

## CNU X Plenary

Opening Session  
June 14, 2002

### ***South Florida: a Rehearsal for America*** **Curtis W. Johnson**

Remember the year 2000? Back when we turned the corner on the century and we all thought *computers* were the terror that might do us in? Well, my colleague, Neal Peirce, and I spent the equivalent of about 4 months in 2000 in the three urbanized counties of South Florida. With support from the Knight Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation and the Collins Center for Public Policy, we interviewed hundreds of people, logged a couple thousand often-dangerous miles, and collected a file cabinet full of reports. We were looking for the region's biggest strategic challenges. The result was a series of articles, published over four successive November and December Sundays in the Miami *Herald* and the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel*. We had the high honor of beginning our work during the frenzy over Elian Gonzales and then publishing under the surreal shadows of hanging chads and choking election judges, a metaphor of sorts for the region; surprises are routine experiences here.

We have done these Citistates Reports now in 21 American regions. Let me tell you: Nothing – absolutely nothing – compares with South Florida!

As a writer who came here to look, listen, and figure out what was real, I have a radical assertion: this region is America's most fascinating, fastest-changing urban laboratory. It is as much a window on America's urban demographic future as it is a contemporary museum of suburbia. South Florida is where *suburban* is slouching toward *urban*.

Problems drape over South Florida's shoulders like the perpetual humidity. Pick your own top tough issues, and I guarantee you they are here, in significant scale, and usually in your face by 9 a.m. Look more closely though, and you also see a region of immense opportunities – especially to demonstrate how to graduate from islands of disconnected suburbia to a chain of interconnected communities.

Interview people in Miami and you'll hear about 60-somethings packing up the yellow golf pants and heading to Vero Beach. And in the next minute you'll be talking to someone, usually younger, who's moved here for the buzz, the edginess, who gets a charge from the sheer velocity of change. Someone eager to tell you that after tasting South Florida, living someplace else would be bland, boring.

You noticed, surely, getting off the plane, that you were in an international zone – evoking one of the best tag lines about Miami – that it's such a great city because it's so *near* the United States.

With 70 percent of contemporary growth coming from international immigration, no region is as challenged as this one to figure out what “community” now means.

This cauldron of colliding cultures produces a lot of political theater, but, again, look more closely, and you also see hundreds of ethnic and cultural festivals with a rising percentage of crossover attendance. Still, Robert Putnam may reel in horror over the social capital scene, but Richard Florida (the Pittsburgh-based professor and author of the *Rise of the Creative Class*) should love it. Step out the door right here on to Lincoln Road,

or up and down Collins Avenue. See the let-it-all-hang out bohemians, the proudly gay, the David Brooks' "Bobos in Paradise" – all mixing it up. See weirdness as wonderful. See serious scientists and techies, including those engineers with pocket-protecting pen-holders – showing up where there are people so unlike them. Observe how much they value concentrations of talent of any sort; note that they like diversity, prefer tolerance. They're not looking for casual clothing policies, or bring-your-dog-to-work days, or Jolt Colas in the office fridge. They are chasing flexibility and the assurance they are living in a great place.

But – and this is crucial -- South Florida is literally running out of land and water. If there's not a recurrence of ferocious hurricanes that slowed growth in the 1920s, demographers say 50 percent more people, another two and a half million, will be here by 2030.

Check out a nighttime satellite photo. You'll see that virtually all the land between the ocean and the Everglades is now urbanized. The open spaces not reserved for chasing a small white ball are largely agricultural, and there's a big debate about the future of farming in south Miami-Dade and western Palm Beach counties.

As you know, previous generations here tinkered massively with Mother Nature's plumbing system with a tortuous tangle of canals designed to control flooding, causing billions of gallons of fresh water to end up in the ocean every year. Result: not enough water for the emerging population. The opportunity side: the nation's largest environmental restoration project ever: at a projected cost of \$8 billion. What happens next is worth watching. South Florida's economy will either wither from too little water or be one of the few American regions with real control over its water destiny.

With land supply shrinking, many local developers, who collectively produced suburban form you might think of as "dense sprawl," now contemplate the glories of Orlando, and other regions with more land to plunder. The creative, place-committed ones, such as Tim Hernandez of New Urban Communities, are learning the gentler, more complex arts of urban redevelopment.

This will not be easy. The deck is still stacked against it most places. We heard the story while here from Jaime Correa and Eric Valle (architects well known in the CNU community) of the commission they had in Coral Gables to identify the most admired properties and derive an implied zoning code. They found that the 40 most admired Coral Gables buildings and homes would be illegal under today's bloated code of prohibited practices, that a code friendly to these properties would have required only about 13 pages.

So, here in the home of some of New Urbanism's best-known leaders, the world capital for the practice of charrettes (the term itself a fascinating transformation from a name for art carts at the Sorbonne into a major-league means of learning to love NIMBYs), right here is the best laboratory you'll find for moving from suburban to urban. This transformation is not only South Florida's best choice, it's the only remaining one.

Then there is transportation. Traffic in South Florida is well beyond being just a problem. It is a ruthless, rampaging threat to productivity, it erodes personal sanity, and it's poised to undermine the strategic advantage of having three seaports and three airports. Traffic consistently tops all local political polling for frustration and worry.

Just as so many new suburban developments get named for the natural resource sacrificed for their construction, you'll notice around here a tendency to name freeways with some

soft, pastel, sultry-breezes-evoking terms like Dolphin and Palmetto. Go drive them. They're nightmares all day long. Talk to the transportation department, as we did, and they'll tell you it feels dangerous because truck traffic, especially on the interstates, (so vital to the international cargo sector of the economy) exceeded design limits in the mid-90s; has doubled since, and is forecasted to double again by the mid-point of this decade. And check this: you will find no senior transportation official clinging to the notion that more roads will solve the problem.

Do the math and you see why. Just the next million people will require 37 square miles of additional asphalt to park their vehicles. (The equivalent of paving over from the beach inland a half miles deep all the way from Miami to Boca Raton) And should one in six new drivers venture out during peak periods, the region will need another 1300 lane miles of interstate and up to ten times that for more regular roads. We suggested a new South Florida parlor game: pass out regional maps with string for roads and chips for parking. Find an acceptable place to add all this road and parking capacity. Within a few minutes you and your guests discover, like the transportation secretaries we interviewed, *you can't do it.*

Henry Flager opened up the southeast coast of Florida in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with a rail line and fancy hotels. Julia Tuttle talked him into extending the line through the swamps to the Miami River. But it was the car culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that made South Florida.

And now, to keep its success story alive, this region must build an alternative mobility system.

The pieces of one are scattered all around this region, the most visible of which is TriRail – a 72 mile north-south commuter train, jointly financed by all three counties, now working on double-tracking the entire route to improve headways. There are separate bus systems in each county, and Miami-Dade has several lines of Metrorail, an eight and a half mile busway, and a circulator for downtown. Trouble is, these pieces are largely not connected, not coordinated, and not as concerned with customers as with political control. The mayor of Miami-Dade county wants at least a half cent to add 90 miles to Metrorail and expand that county's bus service over the next 20 years.

But the traffic is not county-contained. And there are no solutions that are not regional, and there will be no regional solution without a regional politics. And while this is not the Mideast, it *is* messy. (If this confuses you, I commend you to another of those Andres Duany lectures, this one on the tenacity of Latin politics). Business, which comes closest to recognizing regional realities, is pushing hard for organizing a serious regional transportation authority. South Florida, if it ever were to act like a real region, would have substantial political clout. Its representatives account for 40 percent of the Florida legislature. Not to mention access to federal funds. (I know that the accepted wisdom is that "a bird in hand is worth two behind the bush," but what if there are two Bushes? Think about it.)

And even a regional solution is no answer if it's not saturated in a culture of customers. Because, essentially, transit is no different from Target or Nordstrom's. It's a retail thing. The trick is to produce an experience that people would actually want to have again, maybe every day.

Finally, if you wander about while here, spend some time on U.S. 1, which snakes up the entire coastline, linking a chain of communities. This is the proving ground for South Florida's future. People have known this for at least 10 years; the state has a program

around it called Eastward Ho. It is the zone already urban, but begging for redevelopment. It is the only hope for absorbing more people.

Today, with only a few exceptions, it's one long eyesore. In the carpet-bombing rhetoric of author Jim Kunstler, U.S. 1 is "a chaos of gigantic, lurid plastic signs, golden arches, red-and-white striped revolving chicken buckets, cinder-block warehouses, discount marts, asphalt deserts and a horizon slashed by utility poles." It ain't pretty.

What if it looked more like Las Olas Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale, or Atlantic in Del Ray Beach, or Hollywood Boulevard in Hollywood, or Clematis Street in West Palm. Nobody uses it for long trips anyway, we said. Put a little Prozac in Florida DOT's coffee and reduce U.S. 1 to a single lane each way, with median curb cuts for left turns; add exclusive transit lanes and curb parking, broaden the sidewalks, zone it for mixed use. As Victor Dover of Dover-Kohl and Michael Busha of the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council have already discovered: some communities are ready to do this. The media and entertainment shops, already spilling out of South Beach over into Miami will run right up the coast, along with the Internet Coast start-ups, spurred by the new Network Access Points in Miami. This new urban environment would not grab everybody, but why would it not attract immigrants in affordable housing near service jobs, empty nesters looking for proximity and escaping the traffic, young professionals with an eye for a place to find work, home, great restaurants and everyday shopping.

So, if you're not from here, here's some advice. Before you board that plane, find time to take a break from the seductions of South Beach. Drive up U.S. 1. Imagining a long, linear laboratory for the New Urbanism should prove more exciting than catching yourself on Ocean Drive cleaning your rose-colored glasses. For those of you who are South Floridians, God love you. You're already living the future.