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Overtown

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Community Background Report

Overtown

County

Miami-Dade

Boundaries

North: Northwest 20th Street

South: Northwest 5th Street

West: Interstate 95

East: Florida East Coast (FEC) Railway and NW 1st Avenue

Community Type

Neighborhood

History

Overtown is a neighborhood encompassing approximately 120 blocks just north and west of downtown Miami, totaling 0.2 square miles. Its boundaries run from Northwest 5th Street to the south to Northwest 20th Street to the north, and extend west to Northwest 7th Avenue and east to the FEC Railway.

Overtown is recognized as one of the oldest black communities in Miami. Like other older neighborhoods in southeast Florida, its origins can be tied directly to Henry Flagler's efforts to extend train traffic to southeast Florida. Black railroad workers came to Miami, taking up residency in one of the few areas designated for black living by segregationist Miami. This area was then called "Colored Town" and came to flourish during the black renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s.

From its segregation from the rest of Miami, Overtown grew as a center of cultural, religious, business and civic activity where churches were established and schools were built. Businesses located near the edge of, and within, Overtown prospered and the community published an alternative perspective newspaper, the "Miami Times."

Through the 1950s and early 1960s Overtown's economic activity remained relatively stable. Civil rights were increasingly recognized in Miami and blacks were more comfortable moving into suburban neighborhoods further north and west of the city center. Then, during the early

1960s state highway engineers, planners and consultants routed Interstate 95 through Overtown, replacing the densely settled area with massive transportation structures. Later, State Road 836 (the Dolphin Expressway) further divided the two parts of Overtown into four. The previous landmarks forming Overtown's boundaries were eclipsed in their significance and no longer acknowledged as relevant to neighborhood transition. The interchange of expressways, standing some 30 feet or more above ground and visible from miles away, became the most obvious structure defining Overtown.

Through the 1970s and 1980s Overtown's population declined and housing in the area suffered from neglect. Area businesses moved out of the area or suffered from a loss of clientele. After a series of riots during the 1980s renewed efforts were garnered to improve the living conditions in many of Miami's black neighborhoods. Strategies focused on encouraging business growth by backing loans and creating tax incentives. In the mid 1980s the Miami Arena opened its doors to the public and shortly after new high-rise apartments were built. Today the Miami Arena has been raised and replaced by the American Airlines Arena just a few blocks further east along with a trend of neighborhood development of high-rise developments.

Community Dynamics

Overtown has several registered historic buildings, including the Lyric Theater (819 NW 2nd Avenue), the Dorsey House (250 NW 9th Street), the Bethel AME Church (245 NW 8th Street) and Halissee Hall (1700 NW 10th Avenue).

Overtown residents are skeptical of plans toward development as many believe the parties steering development ultimately wish to uproot longtime residents or target Overtown as the place holding conduit, which enables the transportation of people and goods to other locations. Though the residents of Overtown are relatively few, the congregation of historic churches (Central Baptist, Bethel AME and Mt. Zion Baptist Church) is large as is the voice of these congregations, the alumni of area schools and other parties interested in local black history.

Due to the reconstruction of Interstate 395, the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) has opened an office in Overtown inviting residents to access state plans. Residents have also been vocal about the Port Tunnel project and how it could affect the area as freight moves through Overtown from the Port of Miami to Interstate 95.

It is highly suggested that any large scale transportation or development project being considered in Overtown should request the input of the following organizations: Power U Center for Social Change, Poinciana Village Condo Association, Central Baptist Church, Bethel AME Church, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Overtown International Longshoreman, Overtown Merchants Association, Overtown Empowerment Zone, Overtown Advisory Board, Overtown Civic Partnership and the YWCA as well as consult with the Black Archives.

Demographic Highlights

According to the 2000 Census, 82% of households were built before 1970 and the population of residents to be between seven and ten thousand with the following demographics:

- About 90% of residents are black and 4% of the population is below the age of 18.
- 27% of households are headed by women with children under 18 years of age.
- One percent of the population is over 65 years of age.
- Of persons aged 25 and over, nearly 55% have not received their high school diplomas. This is a significantly larger percentage of poorly educated adults than the norm in Miami-Dade County.
- There is a 22% unemployment rate.
- There are approximately 3,600 households with a median income of \$13,212.
- 46% of these households have an income below \$12,000, which is one of the highest rates of family poverty in the county at 49%.
- Only 13% of occupied housing units are owner occupied.
- Residents are also more likely to receive federal and state assistance toward medical and nutritional needs and other temporary assistance than are county residents as a whole.

Business Landscape

Overtown's commercial corridors are Northwest 2nd and 3rd Avenues. The Northwest 3rd Avenue corridor was designated in 1998 by the City of Miami Commission as "The Historic Overtown Priority Business Corridor." Since then investment in façade improvements have begun to make a transformation in the look and feel of this commercial corridor. In addition, the Miami Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) has made some improvements to the Overtown area in and around Northwest 3rd Avenue over the past 10 years. The most significant project the CRA has completed in the past several years is to provide infrastructure and support for the Club District and the Technology Center of the Americas, otherwise known as the

Network Access Point (NAP), next to the old Miami Arena. Of the five recent projects completed by the CRA, four are parking lots along Northwest 3rd Avenue.

The proposed “Folklife Village” is envisioned as a mixed-use marketplace covering the two blocks between Northwest 2nd and 3rd Avenues and Northwest 9th and 10th Streets with the boundaries encompassing the historic core of Overtown. Within this core were a number of historic properties including the Lyric Theater, the Ward Rooming House, the Johnson X-Ray Clinic, the Dorsey House and the Cola-Nip Building. The redevelopment vision calls for the reconstruction of structures that were demolished or have fallen into disrepair and their adaptive reuse for commercial and cultural purposes. Design standards that reflect the character of the area for new construction and streetscape element are under development. In addition a "Jazz Walk of Fame", sculpture garden and rehearsal and studio spaces have been proposed for the area.

Crosswinds Communities of Michigan, a private developer, has proposed building what has been dubbed Downtown Overtown, which would be a 1,300 to 1,500-unit mixed-income, residential development on mostly government-owned lots in central Overtown surrounding the Lyric Theatre. Part of the proposal calls for 200 of the units to be affordable housing, of which 50 would be available to current Overtown residents. The project would also include a commercial component that would be made up of tens of thousands of feet of mixed use space at street level. The development would fill most of the vacant land at the neighborhood’s historic heart and is considered the largest private redevelopment project in Overtown’s history. The project is pending a resolution of a lawsuit over development rights stemming from the existing Poinciana Village condominiums.

The Overtown Transit Village (OTV) is the site of a new Miami-Dade County office building (341,000 square feet), retail space, and a large parking garage adjacent to the Overtown/Lyric Theater Metrorail Station. Nearly 1,800 employees work in the OTV.

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