

Miami commission makes Wynwood Norte district a reality. It's what residents wanted.

[By Andres Viglucci](#) March 25, 2021 07:31 PM,



Welcome to Wynwood Norte

Residents and property owners in Wynwood's working-class residential enclave have re-branded, organized and developed a plan to cope with gentrification. By Wynwood Norte

A grassroots plan aiming to save the struggling working-class neighborhood of Wynwood Norte from looming gentrification by spurring limited redevelopment won final and unanimous approval on Thursday from enthusiastic Miami commissioners, who have called it a model for other city neighborhoods besieged by real estate speculation.

The 5-0 vote came five months after commissioners [initially approved](#) the Wynwood Norte Neighborhood Revitalization District, a special zoning plan seeking to corral development pressure to benefit the historic community, once a predominantly Puerto Rican residential enclave that's been steadily losing residents and businesses for decades.

The gap between votes was unusually long because the extensive rezoning the plan entails required review from state of Florida regulators, who raised no major issues. The plan approval was then further delayed while Miami Commissioner Jeffrey Watson was out temporarily with COVID-19.

Wynwood Norte, as its residents have rebranded it, has been mostly overlooked as its better known southern neighbor, the Wynwood arts and entertainment warehouse district, undergoes a massive redevelopment boom. Wynwood Norte consists of a 35-block area that runs between Northwest 29th and 36th Streets from Interstate 95 to Miami Avenue, in the heart of Miami's historic urban core.

The so-called NRD-2, drawn up by city planners based on a “vision plan” developed by a Wynwood Norte neighborhood association, takes an unusual and seemingly counterintuitive approach.

The plan seeks to attract badly needed investment to the neighborhood, plagued by demolitions and vacant or abandoned lots and buildings, by promoting modestly larger and denser but still small-scale infill development through an extensive upzoning. In exchange for the greater capacity to build across most of the enclave’s 140 acres, developers would provide a significant supply of new affordable housing and help pay for enhancements like new street lighting, shade trees and sidewalks. The upzoning would also allow Miami-Dade County’s housing agency, which owns several acres of underused land in the neighborhood, to expand its local stock of affordable and workforce housing.

The plan aims to preserve the core and character of the neighborhood by placing stricter limits on demolitions and maintaining a low scale in residential areas.

Will Vasquez, a Wynwood Norte property owner who grew up in the neighborhood, told commissioners the plan would help “put an end” to the vacant lots that drag the area down and make it “safer and more welcoming for families.”

The neighborhood wish list was put on the path to realization

last year, when the city commission adopted it unanimously. At the urging of then-Chairman Keon Hardemon, the commission also instructed the city planning department to translate the vision into zoning legislation.

Residents were spurred into action by development plans from a Texas-based developer, Westdale Real Estate Investment Management. The firm bought a block of mostly rundown residential properties in the neighborhood and obtained city zoning approvals for [a plan to raze them](#) and build a low-scale housing and retail complex aimed at a range of incomes, including so-called workforce housing that goes for higher rents than legally defined affordable housing.

With development plans on hold, Westdale agreed to back residents, small property owners and other neighborhood stakeholders seeking a better deal.

City planners say the new zoning could produce up to 9,000 new apartments, most in buildings of three to five stories, though some structures could go as high as 12 stories on the neighborhood's edges.

The zoning plan was supported by the priest at the local Catholic church, San Juan Bautista Mission, the head of the De Hostos Senior Center and the director of the [Bakehouse Art Complex](#), a building that houses low-cost art studios and

exhibition spaces. Bakehouse interim director Cathy Leff, also a member of the association board, said the rezoning will allow the nonprofit to move forward with plans to build affordable housing for artists and their families on the Bakehouse parking lot.

"If you love a comeback story, welcome to Wynwood Norte," said Steve Wernick, a land-use lawyer with an office in Wynwood who helped the neighborhood shepherd the plan through to approval, in a statement. "The Wynwood Norte Neighborhood Revitalization District reflects the resilience and perseverance of this community, to come together and shape a plan that encourages growth and infill development while at the same time reinvestment back into the community."

Only one small piece of the plan was deferred for final consideration next month. The legislation would create a parking trust fund that developers with projects in Wynwood Norte would pay into in lieu of providing parking on site. The money would support construction of a public garage in the neighborhood.

Commissioners agreed to delay the item pending a review after Commissioner Manolo Reyes questioned whether the amount developers would pay, \$15,000 per space, is sufficient.



A rendering of how Wynwood Norte's main street, Northwest Second Avenue, with Mission San Juan Bautista Catholic church at center, could look if the neighborhood is redeveloped at a low scale. *Plusurbia Design*