Land Use Planning for Local Prosperity: A Case of Doral, Florida

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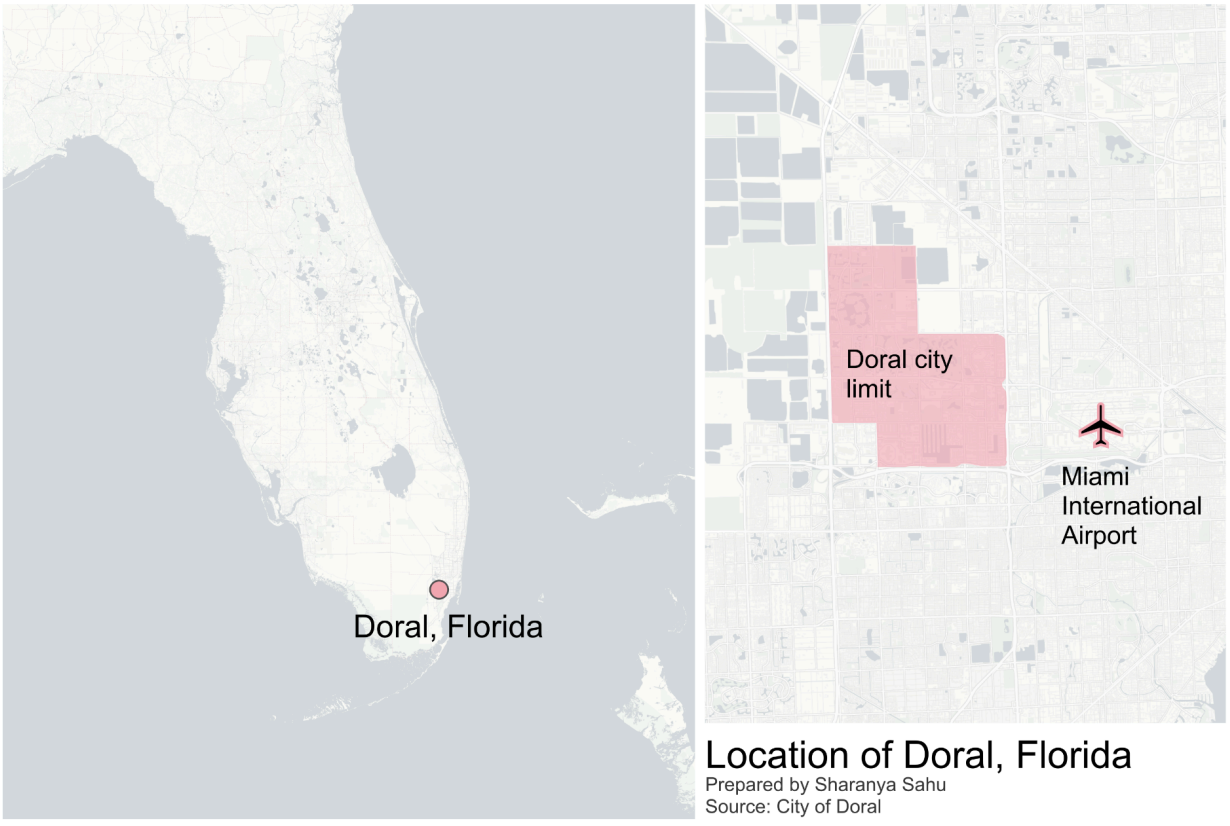
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Introduction

Doral, Florida, is a city of 15 square miles (*Doral Facts*, n.d.) in Miami-Dade County. It was initially swampland, but slowly morphed into a bustling residential, industrial, and recently, commercial area. It is adjacent to the Miami International Airport and has seen massive population growth after it was incorporated as a municipality in 2003 (FIU Metropolitan Center, 2024). It rose to prominence as the second largest economic and commercial area in Miami-Dade County (City of Doral, 2005).

Figure 1

Location of Doral, Florida



Doral's curious development trajectory motivates this paper. The town initially developed as a single-family residential community surrounding a golf course (Nijman & Clery, 2015) in the mid-twentieth century. Its very first development was a country club and golf course built by couple Doris and Alfred Kaskel (City of Doral, 2005) which gave the municipality its name. After this, expressway development surrounding the town brought offices and residences (City of Doral, 2006).

Then, Doral evolved into a major economic center with a concentration of industries (Nijman & Clery, 2015). Warehouses popped up to serve the airport (Portes & Bagwell, 2024, p. 91). The pace of construction picked up in the late eighties and throughout the nineties, especially residential and commercial development (City of Doral, 2005). Large corporations situated themselves in Doral (Portes & Bagwell, 2024, p. 92). This rapid, unchecked growth (FIU Metropolitan Center, 2024) led to Doral's incorporation in 2003.

Now, roughly 40% of Doral is Venezuelan or descended from Venezuelans, (Propmodo Team, 2025) giving Doral the moniker "Doralzuela" (Lopez, 2021). This community's influence is visible in Doral: there are numerous Venezuelan restaurants and businesses (Pino, 2018). Some Venezuelans in Doral also run package shipment businesses to Venezuela, such as VenCarga, Doral Express Cargo, and Next Day Cargo (Pino, 2018). They are broadly an affluent community with a stake in the city's urban development trajectory, aiming "to preserve the handsome residences and ample parks of Doral as a place of residence for the well-to-do" (Portes & Bagwell, 2024, p. 92). In fact, one of the mayors of Doral, Luigi Boria, was born in Venezuela (Portes & Bagwell, 2024).

Doral is now known for leisure, entertainment, and its lively commercial environment (Rivera, 2025; Lopez, 2021). The city website boasts numerous accolades praising its amenities and pro-entrepreneurship characteristics.

Figure 2

Awards and Accolades won by the City of Doral

- Named by Go.Verizon.com as #3 among Top 10 Small Business-Friendly Cities
- Named by Money Magazine as #22 Top Place to Live in the US
- Certified by the World Council on City Data as Sustainable City (ISO 37120), Smart City (ISO 37122) and Resilient City (ISO 37123)
- #1 Best place to invest in real estate in Florida - NerdWallet.
- Best City in Florida for Business Start-ups by BusinessWeek
- Named #2 of America's Top 25 towns to live well for its cultural amenities, pro-business environments, and highly educated workforce by Forbes.com.
- Recognized for Performance Management Success by ICMA Center for Performance Measures.
- City of Doral Ranks 51st in Top 100 Places to Live and Launch a Business in the United States by CNNMoney.com.
- Named the Third Best Place in the USA to Retire by US News & World Report.
- Awarded Tree City USA every year since 2008.
- Awarded Playful City USA every year since 2010

Source: From the City of Doral "Doral At A Glance" webpage

Doral today is vibrant, with various thriving industrial and commercial spaces, shaped by a diverse, largely foreign-born population. "Cities have a way of reflecting their roots… Doral reflects its origin as a warehouse district and a golf course…Doral is expansive and bold. It features an impressive City Hall, surrounded by a large park… [which] faces … the University of Miami medical system—and a luxury shopping area with several first-rate restaurants." (Portes & Bagwell, 2024, p. 94) This paper will examine the question: how does Doral plan for its future economic development and growth?

Literature Review

Urbanization in Miami follows a distinct pattern. It is constrained by geographic and ecological factors. On its western and eastern sides are two protected areas: Biscayne National Park and the Everglades National Park. Miami developed vertically along its coastline (Nijman and Clery, 2015). Miami's warm weather attracts tourism, which drove initial development. The tourism focus held back the Miami region from enacting a long term city and infrastructure vision for its residents (Nijman and Clery, 2015). Towns in Miami gradually developed their own urban cores inland (Al Rifat and Liu, 2019). They became sites of high density suburban development and concentrated economic activity (Nijman and Clery, 2015). Doral follows this pattern, containing suburban residential development, industrial areas, and a downtown area.

Miami's growth also came from Latin American immigration. Doral attracted Venezuelan people escaping regime change back home. This was a wealthy demographic with strong ties to their home country. Venezuelan refugees tended to be individuals with college education, and the areas that they choose to arrive in were not determined by labor market conditions. Instead, proximity to Venezuela and similar climate shaped their decision-making (Gunadi, 2021). Doral's growing walkable downtown areas have received much attention in local news (Lopez, 2021; Viglucci, 2017). These expanding recreational and commercial spaces also contribute to Doral's growth. This pattern aligns with the archetype of "consumer cities", where the presence of amenities attracts highly educated individuals (Glaeser, 2009, p.24). In Doral, easy access to the Miami airport enabled immigrant communities to move back-and-forth between Miami and Venezuela (Portes & Bagwell, 2024). Foreign immigrants have also brought capital with them to Doral (Oppenheim, 2019), further investing locally.

The airport critically shapes Doral's economy. Transportation facilities distribute urban amenities and productivity (Glaeser, 2009). Areas near airports become "major mixed-use urban nodes" (Freestone and Baker, 2011, p. 263), with agglomerations of offices, hotels, warehouses, logistics facilities, etc. These facilities further attract others in the same sectors, increasing local growth in those sectors (Glaeser, 2009). Doral's economic trajectory follows this pattern, with the employees in the city far exceeding the resident population (Prosperi, 2008). Industry in Doral is spatially distributed based on the theory of the urban land market. Transportation and warehousing facilities, with high bid-rent curves, are closer to the airport, moving out other land uses (Prosperi, 2008). The warehousing and logistics facilities are located in the Southeast of Doral, while the malls are to the Southwest, further from the airport.

Overall, economic growth in Doral can be understood using export base theory, which provides an explanation for an area's prosperity based on the demand for its export sectors. Export sectors are defined as bringing "income earned elsewhere into a metro area" (Bluestone et al., 2008, p. 184). These sectors, called basic sectors, act as multipliers, supporting the local service sectors (the nonbasic sectors) and imports. These sectors can be categorized by comparing local employment in that sector with its national employment, represented as a proportion called a location quotient. This theory is based on the assumption that an area's needs follow national trends. Location quotients below 1 indicate industries where the local need is met through importing from other areas. Location quotients greater than 1, show industries that meet local needs and export the remainder to draw local prosperity. Doral's industries can be classified into basic and nonbasic using location quotients. Its basic industries drive its prosperity, making them a target for economic development planning.

The literature explains mechanisms which shaped Doral's local economy, and what motivates the local government's economic development planning. The next section will analyze the growth of different economic sectors using location quotients, and explain how urban planning and municipal government strategies shape local economic outcomes.

Analysis and Results

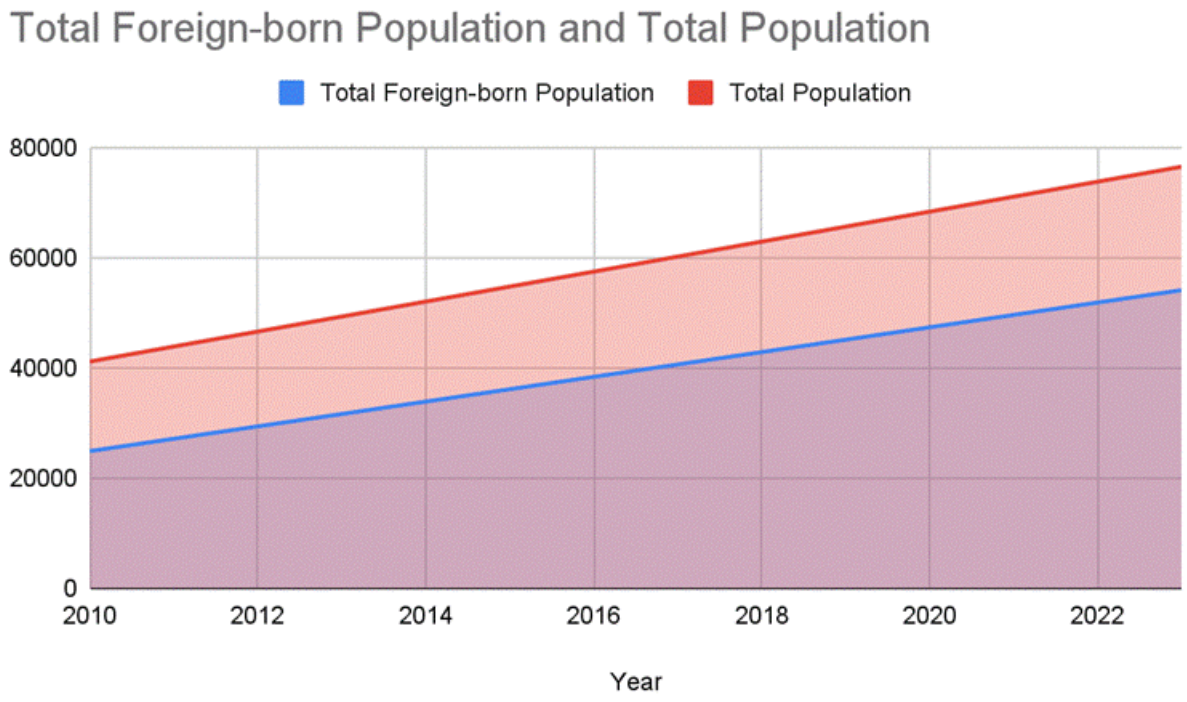
My analysis unpacks how Doral has used land use planning to realize a vision for its local industries and economic prosperity. This has been done in two steps. First, I used American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates to explain Doral's population and industry trends. However, Doral has 85,000 commuters that work in Doral but do not live there (FIU Metropolitan Center, 2024). To account for this, Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) data would be a more representative measure. For this study, I approximated industry data using the ACS for consistency, and identified basic sectors which drive Doral's prosperity. Secondly, I analyze Doral's comprehensive planning documents to unpack how land use planning has been used to shape economic development outcomes by supporting these basic sectors.

Doral's Population and Economy

Doral has seen rapid and consistent growth, stemming primarily from international immigration. Doral's population quadrupled since 1990 (City of Doral, 2024), growing from 3,000 to 80,000 (US Department of Commerce, 1990; City of Doral, n.d.). Of the total population, nearly 70% in 2020 was foreign-born (FIU Metropolitan Center, 2024). Immigrants from Latin America comprise 94% of Doral's foreign born population as of 2023, growing from 87% in 2010 (US Census Bureau, 2010, 2023).

Figure 3

Doral, Florida Population Growth - Total and Noncitizen Estimates



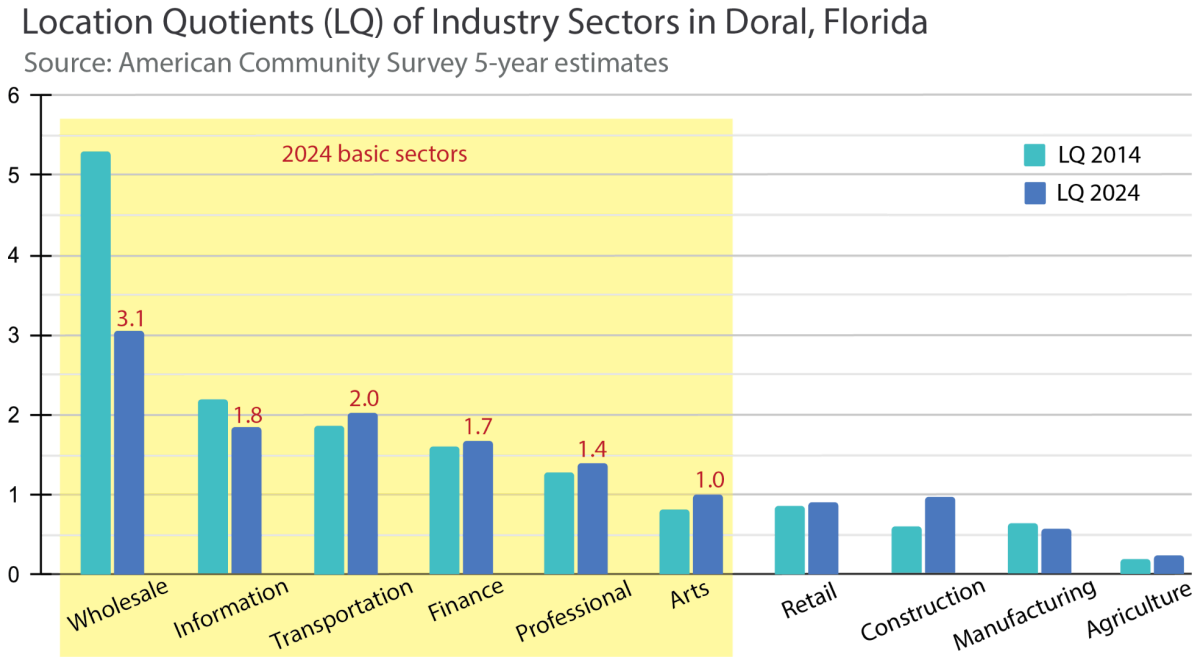
Source: American Community Survey 5-year estimates for Doral. Chart prepared by author.

Doral is also wealthier than Miami-Dade county. In 2021, Doral's median household income was $77,774, rising 6% from 2015 (FIU Metropolitan Center, 2024). The mean income was $97,280, $10,000 greater than that of the county (FIU Metropolitan Center, 2024). In Doral, 9.7% of residents earn incomes below the poverty level (FIU Metropolitan Center, 2024). The population growth and increasing wealth point to a robust local economy, but the poverty levels hint at a weak distribution of this prosperity.

Doral's prosperity could be examined by identifying its basic sectors (Bluestone et al., 2008), calculating location quotients from ACS estimates.

Figure 4

Location Quotients of Sectors in Doral, Florida



Note. Industry sector names have been truncated. Chart prepared by author.

The two basic sectors with the highest location quotients shrank significantly between 2014 and 2024. The wholesale trade sector had the largest location quotient and drop by far, falling from 5.3 to 3.1. Similarly with the information sector, falling from 2.2 To 1.8. Their sizes have shrunk tremendously in the past decade, highlighting a shift in the economic makeup of Doral. With the largest location quotients, they have been the strongest drivers of local prosperity

and backbones of local service sectors. As they have shrunk, their scale of influence over local prosperity has fallen as well.

The transportation and warehousing, and utilities sector's location quotient rose from 1.9 to 2. This sector is particularly important to Doral. Miami International Airport is the number 1 US Airport for international freight (City of Doral, n.d.). The airport requires the more than 3000 transportation/warehousing facilities in Doral. The airport-associated trade and logistics sector includes warehousing and storage, freight transportation and management, and courier services (FIU, 2024). Additionally, the airport also directs business and convention center activities to the city.

The arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services sector was initially nonbasic, but grew tremendously and became a basic sector in 2024. This is related to an increase in consumer amenities which could be attributed to the increasing wealth of the municipality.

The location quotient analysis provides a glimpse into Doral's dynamic economic landscape. Doral still largely relies on industry, but the balance, of late, has shifted towards more consumer amenities. Doral's municipal officials manage this dynamic through their land use planning strategy.

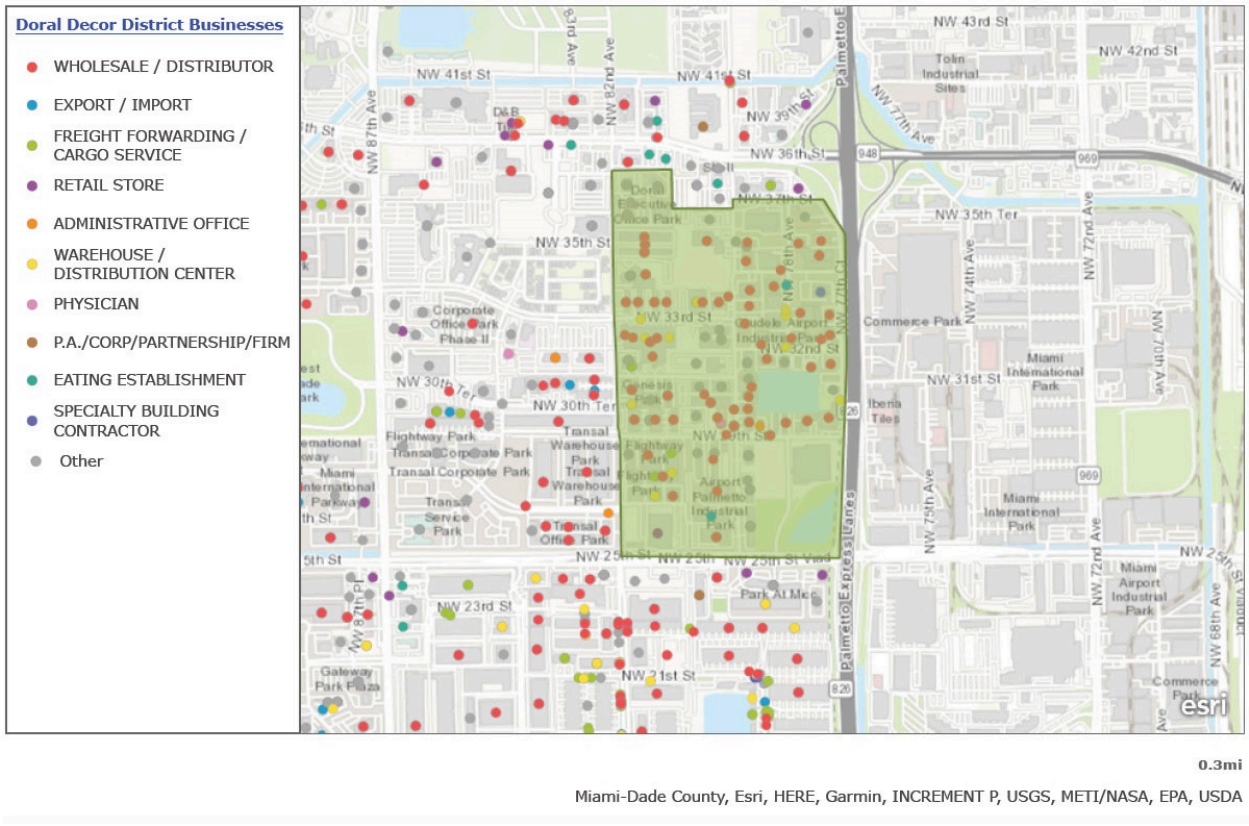
The Role of Land Use Planning in Shaping Future Economic Outcomes

Land use planning has been a mode for the municipality of Doral to direct their future economic development vision. The latest comprehensive plan for Doral was published in 2022 and acts as a legally binding document per Florida state law (City of Doral, 2022). It has 10 elements. The Future Land Use Element describes its goal to shape Doral into "THE premier place to live, work and play in Southeast Florida" (City of Doral, 2022). It lists a range of policies to support the growth of different industry sectors.

Doral's industrial zoning category allows warehouses, office buildings, showrooms, distribution centers, convention centers, hotels. Their future land use plan intentionally directed vacant land in the southern parts of the city to industrial uses, keeping in line with existing spatial patterns of industrial use that arose by the airport. The more prominent basic sectors, such as wholesale trade, and transportation and logistics, fall within industrial zoning. This land use strategy creates space for these important sectors to grow.

Figure 5

Map of Doral Décor District



Source: City of Doral

Attentive to the changing economic landscape of Doral, the plan includes two industrially zoned areas where adaptive reuse is encouraged: the “Downtown Doral Arts District”, and the “Doral Décor District”. The former allows farmers markets, food halls, entertainment, and small-scale outdoor recreational and exercise facilities. Both these districts within the industrial area of Doral are advertised on the city government websites as being off the Palmetto Expressway, and close to the airport, encouraging businesses to relocate there, with contact information for Doral’s business outreach coordinator to help facilitate relocation. These policies

consciously work towards growing businesses in Doral, and creating more recreational facilities. The land use plan also includes a Regional Activity Center (RAC) area which is designated for foreign trade. The foreign trade zone is aptly located due to the airport, and supports several basic industries in Doral, such as the transportation, warehousing, and logistics industry.

Additionally, Doral has included multiple mixed use areas, with land available for redevelopment and incentives to encourage particular types of uses. For instance, the land use plan has a Downtown Mixed Use category, which is envisioned as an area containing a combination of office, commercial, and residential spaces. The city created a density bonus incentive of up to 30% of total units if workforce housing is constructed. Here, Doral is creating an environment where people can both live and work in the city, addressing the high proportion of commuting workers.

Doral is a city saturated with different configurations of economic activity. Their land use plans create space and flexibility for locally important (basic) industries to grow. They also aim to support entrepreneurship and reduce the city's heavy reliance on a commuting workforce. What cannot be dissected from these land use strategies is the distribution of this growing prosperity on all of Doral's residents. Nearly one in ten Doral residents live in poverty, and it is unclear how much of Doral's prosperity they will be able to enjoy as well.

Conclusion

This research paper aimed to disentangle the phases of growth the city of Doral went through, focusing on land use planning as a tool for economic development. Through land use planning, Doral's local authorities were able to articulate a vision for the city's growth and align it with sectors promoting local prosperity.

Doral's case shows that land use planning can be a powerful tool to work with existing economic patterns. Doral's future land use plan did not deviate tremendously from existing patterns of land use, but served to tweak them and strengthen patterns which benefited the local economy. This shows that land use planning cannot create new economic sectors, but can either facilitate or impede growing sectors. Doral's proximity to Miami International Airport set the stage for several sectors to thrive, mainly the transportation, warehousing, and logistics sector. Affluent members of the Venezuelan community settled in Doral because it is near the airport. The growth of Doral's sectors, and the resultant growing wealth of its residents stimulated consumer amenities to come up in Doral. Through land use planning, these transitions have been welcomed.

Lessons from Doral's land use planning strategies could be transferred to other airport towns that follow similar patterns of growth. However, this economic development strategy does not address economic inequity, which has not been a focus of this study, but is crucial to holistic local prosperity. Ultimately, land use planning can be a tool to engage with economic growth, and what that looks like depends on the stakeholders involved, and the municipality's ultimate vision for its community.

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