing extremely well, which of course, it’s important to us. But it’s much more than that. It’s about how we benefit the community.”

Much like Perez’s vision, West Palm Beach is a city devoted to its people. Quality of life and housing represent a large portion

of that. Perez, who started as an urban planner in Little Havana in Miami, and not as a businessman, has a passion for changing neighborhoods that are lower income. This passion helps those who don’t have the means to afford housing attain the American dream.

A home is the most significant thing that you have, he says. “It’s what makes you so proud. It’s what helps you raise children the right way. A home is much more important than the blocks in the home. And the neighborhood around it adds to the full picture and to the stability of the home.”

As this publication went to press, the City was heavy on construction plans and permits, providing redevelopments of mixed commercial and residential

areas in the surrounding areas of Northwood Village, particularly in the Broadway corridor.

Plugged with wildly overgrown lawns, crumbling buildings, art installations made from scrap metal, and garbage soaring in unsafe surrounding streets, Broadway is Northwood Village’s eyesore.

“We’ve had long discussions and we finally got approval from the Department of Transportation to redo all of Broadway in two phases,” said Fana. “From the south end to 45th Street is the first phase, and from 45th Street going north is the second phase.”

In the coming months, people can expect some slowing down of traffic. However, that’s just

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The Northwood Historic District is a funky bohemian “village” full of interesting antique shops, local retailers, art galleries, and cafes. The area is slated for a remarkable transformation.

part of the beautification efforts. These include sidewalk widening, upgraded lighting, and better aesthetics for a safer environment. This will change the Broadway corridor dynamics over time.

“We’re also embarking on an effort to rezone Broadway to allow for some additional flexibility and density in that area,” explained Fana. “It will create a good balance between the residential neighborhoods found on both sides—the east and west sides of Broadway.”

According to Fana, the design of the first phase of the Broadway corridor streetscape project will commence this summer, with plans to start construction sometime in 2025. This beautification will take a few years to complete, of course, but already we’re seeing investors developing on the corner of Broadway and 33rd Street. The 22-townhome complex is just one of the developments under construction—a very promising start to the beginning of the much-anticipated improvement to the north end area.

What’s Next in Entertainment?

For a city to be the right place to live and work, there’s also the need for fun places to explore and be entertained. Aside from Sunfest, the Palm Beach Boat Show, Clematis by Night, and The Square’s line of lively events, locals are asking, what else is there?

“That’s a great question,” exclaimed Fana. “One of the things that’s already under way is a waterfront playground area near the great lawn in downtown West Palm

The Ben, part of the acclaimed Marriott Autograph Collection, has elevated West Palm Beach's lifestyle to an entirely new level since day one with its downtown's only water-facing rooftop lounge and swimming pool.

Beach so that we don't have kids running into Flagler."

Along with the Downtown Development Authority office, the City is also planning to activate more spaces for special events. For the next few months, on Friday nights, City Hall's large courtyard will be transformed into a dance floor of sorts. If you love Latin music but don't know how to salsa dance, here's your chance to take a lesson! And if dancing is not your thing, perhaps playing games like chess or dominoes is?

For local musicians, the City offers them a platform in an open space, where they can share their music throughout the downtown area. Artists are encouraged to visit their site, wpb.org, and submit their permit requests. This exposure creates a win-win situation, both for the artists who want to promote their bands and the people who get to listen to and be entertained by their music outdoors.

Writers can also find their niche by plugging into the Mandel Public Library of West Palm Beach on Clematis Street. Their book festivals and other storytelling initiatives, such as the Short Story



Dispenser are great draws. These stand-alone kiosks found around the downtown area invite authors to submit their West Palm Beach-related short stories, which then deliver their fiction to the public, breathing new life into the art of storytelling.

Our Legacy

In my first piece, one of the last things I wrote about was the plans for the site on the corner of Banyan and Flagler. It read, "Now under construction—to be completed by 2019—a 208-room Marriott Autograph Collection hotel, 251 live-work apartments, 20,234 square feet of retail space, 6,000 to 7,000 square feet of waterfront restaurant space with indoor and outdoor dining, a 483-space parking garage, a public park with outdoor art, an event lawn and a

3,000-square-foot observation deck 42 feet high, allowing views of the marina and Intracoastal Waterway."

Of course, I was talking about the \$145 million development by local architect and developer, Frank Navarro, managing principal of Navarro Lowrey, Inc. He brought us The Ben, Autograph Collection Hotel and his project gave way to Elisabetta's Ristorante and other commercial spaces people enjoy.

Moving forward, everybody, from the City to the investors, and the community at large, seems to share the same sentiment: we need to replicate the things made in West Palm Beach with the greatest care, quality of standard, and commitment. After all, it is not only for us but more importantly, for those who come after us.