

# Final Report

## The Historical Impacts of Transportation Projects on the Overtown Community

Prepared by

Institute of Government

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for the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)

of Miami-Dade County

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Available on request from the Black Archives, History & Research Foundation of South Florida, Inc.,  
or from the Institute of Government at Florida International University.



# Executive Summary and Major Recommendations

*Prepared by Milan Dluhy*

## 1. Background

The objective of this study was to assess the extent to which the Overtown area has been historically affected by major transportation projects and to suggest possible mitigation measures that would help preserve its integrity as a viable neighborhood and community in the future.

An interdisciplinary team of public administration/public policy analysts, economists, historians and planners from FIU in conjunction with a sub-contractor, the Black Archives, completed a comprehensive analysis. The team reviewed and evaluated all previous studies of Overtown and government documents and newspaper stories related to transportation projects affecting Overtown dating back to 1950. In addition, we collected and analyzed historical census and business information on Overtown. The project team also interviewed key decision-makers involved in the policy process connected to these projects. The Black Archives interviewed 56 former and current residents of Overtown to document the public's perception of the impacts. Finally, the project team completed a less comprehensive review of the impacts of transportation projects dating back to 1950 in Atlanta, Jacksonville, Nashville, New Orleans and Tampa in order to compare the experiences of these areas with Overtown.

## 2. Conclusions

The major conclusions of the study are indicated below but the reader is encouraged to read the individual Chapters in the Report for a more detailed discussion of the key points.

2.1 Transportation and Urban Renewal Projects had a Major Impact on the Decline of the Overtown Community. The historical review presented in this study of I-95, SR 836/I-395, Metrorail, Metromover, and Urban Renewal demonstrates that these projects taken together have had a devastating impact on the Overtown area and largely destroyed a once viable and stable African American Community. At the time most of these projects were being implemented (the period of 1965-70), the larger community thought that these projects were positive and progressive. For example, many outside of Overtown believed that these projects would revive the downtown area, eliminate some of the worst housing in Miami-Dade County, speed workers and tourists to and from the downtown central business district, and allow the downtown business area to expand (see Chapter 4). While many of these changes did take place, the larger South Florida community has never acknowledged to any great extent the damage done to Overtown because of these projects. Until recently, there has been little interest in taking corrective action even though numerous studies completed back to



1971 have urged direct government intervention in Overtown to either slow its fall or later to revitalize it.

This study carefully documents (especially in Chapters 1, 2, and 3) and presents a scenario about the impacts that these projects have had on Overtown. The most important aspects of this scenario are as follows.

In 1950, Overtown contained 45% of the African American population in Dade County with a thriving central commercial area (see Chapter 2). Most historians and researchers described the community as self-contained and autonomous. For many in the African American community, it was a source of pride and this overall positive perception continues until today. In 1960, Overtown reached its peak in population with close to 33,000 and its business community, although already in modest decline, had 318 business establishments representing a diverse mix (see Chapter 1). After the projects analyzed in this study were completed about 1970, the Overtown area reached a bottom from which it has never recovered.

For example, the expressways and urban renewal directly displaced close to 12,000 people and another 4830 moved out during the decade of the 1960s for other reasons. In sum, from 1960 to 1970, Overtown lost 51.2% of its population and 33% of its businesses. In 1970, 15,935 or only 8.4% of the African American population in Dade County remained in Overtown and the area's significance and commercial importance had been seriously changed (see Chapter 2).

2.2 Overtown's Internal Circulation System was Disconnected and the Community's Decline Accelerated After the Projects were Completed. In addition to these major population and business displacements, the community's internal circulation system was left in shambles, the dead and useless space under the expressway structures became a wasteland and haven for undesirable people and uses, and the few home owners in the area were largely gone with home ownership dropping from 12% to 5% between 1950 and 1970. The community continued to lose population and businesses well into the 1990s.

Today, Overtown has one of the highest poverty rates and worst (and cheapest) housing in Miami-Dade County. The population is now just under 8000 and there are only 41 businesses left (in 1950, there were 389). Only 2% of the African American population in Miami-Dade County resides there and 32.3% of the population live in either public housing or government-subsidized housing (see Chapter 2).

2.3 Overtown's Decline Actually Began About a Decade Before the Transportation and Urban Renewal Projects were Completed. The exodus of more prosperous and mobile African Americans out of Overtown began right after the Second World War. Census information shows out migration of residents into areas like Liberty City, Brownsville, and Edison and other areas north and west of Overtown was already well underway as housing opportunities for African Americans became available largely because of the Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration mortgage programs. This outward movement into what historians called the second ghetto was never reversed and Overtown



considerably better over the 1950-1990 period in terms of stability and positive social/economic growth than the areas impacted by transportation projects.

The comparative analysis also revealed that the projects in the 1960s involved little public participation, expressway impact mitigation actions were superficial, and attention to the impacted areas has been only very recent. Thirty-five years ago, the environmental justice requirement of extensive public participation was not required, though planners were compelled to seek some community input. Often, the standard public participation policy was not effective and disempowered groups were largely unheard. Thus, the impacts of these projects were almost always negative on the minority neighborhoods and none of these areas have appreciably revitalized over the last 30 years.

In sum, policy makers in these cities made mistakes in launching expressway construction and urban renewal and they took no immediate action to correct these mistakes. Reinvestment and direct intervention in the impacted areas decades after the projects were completed now seems to be of some interest in all comparison cities, although major redevelopment of these neighborhoods is now only in the beginning phases.

2.5 Former Residents of Overtown Uniformly Condemn Public Officials for Past Project Actions and do not Trust them Regarding Future Actions. Interviews completed by the Black Archives and reported upon in Chapter 4 document the views of a segment of the African American community toward the decline of Overtown. A majority of those interviewed had moved out of Overtown many years ago. There is a clear consensus among this "community in exile" that they would like to see Overtown flourish again and at least have a portion of it serve as an historic area for African Americans in South Florida. Many of those interviewed still attend church in the area and are supportive of economic revitalization.

Also, this group uniformly condemns past public actions in this area and even questions the motivations of the past decision makers responsible for these projects. There is considerable distrust of past and present decision-makers in the transportation area and a strong desire among most to have their hometown—a place founded by their parents and grandparents—revived. They describe the Overtown of the past as a "city within a city" where the bonds of community were strong. No other area in Miami-Dade County seems to have the same meaning for African Americans.

2.6 Overtown Can Never Regain Its Past Glories; It is a Different Place with a Different Population Today. Yet Positive Change Needs to Occur and the Reinvestment Cycle Started Again. It is difficult to foresee the future of Overtown although studies and plans cited in Chapter 6 have already made many concrete suggestions. Although the old Overtown, circa 1940s, will be difficult to re-create, a transformed and stable African/Caribbean community may be possible. Michael Porter, writing in the February 1997 Economic Development Quarterly makes a strong case for how to view the inner city neighborhoods of the future:

The best and only way to develop the economies of inner cities is to make them attractive and welcoming places in which to invest and do business, both for residents and non-residents.... There is a continuing, vital role for government in inner city economic development, a role focused not on direct intervention and heavy reliance



on operating subsidies to attract companies, but on creating a favorable environment for business and housing especially through upgrading the infra-structure.

The implication of this view is that all levels of government should focus on infrastructure improvements and make the area attractive for re-development purposes. At the heart of the revived Overtown could be the Folklife Village (between N.W. 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Streets and 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenues), but the rest of the area will very likely follow the broader economic development patterns already occurring in Miami, especially the revitalization of the downtown had Brickell Avenue areas.

### **3. Recommendations**

#### **3.1 General**

Any additional state transportation projects like state project number 87200-1532 (SR-836/I-395 from N.W. 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the MacArthur Causeway Bridge) will have to abide by the Environmental Justice guidelines. Executive Order 12898 signed by President Clinton in 1994 requires each federal agency to develop strategies to avoid disproportionately high and adverse impacts on minority and low income populations. Although this pending project will have only some small and very marginal impacts on Overtown, it would be helpful to Overtown if transportation authorities in South Florida recognized that previous projects have had some negative consequences and agreed to take some creative action within the limits of their respective resource capabilities. Below are a short list of transportation related projects that, if implemented, would demonstrate to the Overtown Community that the transportation authorities are willing to make up for some of their most serious mistakes of the past.

Since expressway projects are almost always going to affect low income, minority communities negatively, reinvestment or positive intervention should be taken at the time or shortly after these projects are completed. Allowing negatively impacted communities to go decades without corrective action or direct assistance is simply bad public policy.

#### **3.2 Transportation Related**

These recommendations emphasize what the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), the Miami-Dade County Commission, the City of Miami, and other transportation related authorities and agencies have some jurisdiction over. The overall goal of these recommendations is to improve the circulation system in Overtown and improve its physical appearance so that it becomes more attractive for current and future residents and businesses. The recommendations below are premised on reviving the hub of the commercial and historical community around the Folklife Village and the commercial areas on N.W. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenues and N.W. 14<sup>th</sup> Street. This area in the future will serve not only the current residents of the area but could also become a destination point for tourists and other people in South Florida.



- Improving Signage on the Perimeter of the Area.

The perimeter of Overtown needs to be highlighted using historical symbols and markers to enhance the gateway character and identity of the area. In addition, the signage should direct people to the heart of Overtown—the Folklife Village. In particular, there needs to be key points of entry and directions on the western boundary of N.W. 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue at 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> Streets. These streets are currently all through streets, although three of them, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> are one-way. If possible, all these cross streets should be made two-way to simplify the circulation system and make it easier to access Overtown from the west.

On the east side of Overtown, signage from 20<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> Street should be considered as well. The FEC railroad tracks form a natural boundary on the east and the signage should appear on these streets at this point as people cross the tracks into Overtown.

Finally, N.W. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenues on the northern boundary (at 20<sup>th</sup> Street) and along N.W. 5<sup>th</sup> Street on the southern boundary should be highlighted as well. A combination of historical markers and directional signs should be considered.

- Improving Signage on Exit Ramps.

Drivers exiting north and south from I-95, east from SR 836 and I-395, and west from I-395 should be directed to the Historical Folklife Village or tourist center and the main commercial districts on N.W. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenues and N.W. 14<sup>th</sup> Street. The current signage for the Miami Arena should be used as a model.

- Redesigning an Important Entrance Ramp.

The north entrance ramp to I-95 from N.W. 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue needs to be re-designed and N.W. 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue made a two-way street. The entrance ramp should be redesigned so that southbound NW 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue traffic can access the northbound on-ramp. This would further improve the circulation system and make the commercial area more accessible. Someone leaving the commercial area and going south now runs into a dead end street.

- Opening Up Dead End Streets.

There are a number of dead end streets under the expressway structures and the streets bordering the FEC railroad tracks. The feasibility of opening these streets should be examined to further improve circulation. Currently, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Streets dead end into I-95 and make it difficult for pedestrians and others on the east side of I-95 to have direct access to the Booker T. Washington School. The feasibility of putting a bike or pedestrian path from Douglas Elementary School under I-95 at about 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> Street should be examined. This would connect the two schools and the adjacent parks more directly.

In addition, on the east side of Overtown, 13<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 17<sup>th</sup> Streets dead end at the FEC railroad tracks. These streets should be re-opened to two-way traffic to further improve the circulation within the area.



- Connecting the Residential Area in Northeast Overtown More Directly with Booker T. Washington School.

There needs to be a walkway or bikeway and/or a pedestrian bridge that will allow residents and particularly children living in northeast Overtown to have more direct access to Booker T. Washington School. Currently, the midtown interchange does not allow this type of north-south access for residents. This recommendation would help to overcome some of the unnatural partitioning of the community since the interchange was built.

- Completing the Metromover Loop.

The feasibility of completing the Loop from the School Board Offices either south to the Government Center Station along the FEC tracks or southwest to the Overtown Shopping Center or westward to the Culmer Station should be examined. The purpose would be to fully connect the Metromover system which now excludes the northeastern portion of Overtown. The connection would facilitate the movement of Overtown workers to downtown jobs as well as to jobs north and west of Overtown.

- Improving the Physical Appearance and Safety Underneath the I-395 Structures.

Currently, the area underneath the I-395 structures from the midtown interchange to Biscayne Blvd. is an ugly and dangerous wasteland. Every effort should be made to develop a plan for either landscaping, filling (berm), or converting the space into commercial or recreational use. For example, a recent proposal for an African Stone Park is a possibility. Since this land is owned by the state, every attempt to make this space safe and productive should be a high priority. Additional landscaping and beautification at the midtown interchange is necessary especially at the major north/south and east/west arterial routes.

- Building More Exit and Entrance Ramps into Overtown.

The Florida Department of Transportation is currently considering changes to the SR 836/I-395 corridor under state project 87200-1532. To improve circulation in Overtown, every attempt should be made to make the Folklife Village and commercial area more accessible from the expressway. Accordingly, an exit ramp from I-95 going north at about N.W. 14<sup>th</sup> Street and an exit ramp from I-395 going west at about North Miami Avenue (or further west if feasible) which would connect through signage the 14<sup>th</sup> Street commercial area should be evaluated. An entrance ramp to I-95 going north at about N.W. 22nd Street and an entrance ramp from N.W. 12th Street to I-395 going east should also be considered. Along with the signage mentioned earlier, these changes would improve the circulation system. Changes in ramps would be more problematic according to F-DOT engineers for design and safety reasons.

- Increasing Retail Opportunities at the Culmer and the Arena Metro-Rail Stations.

Current usage of the Culmer Station is low and the amount of space devoted to empty parking lots is excessive. This space needs to be looked at again and other uses explored



particularly those with some commercial/retail potential. With the Miami Heat moving out of the present Arena in the near future, the NBA requirements for parking lots can be reassessed. The Arena is surrounded by dead space, some of which could be converted into either residential and/or commercial use. Safe walkways from the Arena station to the Folklife Village are necessary, especially if retail or residential uses replace some of the parking lots. Joint use development could occur around the Metrorail stations.

- Developing a Circulator Bus System for Overtown.

Although there are bus routes and private jitney services in the area, another very important way of improving the circulation patterns within Overtown would be to develop a special Circulator Bus System. The city of Miami Beach is now piloting an electric bus that travels a fixed route in the heavily congested South Beach area. In Overtown, the subsidized buses could serve a fixed route in the area and connect residents with jobs and retail areas in the adjacent downtown area like the Omni, the Port, the Jackson medical complex, Bayside and Flagler Street. The bus would operate in prime time hours and allow Overtown residents better access to the downtown area.

### 3.3 Economic Development Related

In addition, there are a number of recommendations about economic development below. There are many other groups as indicated in Chapters 6-8 who have already done a lot of work on economic development strategies. Since this study has emphasized transportation-related recommendations, we suggest only a few critical economic development approaches that need to be a part of any more comprehensive look at the Overtown area.

- Finding a New Use for the Miami Arena.

The city of Miami and its Sports Authority need to complete an adaptive re-use study of the Miami Arena. Once the Miami Heat and Florida Panthers move to new locations, the Arena could easily fail economically and the surrounding area would suffer as well. The few positive economic gains made in the area around the Arena could be jeopardized without a viable Arena. *already moved out - reward*

- Including Overtown in other Planning Authorities.

The boundaries of the Downtown Development Authority should be extended to include all of Overtown. This would allow Overtown to take advantage of funding opportunities and projects endorsed by the D.D.A.

- Encouraging Home Ownership in Overtown.

The Miami-Dade Housing Authority is now in the process of selling 145 public housing units to the private sector. When these units are rehabilitated and sold, residents will have more of a stake in the area. Research has consistently demonstrated that home ownership leads to better-maintained property and a desire to make the community a safer



and cleaner place to live. Since about a third of the housing in Overtown is owned by the government or subsidized, the Authority should be encouraged to develop more low cost, owner occupied units.

- Supporting the St. John's Plan for Overtown.

The St. John Community Development Corporation's economic re-development plan for Overtown is the most comprehensive strategy currently available for the area. All interested parties should continue to support the implementation of this plan.

- Facilitating Private Sector Housing Development in Overtown.

The City of Miami should continue to be encouraged to develop more affordable housing and office complexes for the 240 acres east of I-95, west of the Miami Arena, north of the U.S. Post Office, and south of the Folklife Village. The area around Poinciana Village represents one of the few private market developments in Overtown and when this area fills in residentially, new businesses will come as well. These are the kind of projects that can restart the revitalization cycle.

The irony of the negative impacts of transportation projects on Overtown is that the original route for I-95 in Miami in the early 1950s called for the expressway to follow the FEC railroad tracks and largely by-pass the heart of the Overtown community. As resistance to this original route was mobilized, the Overtown community did not respond with an organized voice and the ultimate route chosen a few years later bisected the community and cut it into parts.

This Report should be used as a model for the planning and implementation of future transportation projects. Adverse impacts that transportation projects may have on stable communities need to be taken very seriously.

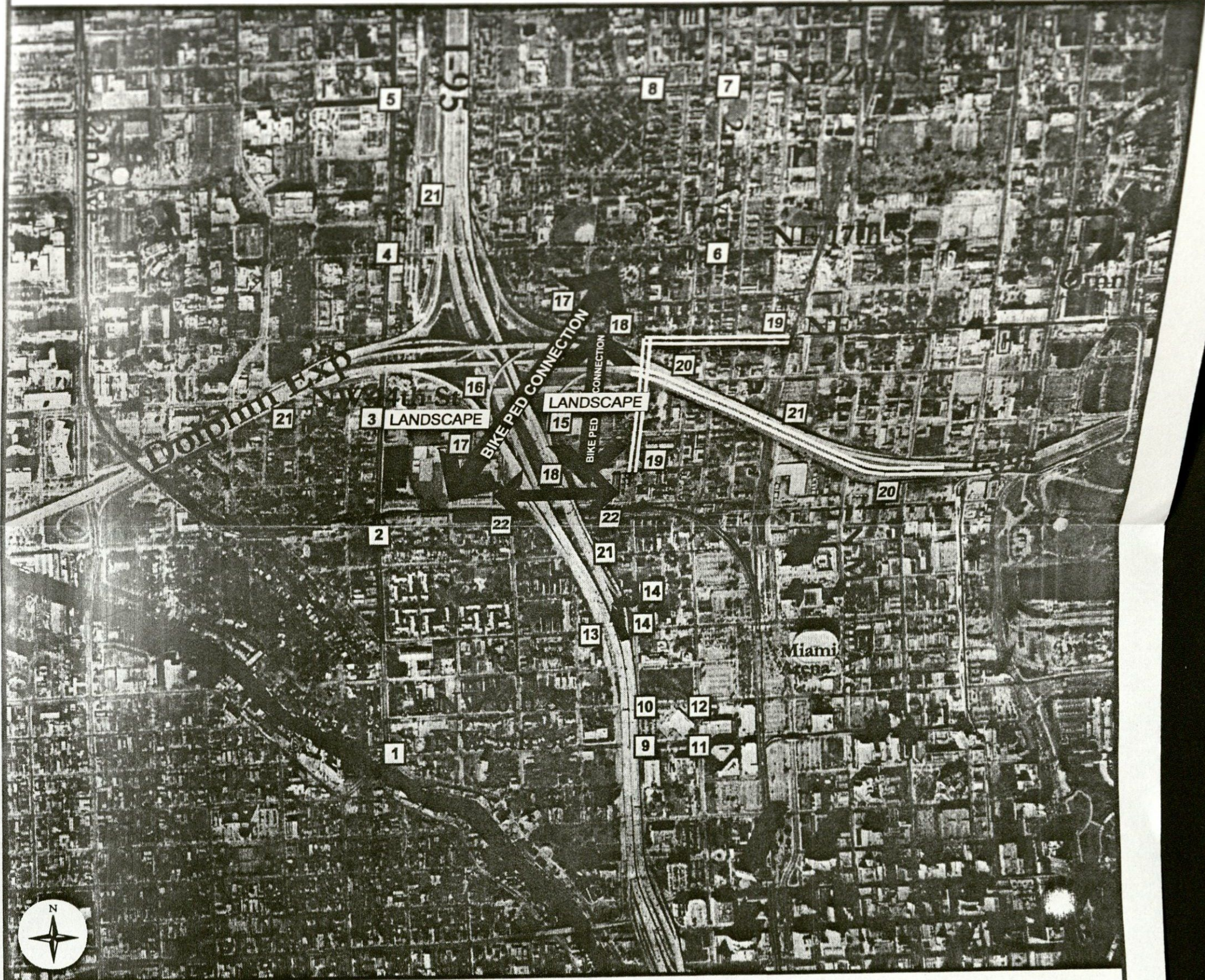
Table 0.1: Selected Characteristics of Overtown, 1950-1990

Characteristic	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
Population	29,253	32,665	15,935	10,109	7,961
Percent of housing units owned	11.6%	5.9%	2.2%	4.9%	3.8%
Percent of black residents of Miami-Dade County living in Overtown	45.0%	23.8%	8.4%	3.6%	2.0%
Percent of residential land use	n.a.	40%	33%	28%	n.a.
Number of business establishments	389	318	148	49	41



# OVERTOWN TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENTS

Source: MPO Overtown Study Draft Report, January 12, 1998.



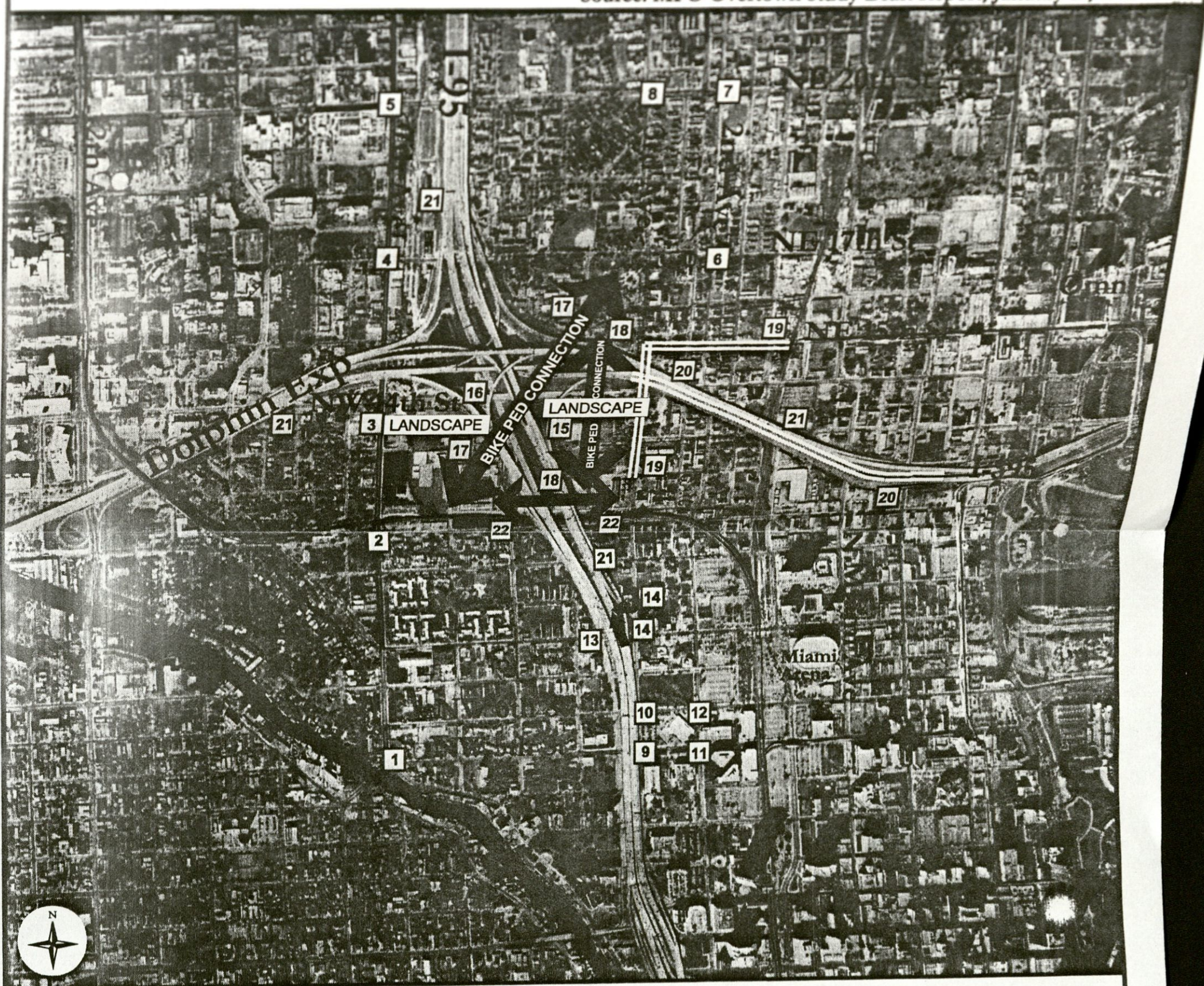
## LEGEND

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2. Entry sign, NW 7th Ave. At 11th St.
3. Entry sign, NW 7th Ave. At 14th St.
4. Entry sign, NW 7th Ave. At 17th St.
5. Entry sign, NW 7th Ave. At 20th St.
6. Entry sign, NW 2nd Ave. At 17th St.
7. Entry sign, NW 2nd Ave. At 20th St.
8. Entry sign, NW 3rd Ave. At 20th St.
9. Entry sign, NW 5th St. at 3rd Ave.
10. Entry sign, NW 6th St. at 3rd Ave.
11. Entry sign, NW 5th St. at 2nd Ave.
12. Entry sign, NW 6th St. at 2nd Ave.
13. Entry sign, NW 8th St. at I-95 exit.
14. Redesigned entrance ramp to allow I-95 access from Southbound NW 3rd Ave.
15. Landscaping, east side of I-95 interchange.
16. Landscaping, west side of I-95 interchange.
17. Bicycle-Pedestrian paths, from northeast quadrant of I-95/I-395 to southwest quadrant/Booker T. Washington School.
18. Bicycle-Pedestrian paths, from northeast quadrant of I-95/I-395 to southeast quadrant/commercial area.
19. Additional leg of Metromover from School Board station to Overtown shopping center.
20. Add fill or make productive use of space under I-395.
21. Trailblazer signs directing motorists from I-95, I-395, 836 to Overtown.
22. Bicycle-Pedestrian paths from Southeast quadrant/park to southwest quadrant/Booker T. Washington School.



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