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The Train Depot Gets a New Lease on Life

By **Randy Schultz** - January 18, 2018



The Boca Raton Historical Society & Museum has a buyer for the former train depot at Camino Real and Dixie Highway near Addison Mizner's former office.

It's Mizner Arts LLC. The principal is Holly Meehan, a longtime Junior League volunteer. She is the daughter of George Zoley, founder and CEO of Boca Raton-based GEO Group. State records list Meehan, her father, and her mother, Donna Zoley, as managers of Mizner Arts, but Meehan said she would be the one involved with what she envisions as a spruced-up, thriving city hub.

As I had reported, the historical society decided in 2015 to sell the 88-year-old depot because the organization lacks the resources to maintain the exterior and structure of the building and the four historic rail cars that are part of the depot tours. Though the city paid for some of the upkeep, the society believed that the expense was detracting from the organization's core priorities.

Still, since the depot and the cars are on the National Register of Historic Places, the idea of divesting was tough. "It took a long time to get my head around it," said Mary Csar, executive director of the historical society.



It also took a long time to choose a buyer. The society wanted someone who would maintain the historical integrity of the depot and continue the education component. The society bought the depot in 1987. It had deteriorated for nearly two decades after the Florida East Coast Railway discontinued the passenger service that the company has revived with Brightline.

Csar said of the depot, "We want to see people there. We want it to get better." Meehan agrees. "I don't want it to be just another building."

Meehan and her parents formed for-profit Mizner Arts LLC last year to bid on the depot. Meehan said she would market it as a unique venue by using the building's history as a draw. The society had interest from 100 parties. The request for proposal went out to 25, and five submitted bids. Mizner Arts, Csar said, "was the vision closest to what we would have wanted if we had the resources."

Csar would not reveal the price, but she said it's close to market value. The Palm Beach County Property Appraiser's Office lists the roughly 1.3-acre site and the 3,300-square-foot building at roughly \$2.4 million.

The sale is contingent upon the city rezoning the site from Cultural to Retail High. Though the depot hosts events now, Csar said the change is necessary because a for-profit company would own it.

In its letter to the city, the attorney representing Mizner Arts says the company would maintain the current 40 parking spaces and seek "offsite" parking "as required." Mizner Arts wants to provide a "four-season" experience and will "refresh" the exterior and the grounds and do a "full interior upgrade." The application has its first city review on Jan. 23 with department heads and outside agencies like Florida Power & Light.

Assuming nothing untoward arises during the city's review, the deal seems very good. A preservation easement will be on the depot, and Meehan already has shown a strong civic commitment to the city. Brightline trains won't be stopping at the depot, but the deal could mean a great future for something important from Boca Raton's past.

Depot Plans



The train depot. Image by Peter Lorber.

Mizner Arts notes that the depot can take advantage of redevelopment in the south end of downtown Boca Raton: Via Mizner, apartment complexes. Another project is Camino Square, proposed for the former Winn-Dixie plaza just west of the depot on Camino Real. The project goes before the planning and zoning board tonight with a recommendation for denial.

The residential arm of Florida Crystals, the sugar cane company, wants to construct two buildings that would hold 350 apartments. It would be another major shift downtown from retail to residential, though some retail still might go on the roughly 5-acre property.

City planners cite "several problems" with the project, most notably its pedestrian-hostile design. The report calls the north-south driveway "a missed opportunity," saying the developer did not incorporate suggestions that planners had suggested. As such, the report finds that the project is not compatible with the downtown plan.