Miami is booming. Some $13 billion in new construction is under way in downtown alone, according to Christina Raecke of the Miami Downtown Development Authority. The new buildings reflect Miami's role as the financial hub not only of south Florida but of all of Latin America.

Most of the city's 400,000 residents (and tens of thousands of suburban commuters) embrace the boom, but the almost unbridled construction of recent years has generated much criticism. Complaints range from rants against traffic congestion to fears that overdevelopment will put a damper on real estate values that are already suffering from the recent “market correction.”

Incorporated in 1896, Miami developed first as a small bayside city, then as a vacation destination, and recently, especially since the 1980s, as a mecca for Latin American immigrants. But it is a conventionally zoned city whose ordinances have not kept up with the rapid growth.

The big plan
Complaints about the zoning regulation, which was last revised in 1991, have mounted in recent years. The complaints fall into three categories, according to Luciana Gonzalez of the city's planning department:

First, critics charge that the conventional use-based code too rigidly separates the places where people live, work, shop, and play. Second, the current regulation has been amended numerous times in an ineffective attempt to solve long-term problems with short-term solutions. Third, others charge, the current code “incentivizes” development in a haphazard way.

The force behind the overhaul, many Miamians agree, was Mayor Manny Dias. He called for a new zoning code that would reflect the “Miami of the 21st century”—hence the name, Miami 21. The new code would “create a more predictable and efficient regulation,” but it would also take “a holistic approach to land use and urban planning, broadening the scope of a traditional master plan to become a truly comprehensive plan,” said the mayor.

“Miami 21 is more than just a zoning rewrite,” says Luciana Gonzalez, who is the project manager for Miami 21. “Its goal is creating a more predictable environment and improving the quality of life of the residents. Our zoning ordinance is a little antiquated, written almost 20 years ago.”

The old code created zoning bonuses, which helped to spur development, but “it also created a lot of problems in established neighborhoods,” says Gonzalez.

“The goal of Miami 21 is to incentivize development in a way that is appropriate,” meaning
Design plays a big role in Miami’s zoning code overhaul.

along the city’s arterials and not in single-family neighborhoods, she says. “We want a city with a sense of community and a high quality of life. That’s the bigger vision of Miami.” She adds that Mayor Diaz often mentions Chicago’s 1909 Burnham Plan as a model.

It was Burnham who said, “Make no little plans,” and Miami 21 is in fact a big plan. While technically a zoning code, it also covers economic development, transportation, parks and open spaces, historic preservation, and arts and culture. There are also parallel projects under the Miami 21 umbrella, including the revision of the chapter of the current zoning ordinance that deals with historic preservation.

Shift to form-based
Miami's current zoning code is typical of its time, with a focus on uses and density. It is a form-based code, meaning that emphasis is placed on the form of buildings and their buildings to each other, to streets, and to open spaces. “We want to encourage more of the smart growth principles that focus on a greater mix of uses, transit and pedestrian-use areas, and other principles,” says Gonzalez.

The work is being done by a group of consultants headed by Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, a principal of the Miami-based town-planning firm Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company and dean of the University of Miami’s School of Architecture. DPZ is working with the Washington, D.C., office of Economics Research Associates to create an economic overview of the city. A park and open space plan is being done by Boston’s Goody Clancy. Gannett Fleming of Miami is preparing a transportation plan. DPZ is doing much of the planning and zoning work.

Revising the current zoning is first on the to-do list, says Francisco Garcia of Duany Plater-Zyberk. (He formerly worked for the city’s planning and zoning department.) He notes that Miami’s recent growth spurt has produced a spate of massive condominium towers next to single-family neighborhoods. “When those buildings actually hit the streets, you see where urbanism has failed in Miami,” he says.

The goal of Miami 21 is to create a pedestrian-friendly city that allows commercial development next to a single-family neighborhood, and has predictable, user-friendly regulations, says Marina Khoury, director of town planning for DPZ.

DPZ and city officials have also created incentives for affordable housing and open space. According to Luciana Gonzalez, capacity incentives allow developers to build more in exchange for providing either affordable housing or parks and open space. There are three ways to do that: building on-site, building off-site,
or contributing to a trust fund.

In addition, under the new code, all buildings with over 50,000 square feet in T-5 or T-6 zones must qualify for LEED silver certification.

Disgruntlement

Miami 21’s tagline is “Your City, Your Plan.” But not every Miamian likes the plan.

In fact, after opposition from a number of groups, the city commission on June 28 requested that meetings be held to inform the public and see how the plan could be improved. A total of 14 meetings have been held in the city’s East Quadrant, which is the first quadrant scheduled for approval. The commission also asked the drafters of Miami 21 to consult with local and national architects to ensure that the regulations are workable.

As of early October, the plan had not yet been presented to the city commissioners. Gonzalez says a decision on the plan is likely to be deferred until after the early November city-county election. Three of the five city commissioners are up for reelection.

“Most groups say there’s much good that Miami 21 is bringing,” says DPZ’s Khoury. “But does it satisfy everyone’s goals? No, it’s impossible. We’ve had unbelievable public outreach programs: community meetings, public workshops, open houses, a series of specialized meetings with architects to test our code to make sure it makes sense, with developers, with associations, with attorneys, with a website where people post comments.”

But does that satisfy everyone? No, she says. “On one hand, developers don’t want to be told how to shape their buildings or have reduced capacity,” Khoury says. “And the neighborhood associations think there’s been too much development. So we’ve had to walk a fine line. We’ve brought the height down where we felt necessary and we’ve been successful in creating new transition zones.”

The transition zones, which will allow up to 36 units, include a section of the city’s Design District (a burgeoning neighborhood filled with showrooms and shops) and the historic MiMo District (for Miami Modern) on Biscayne Boulevard. Both of these zones abut historic districts and could run into protest from preservationists.

Another contentious issue for Miami 21’s drafters is structures that do not conform to a zoning category. “Nonconformity is a complicated issue here in South Florida because of hurricanes,” says Gonzalez. “People worried that if a hurricane were to destroy a home that was grandfathered in before Miami 21, they wouldn’t be allowed to rebuild. We’re fixing it so they can.”

The most vocal opposition to Miami 21 comes from Miami Neighborhoods United, a coalition of 17 homeowner associations. Hadley Williams, MNU’s Miami 21 team head, says complaints range from a lack of communication by the drafters to a lack of time to study the plan.

But there are also very detailed concerns. At a meeting on September 5, Williams’s team presented a list of more than 30 questions to city and DPZ officials. They asked why a transportation plan wasn’t included, why homes must face the street (a new urbanist tenet), and why street parking wasn’t allowed in certain neighborhoods.

They also asked whether there was a hidden architectural agenda—this in response to a DPZ statement that the planners did not want...
"The neighborhood associations think there's been too much development. So we've had to walk a fine line."

Miami 21 includes greater accessibility to the Miami River. Architect Thomas Spain's rendering shows what a pedestrian passageway in high-density areas might look like under plan principles.

to hamper creativity and thus did not include design standards.

Finally, they questioned the planners' consistency, noting that in some areas the code allows high-rise buildings next to single-family houses.

City and DPZ officials answered the groups' questions and have made some changes to Miami 21 as a result.

**What now?**

The plan for Miami's East Quadrant was approved by the city's Planning Advisory Board last April. The first of two required hearings by the city commission to approve this quadrant was scheduled for late June. That meeting was deferred so the Miami 21 drafters could set up the 14 community meetings. It was rescheduled for mid-October, when the planners were to present a revised document. If commissioners approved it, the second hearing would likely be in November.

After the East Quadrant is approved, the second quadrant, undetermined as of October, will move forward. The drafters hope it will be approved in six months.

David Raterman is a writer in the Miami area.

---

**Resources**

**Website.** The official website is Miami21.org.

**New book.** Miami 21 is one of 12 case studies in *Form-Based Codes: A Guide For Planners, Urban Designers, Municipalities, and Developers* by Daniel Parolek, an urban designer in Berkeley, California (to be published in the spring by John Wiley & Sons). His review: "Miami 21 is an extremely well thought-out regulatory system and the basis of the code, which is extremely impressive, was the thorough analysis of the existing code, highlighting shortfalls."