

Developer making headway on new Kendall village center

By LAURA IRWIN

After two years of planning, developer Jeffrey Berkowitz is making headway on a new village center in Kendall.

The \$40 million, 35-acre project, a cross between Main Street in Miami Lakes and CocoWalk, will have up to 232,500 square feet of retail space and a minimum of 50,000 square feet of office space.

Cornered by Kendall Drive and the Florida Turnpike, the project will also have housing and entertainment areas, including a movie theatre, sports club and a children's museum.

Originally Mr. Berkowitz, who has had the land for six years, planned an auto park with 10 showrooms, but the Metro Commission, acting as the zoning board, shot that down after angry Kendall residents objected. The project now under way was born out of a compromise.

"It was jointly conceived by Kendall leaders and us," Mr. Berkowitz said. "It's a place where a family can visit on evenings and weekends."

Said Jose Rojas, a member and past president of the Kendall Federation of Homeowners: "This in essence is going to be the gateway to Kendall. I think all concerned wanted to have it be a model project. We didn't want it to be your run-of-the-mill mall or shopping center. There was a lot of back and



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forth, and we finally agreed to build this center."

The center, which will be across the street from Town and Country Mall, was designed in the spirit of a traditional neighborhood.

The purpose of traditional neighborhood districts, which have been created across the nation, is to reduce the number and length of trips drivers make. The village center is a smaller version of a traditional neighborhood development.

The Berkowitz Group is still working to finish the village center plans and is negotiating with tenants. While there are some confirmed tenants, Mr. Berkowitz did not want to name them.

"We have some discussions pending with a number of potential users, and I hope they will resolve themselves in the next few weeks," he said.

Mr. Berkowitz expects to complete drawings for the center soon.

Once that is done and leases are signed for the retail space, the development group plans to sell the property's outer parcels to help finance the project.

"We hope to begin closing on those outparcels in February or March," he said.

The sale of the peripheral land is part of the first phase, which also includes building the necessary infrastructure to support the project.

The team, Mr. Berkowitz said, hopes to break ground on the infrastructure by March. He hopes to begin constructing space for restaurants and other users simultaneously.

During phase two the bulk of the retail space and theatre will be built, he said. Construction is expected to start this summer.

The third phase, the residential component, will start "as soon as we find a qualified developer," Mr. Berkowitz said. The plan is to com-

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plete the village center within two years.

Mr. Berkowitz, who is working on another joint development project with the county at the Dadeland North station, is working to link transit into the Kendall project as well. He's trying to get the county to provide \$8 million to help finance a 1,200-space parking garage for the project that the county can use for bus and possibly rail riders.

"There is a real need for transit in Kendall," he said. "This is a logical place to connect rail. The property is at the heart of the community."

Typically, what the government condemns property and ruins someone's project, Mr. Berkowitz said. Rather than having to do that, it can be assured of having the garage space up front if rail is extended to Kendall, he said.

"We would donate the property,

and we would pay 100% of the debt service on the bonds issued by the county. The county would then own the garage, and we would have the right to buy it back at a future date."

If the garage is profitable the plan is for the developer and county to share the revenues.

The arrangement, Mr. Berkowitz said, would work well because there will not be many people at the village center during the day, and there will be plenty of space in the garage for transit and bus passengers.

At night, when there are fewer people riding the train or bus, shoppers and moviegoers can use it, he said.

Though Mr. Berkowitz has been negotiating with the county for some time an agreement has not been reached. The commission is expected to decide whether to finance the garage by January.