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CASA COASTER

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Despite a slow start and slow speeds, Coastal Cruiser is a winner for Boynton



MISTER B'S NEIGHBORHOOD

Boynton Beach has launched an eco-friendly on-demand rideshare initiative they call the Coastal Cruiser.

It's operated by Circuit Transit, which began as a shuttle in the Hamptons and has grown to over 40 markets – 14 in Florida.

It's like Uber, but for short, uber cheap trips. Circuit partners with cities and hotels that subsidize the cost and define the maps where drivers may go. In Boynton, most rides are $1 and run mostly along Federal Hwy. It also can go to the beach.

Circuit is perfect for locals and tourists alike. For Casa Costa residents, Circuit's all-electric fleet makes it easy to run errands, visit local attractions, or simply enjoy a stress-free ride – all without worrying about gas or parking.

On a rainy January afternoon, Jake Harrington and I decided to try it out. I downloaded the app, loaded a credit card and summoned a ride from Casa Costa's front circle.

While we waited, we bumped into neighbor Roberta Mann. Turns out she'd just coastal cruised herself: "Since my surgery, I'm not driving yet, so I decided to check out Circuit. I loved it! It's just so convenient," she said.

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J.T. HARRINGTON

WINDBLOWN LOOK: Circuit's network in Boynton includes four vehicles.

Office dispatches maintenance team to check-in, paint

As the crew at Valcourt Building Services winds their way around the property, Casa Costa's in-house team is batting clean-up.

The massive project to repair cracks and paint the building has entered its eighth month and is ahead of schedule. This progress is despite weather delays and engineers finding worse concrete deterioration than expected. Valcourt continued to ramp up its crew and mobilize equipment throughout the winter months. Both towers will soon be active job sites.

After repairs are signed off by engineers and balconies are reopened, the management office has deployed its in-house maintenance team to inspect every unit's exterior to finish the job.

"Contractors often leave a mess and Valcourt painted certain balconies after completing major structural repairs," said property manager Ryan Booker. "We decided to send our in-house crew through to paint any balconies without tiles, plus to make sure glass doors are still sliding smoothly after all the dust and disruption."

The $7 million project is roughly a third complete and speeding up, Mr. Booker said. *CC*

INSIDE

INTRODUCING CONDO BITES
Don't let the quirky name of this chicken recipe scare you. **A6**

OPINION

Boynton's future is still waiting for permits

BY J.T. HARRINGTON

Its builders named our property Promenade, a word that comes from the French for a leisurely walk in public. Glossy brochures promoted how "the new Downtown begins at your doorstep" because the sidewalk between the towers and storefronts would meander out to the pond, over to the marina and then westward down Ocean Ave. The brochure gushed: "there is a palpable sense of excitement in the heart of the New Downtown Boynton Beach. Look to Atlantic Ave. … for a sense of the vibe that is on the rise in this thriving coastal community."

The Related Group bought all the unsold units here in 2012 after the Great Recession bankrupted the first developer. Related had built and sold out Marina Village across the street a decade earlier, so perhaps knew better than to trust good vibes in Boynton Beach. The rebranding to Casa Costa and relaunch of property sales ignored any promise of a downtown at the doorstep; a map in their brochures doesn't even acknowledge that Ocean Ave. exists.

Since I moved in four years ago, I've puzzled over why the neighborhood around Casa Costa sits underdeveloped and dangerous while nearby cities thrive.

In 1991, Boca Raton completed Mizner Park, which became a defining feature of its downtown. The 29-acre hub – shops, restaurants, offices, museum, amphitheater – encouraged developers to build high-rise housing nearby, creating a walkable blend of residential, commercial and recreational spaces.

Atlantic Ave. in Delray Beach is today a lively stretch of restaurants and shops, but decades ago it was a symbol of urban decay known for crack addicts. City leaders have since balanced historic preservation with encouragement to owners of galleries, boutiques and restaurants. The transformation worked; *USA Today* named Delray "The Most Fun Small Town in America."

West Palm Beach similarly transformed a "war zone" patchwork of dilapidated homes and businesses with open drug dealing into a mega-mall that debuted in 2000 as CityPlace. Over the years, housing and offices overtook the brick-and-mortar shops at the development, and its owners renamed the project Rosemary Square, then just The Square. Last year they reverted to its original name, but it remains a cornerstone of the city's adaptability, identity and growth.

Surrounded by success stories of downtowns transformed by strong city stewardship, where are we?

Since the 1990s, leaders in Boynton Beach have said they dream of a new downtown bisected by Ocean Ave. and promised that mixed-use projects would replace empty lots. They formed the Community Redevelopment Agency to siphon property taxes, spur private development and buy blighted lots.

Readers of these pages may be confused that in April 2023, we reported that "the city has approved 2,200 apartments to be built within three blocks of Casa Costa" and now nearly two years later, nothing's changed. Back then a city official told the *Casa Coaster* that after gaining initial approval, "each developer is responsible for their construction timeline." The statement is technically true, but it's a misleading deflection. The real green lights come by way of permits through the Building Department.

This group of 29 staffers earning $2.5 million took six months to approve a kitchen remodel within my private residence (at one point they asked what color an electrical outlet would be), so I can imagine the frustration of architects working toward $100 million buildouts.

When questioned about delays at city commission meetings, the mayor and his deputies tend to blame the CRA. Meanwhile at CRA meetings, the staff often invokes that many decisions are not theirs but "city issues." We witnessed this dynamic in person when CRA reps met in the club room to explain all the things they can't do. It's a curious distinction because since 2016, the same five city commissioners control both city hall and the CRA.

Moreover, it's been largely the same cast on the dais. Woodrow Hay has served since 2007. When he was re-elected two years ago, he said: "We just have a plate full of projects that we're doing, and I'm happy the team is back together, because we're all on the same page to get these projects completed."

OPINION

Time is the worst thing from a developer's point of view because it's expensive. In Boynton, false starts and excuses are nothing new. The CRA director penned an article in the *Palm Beach Post* proclaiming "Downtown Boynton is about to arrive," but blamed construction costs, labor shortages and interest rates for delays. This was June 2006, but you are excused for mistaking it for 2024; when a city delays progress through multiple real estate cycles, they can reuse the same excuses.

Fast-forward to 2017, developers at 500 Ocean were hoping the fourth time was the charm. Two years prior, the former mayor promised "a springboard of more development comin' down the pipe." Three teams before them had tried to build housing on a vacant lot since 2003 when the city razed two-story landmark buildings. That year, the city approved a plan for condos, shops and restaurants on the lot – "billed as a mini-CityPlace" – and the CRA was set to chip in $4.7 million. The incentive expired. The *South Florida Sun Sentinel* wrote how the failure "made the city look like a ghost town."

What was to be the centerpiece of the new downtown has perhaps been the biggest embarrassment. In February 2023, city commissioner Thomas Turkin said: "Tonight is a big deal because it is the next step in fixing a rat's nest created by a previous commission."

The rat's nest is "Town Square," a 16-acre development that city officials promised to deliver five years ago. Plans called for public buildings, a hotel, apartments, a parking garage and storefronts on city-owned land between Boynton Beach Blvd. and Ocean Ave.

City officials awarded the job to a developer, paid him $2 million and handed over the land. The developer built a new city hall, library and amphitheater, but refused to continue and instead tried to sell the rest of the land. Incredibly, the agreement that the city's lawyers had negotiated didn't consider this possibility, which lead to years of battles in court. Mr. Turkin's "big deal" was a settlement that returned the land to the city and a new developer agreed to take over the half-built project. It's now back "in permitting." The CRA's website labels the project "completed."

When a city delays progress through multiple real estate cycles, they can reuse the same excuses.

* * *

Boynton Beach is the third-largest city in the county. It's trying to annex 38 communities toward its west to increase tax revenues, so we assume our city leaders have ambition. So what are we to make of their inability to build a downtown corridor that has been their self-imposed marching orders for decades?

I wouldn't have a problem with a less ambitious plan, and surely some citizens would prefer parks over high-rises. Many quaint cities have plenty of character. My problem is that our elected officials don't seem to appreciate that no decision is, in itself, a decision. Commission after commission hasn't pushed their Building Department to fast-track approvals, allowing it to be the floor within city hall where real estate projects wither and die. The result is a collection of empty parcels in prime locations for decades. In the midst of the Town Square debacle, commissioners complained that the developer's refusing to build was keeping the land "hostage." I would use the same term for how the Building Department operates generally.

In 2004, our mayor said: "I believe over the next two years, you're going to be amazed at what happens to this city." Are you amazed yet?

I'm rooting for Boynton, but city officials need to get out of their own way and reverse their reputation as being unfriendly to developers. The official excuses back in the day were probably legit. In the 1990s Boynton's mayor said the city wanted to attract developers, but "progress and how fast it comes in is 90% out of the city's hands." Back then the market was recovering from a crash and parts of Florida were overbuilt, making some investors gun-shy. Things have come a long way since the days of car phones and boy bands.

In 2021, with pandemic migration fully underway, real estate investors poured $2.5 billion into West Palm Beach. Its downtown has doubled its population since 2008, according to city records.

Here in Boynton, they built themselves a fancy new city hall.

Mr. Harrington's opinions are his own and are not necessarily shared by the board of directors nor other contributors to these pages.

I tried our almost-free shuttle

Continued from page A1

Within five minutes, we'd climbed into a Kia Niro EV, ready for a ride to Walmart at the edge of the city – the farthest point south on the route. The Kia is small but comfortably seats three passengers. Circuit's fleet includes two Kias and two versions of a GEM e6, which is similar to a golf cart with doors. One seats five and the other is equipped with a ramp and space for a wheelchair and three riders.

Elizabeth, our driver, told us her story. Eight months ago, her car broke down, and she relied on Circuit to get around. Impressed with the service, she applied to become a driver and now enjoys connecting with the community. She walks 15 minutes between her home at Sterling Village and the city lot where the fleet is parked and hasn't needed to fix her own car. Between driving and riding with Circuit, she's covered.

"A lot of people who only come here for a month or two each season wish they'd known about us," she said. "They wouldn't have bothered bringing their car." She told us a lot of requests that come in are from customers at bars and restaurants who want a safe ride home.

Circuit operates Sunday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Fridays and Saturdays till 10 p.m. Elizabeth mentioned that weekdays tend to be quieter but she expects ridership to increase during the winter. We were her sixth ride that day, which equates to about one per hour.

The most recent statistics provided to the city show 900 Coastal Cruiser riders per month on average. The most popular drop-off locations are the beach, Publix and the two restaurants at the marina.

For our ride back home, we got Gary. He's been driving for Circuit since August. He's passionate about promoting the service, distributing cards to local businesses and communities.

Then we spotted fellow Casa Coaster Michelle Srebnik walking out of Walmart. That day, she'd driven herself but said: "I walk to restaurants, but when it's dark, I feel more comfortable calling Circuit. It's safe and super convenient for us at Casa Costa."

When they're not full, Circuit drivers are encouraged to pick up anyone that hails them from the sidewalk for a free ride. Gary takes things a step further, actively seeking passengers at popular spots. "I'm hustling," he said. "We're rolling advertisements. I've gotta get eyeballs on the vehicles."

Gary drives the wheelchair-accessible vehicle, which he mentioned is also handy for passengers using walkers. The extra space easily fits beach chairs, groceries and pets. "If it fits, we take it," he said.

A Walmart employee named Trazarra approached us, thanks to Gary's strategy of parking in a high-profile location. Her plan was to take the bus home, as she did most days. Sometimes in bad weather, she uses Uber. She explained that she never learned how to drive and no one in her family of three has a car, so they all rely on public transportation or ridesharing. She'd never tried Circuit but hopped into the seat next to Gary and we were off.

Gary's ride tops out at 25 mph, ten under the posted limit on N. Federal Hwy. and way less than many drive, but the windowless vehicle made for a smooth and enjoyable trip.

"Door-to-door service is a big deal," Trazarra said as we dropped her off. "Now I don't have to walk to the bus stop in bad weather. It's a game changer for my whole family."

Trazarra's home and workplace are at the opposite outer edges of our local Circuit service. Enlarging these boundaries have been a consistent request by riders. The map is limited to the jurisdiction of the city's Community Redevelopment Agency. The CRA agreed to pay $400,000 to pilot the service for a year. This net figure is an estimate because the fees riders pay go to the city, as does half of the revenue from advertising printed inside and outside the fleet.

From its launch, the CRA coordinated a deal to bring its Coastal Cruisers to the beach, which is outside the city (rides there cost an extra $1), but have since received requests for Circuit to service more of Boynton, such as the Tri-Rail Station and Bethesda East Hospital.



JOHN BATTISTA

Strategic parking in a Walmart lot introduced Circuit to a first-time rider who called it a game changer.

Another quirk of the Circuit network and its funding mechanism is that even though both neighboring cities now have fleets of vehicles on the same app, their maps don't overlap, so neither Elizabeth, Gary nor the five other drivers can travel up to Lake Ave., even though the Lake Worth Beach CRA has signed up to subsidize its own fleet of Circuit vehicles.

Delray Beach fully subsidizes six on-demand shuttles that operate in and around its downtown core and beachfront. Their CRA partnered with a

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Mr. B's wild ride

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rival to Circuit called Freebee (at a somewhat higher cost to taxpayers), which cannot cross the border into Boynton. So technically I could get from Casa Costa to Atlantic Ave. with two apps, $1 and a connection in the Johnny Mango's parking lot.

Back in Boynton, at a CRA meeting in December, city leaders said they were optimistic based on growing ridership numbers in Circuit's first months. They were looking to expand the map within the city where drivers could service, especially for city-sponsored events.

I paid Circuit $2 to get to Walmart and back with little waiting and friendly drivers. Uber's lowest price was $14 per way with more waiting. Boynton Beach and its taxpayers are paying a flat-rate for four on-demand vehicles. Yet, given the current low usage, as a city, we're paying more per ride than Uber costs since we're subsidizing idling shuttles.

I was delighted to witness Trazarra's first taste of her new inexpensive commute, and I think the Circuit program deserves continued support and broader coverage from our city. Take a ride and you'll agree. *CC*

DUNCE OF THE MONTH

Last year the association decided to spend a quarter million dollars on new elevator cabin interiors. Last week someone refused to use the padded elevator and took a slice out of a panel. *CC*



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SOUTH FLORIDA'S #1 POOLSIDE AMUSEMENT

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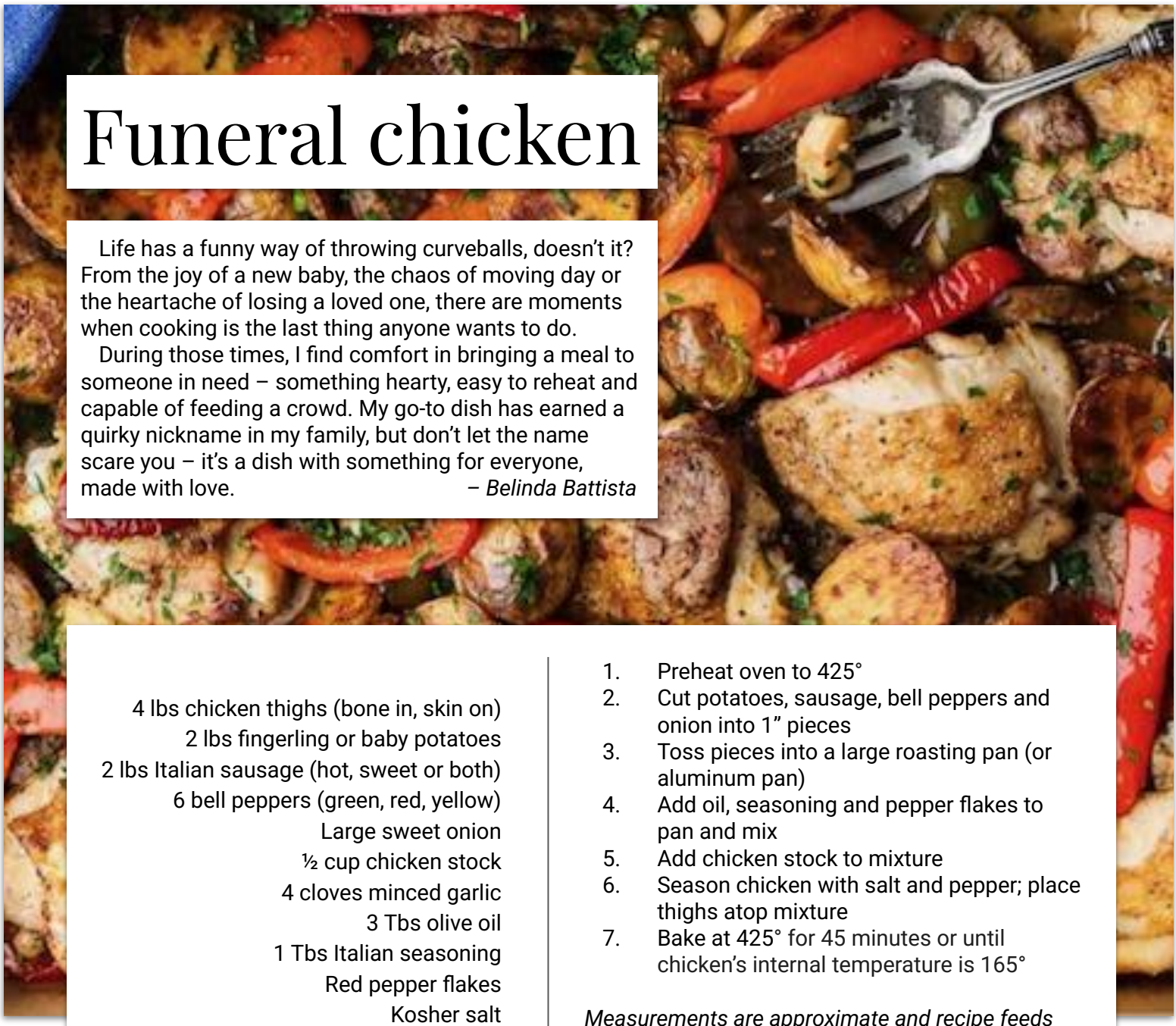
Introducing: Condo Bites

I'm thrilled to share some exciting news! The Social Committee is bringing back the beloved potluck dinner on Sunday, March 30. If you attended last year's event, you know it was a feast for the taste buds, with an array of delicious dishes crafted by Casa Costa's talented home chefs. But as I savored each bite, one thought lingered in my mind: *Where are the recipes?* There were so many dishes I wanted to recreate, but without the secrets behind them, I was left dreaming of flavors I might never taste again.

It got me thinking – what if the *Casa Coaster* became a platform for our community chefs to share their recipes and also the memories or stories tied to your signature dishes? I'd like to kick things off with one of my own, but now it's your turn to share a favorite recipe with a story or special memory behind it.

– Belinda Battista

I'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU! EMAIL BATTIB33@GMAIL.COM



Funeral chicken

Life has a funny way of throwing curveballs, doesn't it? From the joy of a new baby, the chaos of moving day or the heartache of losing a loved one, there are moments when cooking is the last thing anyone wants to do.

During those times, I find comfort in bringing a meal to someone in need – something hearty, easy to reheat and capable of feeding a crowd. My go-to dish has earned a quirky nickname in my family, but don't let the name scare you – it's a dish with something for everyone, made with love.

– Belinda Battista

4 lbs chicken thighs (bone in, skin on)
2 lbs fingerling or baby potatoes
2 lbs Italian sausage (hot, sweet or both)
6 bell peppers (green, red, yellow)
Large sweet onion
½ cup chicken stock
4 cloves minced garlic
3 Tbs olive oil
1 Tbs Italian seasoning
Red pepper flakes
Kosher salt
Black pepper

1. Preheat oven to 425°
2. Cut potatoes, sausage, bell peppers and onion into 1" pieces
3. Toss pieces into a large roasting pan (or aluminum pan)
4. Add oil, seasoning and pepper flakes to pan and mix
5. Add chicken stock to mixture
6. Season chicken with salt and pepper; place thighs atop mixture
7. Bake at 425° for 45 minutes or until chicken's internal temperature is 165°

Measurements are approximate and recipe feeds 6-8. Pair with a fresh garden salad and some crusty bread, and you've got a meal that says "I care."

City reps update residents on projects

Nearly three dozen residents filled the club room on Jan. 9 as city officials described their role in improving Boynton Beach. Since its establishment in 1982, the Community Redevelopment Agency has worked to eliminate slum and blight conditions.

A trio told us that their agency created six districts and are funded as property taxes increase in their 1,650-acre zone of East Boynton. They navigated us through their website, which they said they keep up to date with the projects in which they have a hand.

"We have a plan with established goals and objectives," Timothy Tack said, adding that they "operate strictly within those parameters" and cannot tackle anything that's already the role of another department like Recreation & Parks. The CRA is involved with most of the large-scale plans in our neighborhood.

In addition to a streetscape improvement of Boynton Beach Blvd. and plan to move the post office closer to us, they highlighted the nearly-complete Heart of Boynton Village Apartments and Shops. The $34 million project is the first in nearly 50 years on Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., where the CRA acquired property over 14 years. Mr. Tack said they tend to "buy high and sell low," the opposite of prudent investing but within their mission of revitalizing neighborhoods. The project tapped federal, state, county and city programs to deliver 124 low-income apartments and storefronts leased to local businesses at capped rents. The CRA won awards for their role in it.

The CRA encourages private investment by waiving a portion of property taxes in exchange for elements that benefit the wider community. The presentation cited The Villages, a mixed-use project just west of the train tracks between Boynton Beach Blvd. and Ocean Ave. In exchange for 120 metered public parking spaces, 30% of the parking revenue and a 15-year deal that a neighborhood coffee shop could lease space for 50% off, the CRA agreed to forego up to $9.1 million in taxes. CC



BOYNTON BEACH COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY



JOHN BATTISTA



CR-YAY: Above is a rendering of a beautified Boynton Beach Blvd. corridor. Below, from left to right are the CRA's Timothy Tack (interim director), Bonnie Nicklien (grants & programs manager) and Theresa Utterback (development & services manager).

CRA DISTRICTS

1: Federal Hwy. North Entry
2: Federal Hwy. South Entry
3: Downtown
4: Cultural
5: Boynton Beach Blvd.
6: Heart of Boynton
7: Industrial/Craft
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