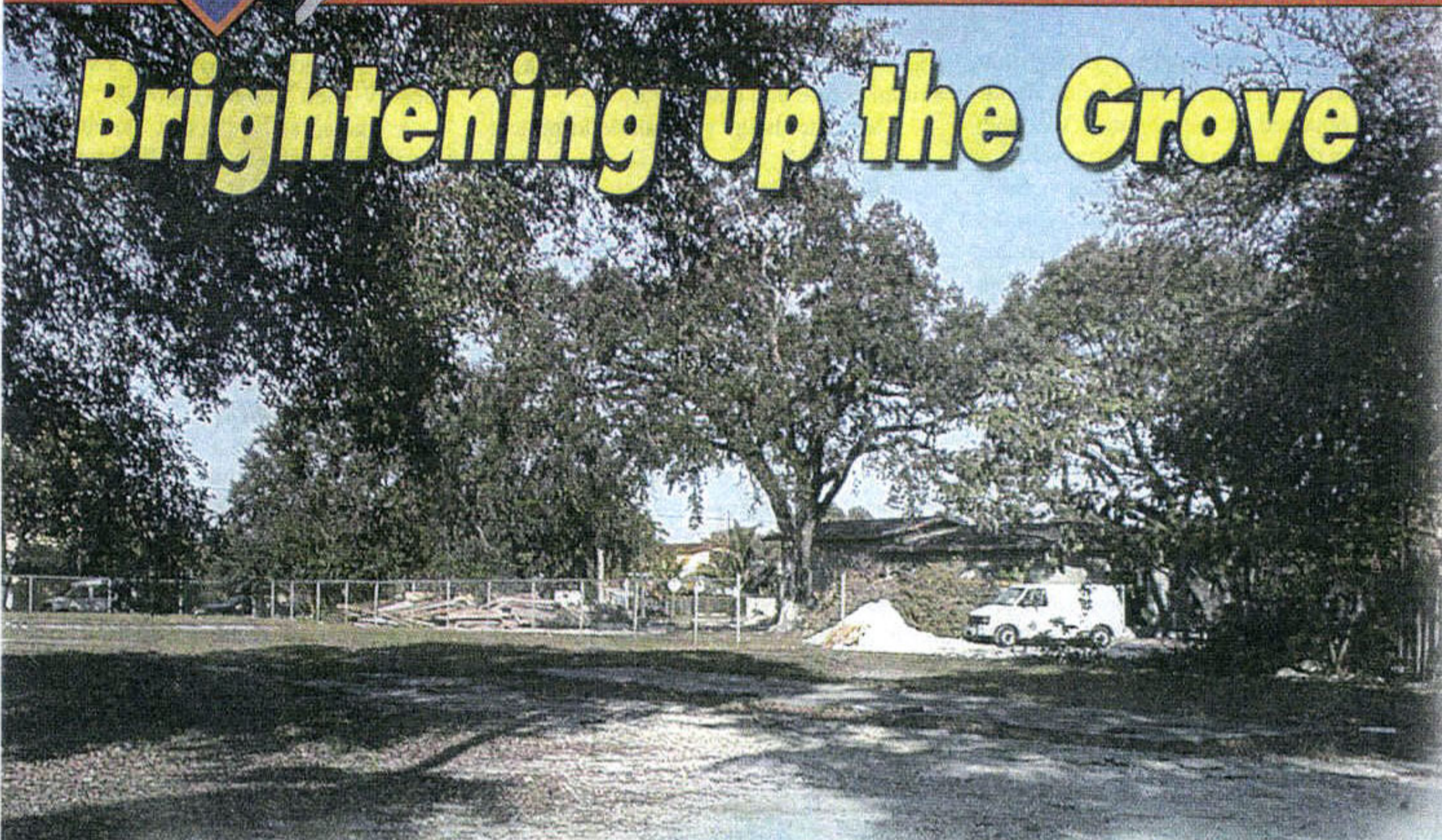


COCONUT GROVE TIMES

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Brightening up the Grove

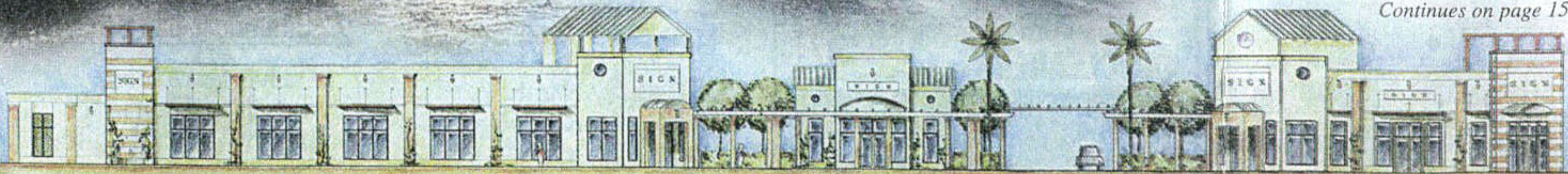


Farmers Market development to usher in a new era

January marked the end of an era for the Coconut Grove property known as the Farmer's Market. The land, located on Grand Avenue between McDonald and Margaret streets, was bought by the Comras Company which plans to build a CVS Pharmacy on the site – a development many hope will help unify the West and Center Grove.

“This is very much a community service oriented project, designed as a low-scale pedestrian friendly streetscape to encourage foot traffic in the area,” said Michael Comras, president and CEO.

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Architectural renderings by Gail Baldwin

Farmer's. • •

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The block already contains three single-family homes built by developer and general contractor Bruno Carnesella, who sold the property last month for \$3 million. Architect Gail Baldwin has drawn up a full set of plans for "Grand Avenue Plaza," an 18,000 square-foot, one level development, taking up nearly two-thirds of the space. The remaining 7,000 square feet is currently available for leasing.

Plans for the project call for a unique design that is not "the cookie-cutter type that is typical of the pharmacy industry. We worked with the City of Miami to create a unique building for this site," said Baldwin, adding that he believes this is the first step in uniting the two communities from an architectural point of view.

"It's the kick-off of other buildings to be built along Grand Avenue and that's a huge step."

The "black" and "white" Grove has typically been redlined right where this project lies, with McDonald Street, for the most part, being the dividing line. Many believe the Grand Avenue Plaza project will wipe out that undesirable historical borderline. All involved consider it an extremely positive transitional development that is being carried out with the joint support of both neighborhoods, which are intent on creating unity.

A subject of controversy over the last years, the Farmer's Market property had remained undeveloped and neglected for decades, due to disagreement over the area's zoning. The plot of land earned its name after it became the informal meeting ground for weekend vendors peddling everything from fresh foods and organic produce, to incense and clothing. When property owners asked the vendors to secure liability insurance in exchange for their continued free use of the land, the vendors opted to move across the street to another vacant lot.

Subsequent plans to develop the site were put on hold after neighbors objected to the scope of the project. After many meetings compromise was reached, and three single-

family homes were built on the Florida Avenue side of the property, something that very much pleases West Grove activist Will Johnson.

"I respect the partners involved [Allen Sweeny, Sky Smith and Bruno Carnesella] because they kept their pledge to our community in building the three homes," said Johnson, president of the Coconut Grove Village West Homeowners and Tenants Association. "They kept their promise and that is very important."

Johnson said his community has waited a long time for the property to be developed, and calls the project "a bridge to the Black community and a catalyst for other projects and businesses to come down Grand Avenue."

— Bruno Carnesella

"I am very pleased that I was able to be one of the elements for the urban renewal of this property in the Grove."

gone unnoticed by the developer. "I think it brings the two communities together, which allows for a wonderful opportunity to improve the area and really set a redevelopment trend that can go both ways-east and west," said Comras, adding that he prefers not to think in terms of borders and dividers, but rather, how his project can be inclusionary. "And if the development erases that line forever, then that would be great."

Comras is behind a number of developments in the area, including Shops at Sunset Place and Coconut Grove's Palm Plaza, where Old Navy, Gap Kids and Haagen Dazs sit today. He expects to break ground on the new project in late February, with the pharmacy portion due for completion in the summer.

"The project in its entirety should be finished within 12 months," he added.

Carnesella, meanwhile, will be relocating his office space, which until last month operated out of a small building on the site. A long-time Groveite, Carnesella has developed many Gemini Townhouse projects, Royal Poinciana Villas and Shops in the Grove, as well as a number of high-end single-family homes.

"I am very pleased that I was able to be one of the elements for the urban renewal of this property in the Grove."

—LAURA DELGADO