

## Jesse Biter shares his downtown Sarasota vision at Lakewood Ranch

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Published: Thursday, August 22, 2013 at 4:27 p.m.

Entrepreneur Jesse Biter took his vision for a more vibrant and affordable downtown Sarasota to this master-planned, city-in-the-making.

His Thursday breakfast speech went over well, even considering the receptive crowd — about 130 members of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance, most of whom depend at least in part on the continued success of the 33,000-acre planned community.



*STAFF PHOTO / MICHAEL POLLICK*  
Sarasota entrepreneur Jesse Biter speaks with audience members following his speech Thursday to members of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance.

Biter, who sold a \$2.5-million-a-month automotive sales software system to Auto Trader Group in 2010, lives a long way from Lakewood Ranch, in a downtown condominium tower. He works in the city's core, too, in a four-story former bank building he renovated in 2012, now known as the HuB Building.

He readily admits that much of his world is anchored in five city blocks.

That real estate aside, Biter's other passion — besides the auto supply business Dealers United he has started — is to draw more young professionals downtown and make Sarasota more of a year-round community.

That means supplanting the area's past reliance on rich snowbirds and tourists with workers who are upwardly mobile professionals and businesses that are tomorrow-focused.

"I want us to be the Silicon Valley of the East Coast," Biter said. "Technology is the best business to have in Sarasota. It doesn't pollute. It attracts generally nice people."

### **The plan**

Biter's speech was one of a twice-yearly "Breakfast of Champions" the group holds.

Alliance board member Ian Black, a commercial Realtor who has handled some of Biter's real estate deals, recommended inviting Biter to speak.

Biter contends the entrepreneurs of the HuB, who occupy his building, epitomize the young professionals Sarasota needs to thrive.

To draw younger workers, Biter wants to provide more affordable rentals — in a 168-unit apartment building on property he owns on Second Street near Whole Foods.

He plans to rent units in the \$45 million project for \$1,000 to \$2,000 a month.

"I don't need anything from City Hall for this project," said Biter.

That includes density that exceeds the city's 50 units per acre rule, thanks to a plan approved for a previous owner. The increased density is valid through February 2015.

A previous Biter proposal called for a mixed-use tower on Main Street, on land now housing the Pho Cali Vietnamese Noodle House and the Drunken Poet Cafe.

But those plans fizzled after the city balked at Biter's efforts to increase residential density there.

"You're telling me I can only build 50 units on an acre of land? That's brain damage," Biter told the Lakewood Ranch group. "I was annoyed with this density rule."

He hopes to eventually change the rule by helping to elect growth-minded city commissioners.

"We are not asking for special favors," Biter told a reporter following his speech. "We are just trying to create an environment to encourage growth."

If the city realigned its density rules so that affordable apartments could be built, Biter said, it would make downtown more vibrant on a year-round basis.

"You would see people with their families having picnics in the park. You'd see more people out on the street at night, which means it is safer. You'd see businesses that are thriving because there are more customers year-round."

### **Look to Lakewood Ranch?**

Biter began his quest for more affordable housing when Dealers United employees told him they had to commute — some from long distances — to work downtown, because they could not find adequate places to live in the urban center earning between \$50,000 and \$70,000 a year.

During a Q&A following Biter's speech, commercial Realtor David Neff, of JSS Realty, urged Biter to transplant his vision to Lakewood Ranch, which already has many of the amenities younger professional workers would seek.

"When he says he wants to bring Silicon Valley to this area, or make this the Silicon Valley of the East Coast, that struck a nerve," Neff said later. "We are right here. We've got 33,000 acres."

Biter told the group, in response to Neff's question, that he loves the vibe given off downtown.

"You take the elevator down and you're in the mix," he said.

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