



People who work downtown and area residents take part in a lunchtime food truck event on the new Flagler Shore.

PHOTOS BY STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER DAMON HIGGINS

A ROCKY 'SHORE'

Downtown's new people-friendly experiment on Flagler isn't pleasing a lot of people.

By **Barbara Marshall**
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Just before 8 a.m. on a recent weekday, Bodil Burnett had the downtown West Palm Beach waterfront nearly to herself.

Clouds periodically blew in from the ocean over three or four people walking dogs on Flagler Drive, and once in a while someone intent on raising their heart rate huffed past, but solitude wasn't hard to find.

"This would never be the case in Copenhagen; there would be bicyclists everywhere," said Burnett, a former resident of the Danish port city whose pedestrian- and bike-friendly lifestyle is one of the inspirations behind West Palm Beach's five-month experiment in urban design-assisted social engineering.

"But as you see, there's nobody on the road, walking or on bikes," said Burnett, who lives downtown.

How do you get people to use it? That's the challenge for "Flagler Shore: From Pavement to People," which has closed Flagler Drive's two eastern lanes since early October (through March 1) in an attempt to get people out of their cars and onto bikes or on foot along a sinuous half mile stretch of the city's underutilized waterfront.

Other cities have transformed their public waterfronts in recent decades, creating places for people to congregate near sparkling shores.

Each summer, Parisians mob the city's "Plages" that create temporary beach resorts along the River Seine.

Baltimore's popular Inner Har-



Employees of AMSI Management Co. eat lunches bought from food trucks on Flagler Shore.

bor boasts museums, boat tours and celebrated restaurants.

Washington, D.C. just opened the \$2.5 billion Wharf project along 24 miles of the Potomac River.

In two major surveys, consultants have told West Palm Beach that its expansive Intracoastal Waterway shoreline could also be a major attraction if it weren't walled off by a four-lane thoroughfare, had more shade and included things for people to do once they got there.

But from the placement of the first barricades, many West Palm Beach residents and downtown

workers have objected to almost everything about Flagler Shore.

They criticized what was perceived as short notice about its start, to what's seen as a shoddily-executed design plan to confusion over what the city is trying to accomplish by closing two lanes of traffic during the busy tourist- and-President Trump season.

The Palm Beach Post's Letters to the Editor have been filled with people outraged at what many say is a blight to a waterfront they profess to love, but who statistics say rarely leave their cars to visit.

Flagler continued on D2

Flagler

continued from D1

"We've been talking about traffic problems for years downtown and we're taking roads away?" said an incredulous Jose Rivera, finishing a Puerto Rican "triple" sandwich from the Que Rico food truck, one of four or five that arrive Wednesdays for lunch at the project's south end.

However, the lane reductions don't seem to have created the kind of rush-hour gridlock plaguing Dixie Highway and Olive Avenue through downtown.

"I was surprised (the project) didn't create traffic jams on Flagler," said Dawn Nadeau, who lives in Palm Beach Gardens but works in a Flagler Drive office building.

Said Christine Leon, whose office looks down on the waterfront boulevard, "It doesn't affect traffic. There was never a lot of traffic on Flagler."

The project created a cadre of new art critics, incensed over car barriers made from painted shipping containers left from a public art project.

"They looked like a gang came by and spray painted them," said Carol Wright, a city resident, having a food truck lunch.

The city responded by replacing them with planters and potted palms.

Others criticized the red metal cafe tables and bright yellow seating cubes scattered along the closed traffic lanes.

"Flagler Drive was so nice and dignified, but this furniture doesn't say dignified," said Helene Newman, pausing with Monica Goldberg during their daily walk along the waterfront.

Goldberg, who, like Newman, lives in a downtown condo on Okeechobee Boulevard near CityPlace, isn't opposed to the Flagler Shore idea; just the way it's been done.

"Anything to make West Palm Beach a better place is fine with me, but I'm not sure this is working," said Goldberg. "I think they need to focus on bringing some businesses down here, to give people a reason to

Downtown resident Bonnie Lyons was walking her dog one recent morning on the Flagler Drive sidewalk that parallels the Intracoastal.

"What I'm seeing here doesn't make sense," said Lyons. "Nobody is ever here except when we have the downtown events."

Staci Eaton, a Lake Worth mother of two young children who works downtown, finds little reason to bring her kids to the waterfront except once a year to see Sandi, the city's beach-inspired Christmas tree.

"They need something for the kids to play on," said Eaton, who was trying to find shade in which to eat her food truck lunch. "You need something for families, but even then, it's way too hot to come down here in the summer."

Mark Humble lives on

SPEAK ON THE SHORE

Tell the city how you feel about Flagler Shore during a public meeting at 4 p.m. Dec. 16 in front of E.R. Bradley's. The city, West Palm Beach Community Redevelopment Agency and Downtown Development Authority will present a Flagler Shore status report and take suggestions for improvements and ideas for changes.

Flagler Drive and walks his dog six or seven times a day on the waterfront sidewalk. Getting there is more dangerous, he says, now that he has to negotiate two opposing lanes of traffic at the same time.

"It wasn't well thought out," said Humble. "They don't seem to understand what they've done to the people."

Yet, Flagler Shore has pried a few people out of their cars to enjoy the cooler weather.

"It motivated me to start biking to work," said Robert Gonzalez, an attorney who rides through Flagler Shore from his home in the city's south end to his office on Palm Beach Lakes Boulevard. "But I don't think people really understand what's going on downtown. It came out of left field and the city hasn't marketed it very well."

Gonzalez would like to see West Palm Beach create the kinds of parks he's seen in other cities, where people gather to have picnics, play with their dogs, ride bikes and commune in a public space.

"We don't have that kind of place in West Palm Beach," he said, "but there are plenty of other cities that are creating these green spaces for people to create community around. At the very minimum, (Flagler Shore) has started that conversation."

That is exactly the idea, said Christopher Roog, the city's economic development director, sounding a little shell-shocked from the opposition to the test project.

"It was never intended to be permanent," said Roog. "We're trying to be responsive to what people want and don't want."

One thing they don't want, Roog said he has learned, is a haphazard approach to redesigning the city's signature open space, even during a short-lived exercise designed to be budget-friendly.

"It has become extremely clear that the residents demand high quality public spaces," said Roog. "They want a place that is polished, that looks amazing, that is safe and relaxing, they want lush greenery and world class public open spaces."

But he's not disheartened by Flagler Shore's reception.

"It's a new idea," said Roog. "Am I super-excited (at how it was received)? Absolutely not. Am I disappointed? Absolutely not."

Roog said that after the project ends, the city's staff hopes to answer a number of questions

Can events be held on the waterfront without closing Flagler Drive?

Can we encourage people to park their cars in favor of walking and biking downtown? How can we add shade and play areas for children? Can we add businesses and restaurants to the mix? Most of all, how do residents want to use their waterfront?

"We have to start somewhere," said Roog. "Maybe the food trucks evolve into a cute French bistro where residents can have coffee and a croissant overlooking the waterfront. We want to create a waterfront for people and so I would ask residents and visitors to help us with that vision, knowing this is the start and not the end."

The city plans to hold a meeting to gauge public opinion of Flagler Shore on Dec. 16.

Until then, Flagler Drive resident Denise Salvi thinks people should give the idea a chance.

"If people would go to other cities that have done this," she said, "they'd see how great it can be."