

The Evolution of I-Drive

International Drive's southern strip will become a work-live-play destination by 2040

By Rona Gindin

LOOK OUT YOUR HOTEL-ROOM WINDOW, take a mental snapshot of what you see, then close your eyes. Envision leafy green plazas, public art, bold signage, bicycle lanes, strolling pedestrians and a network of smaller streets linking residences, storefronts and sidewalk cafés with existing and new hotels and attractions.

Visit again in 2040, and that's what will be out that window. Once an ambitious plan called the I-Drive 2040 Strategic Vision is complete, the 2.5-mile strip of the International Drive (aka I-Drive) corridor between Sand Lake Road and the Beachline Expressway will be bigger in terms of the number of businesses and residences, yet more manageable with gateway, pavement and neighborhood signage plus enhanced transportation.

"We'll be adding components to make I-Drive a more urban environment," explains Alberto Vargas, planning manager for Orange County, in which both Orlando and I-Drive are located. To evolve, he says, the area needs extras including urban plazas ("We have zero parks"), street parking, even the right "height to width ratio" for buildings. I-Drive 2040 documents spell out specifics to make every element of this come into being with a unified look—while allowing the area to preserve the identity defined by its "landscaping lushness."

The brainchild of Orange County mayor Theresa Jacobs, whose goal is a "walkable, livable and dynamic" entertainment district, the project involves 1,817 properties within 5.46 square miles of land. The district at large, including sections not part of the 2040 plan, contains the nation's second-largest convention center (connected to the Rosen Centre and Rosen Plaza hotels by skybridges), and within minutes of Rosen Shingle Creek, more than 120 hotels with 45,000-plus rooms, more than 35 attractions and four entertainment complexes.

"The whole flow of the destination will be enhanced," says Maria Triscari, president/CEO of I-Drive's chamber of commerce.

Here are the changes you are most likely to notice. They will be phased in gradually.

SIGNAGE. Four gateways, beginning with the intersection of I-Drive and Sand Lake Road, will spell out the district's name. Likewise, each of eight sub-districts including Rosen Plaza, Rosen Centre and Rosen Shingle Creek will be branded individually.

WALKABILITY. What Vargas calls the "new frontier" of the now-quiet Universal Boulevard will connect to I-Drive via several wide, shaded sidewalks filled with tempting stores and restaurants. In addition, a pedestrian overpass may link all four corners of I-Drive and Sand Lake Road.

NATURE AND ART.

Several green areas will be built, preferably one three minutes from every door-front. There will be public sculptures, too, throughout the area.

TRANSPORTATION. The popular and reasonably priced I-Ride Trolley might run more often, or "circulator" streetcars might transport visitors around the area. Buffered "urban

trails" for bicycles and pedicabs will be built, and bike-share stations installed. Light rail to the airport may come along, too.

PARKING. The I-Drive vision will involve lots more parking, but not near the street. "One acre of property near I-Drive costs \$2 million," Vargas notes, "so it makes more economic sense to put rentable square footage fronting the street, with parking in the back, especially since we have no limitation about how high buildings can be."

HOUSING. More multi-unit residential buildings will be added, such as apartments, condominiums and student housing for the Rosen College of Hospitality Management, bringing 24-hour living to the neighborhood.

Step by step, it seems the southern leg of I-Drive will, indeed, become what Vargas is working to create: "a more real authentic downtown for Orange County." It's a welcome development for Orlando at large, a city that's eager to embrace neighborhood living across its landscape.



Orange County Convention Center