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Fort Lauderdale: The Sleeping Giant of Wall Street South

By Thalius Hecksher, Founder, Florida International Funds Org

For a decade now, the financial world has fixated on one word to describe South Florida: migration. Hedge funds, private equity shops, family offices, and wealth managers have poured out of New York and Chicago into the 120-mile stretch of coastline now nicknamed Wall Street South. Miami's Brickell is the glossy headline. West Palm Beach, with Wells Fargo's wealth management headquarters anchored at One Flagler and roughly 100 financial firms relocated downtown, is the disciplined newcomer. Citadel, Elliott Management, Point72 — the marquee names get recited like scripture.

And yet, sitting squarely between them, with a working port, an international airport, a rebuilt convention district, and a residential downtown that didn't exist a generation ago, is the city the capital-management world keeps forgetting to talk about: Fort Lauderdale.

I moved here in 2012 because I saw what the numbers are only now catching up to. I've spent years since watching this city quietly assemble every ingredient that Dubai, Monaco, and Singapore spent decades building — a deep-water port, a global aviation gateway, a tax structure built for capital, and a lifestyle global talent actually wants to live inside of. In my view: Dubai, Monaco, and Singapore have nothing on Fort Lauderdale. This is a jurisdiction of choice, and it's still waking up to what it is.

A City Rebuilding Itself Around Capital

The physical proof landed mostly in the past year. The $1.1 billion expansion of the Broward County Convention Center wrapped its final phase in October 2025, bringing the facility past 1.2 million square feet, including a 350,000-square-foot exhibition hall, a 65,000-square-foot waterfront ballroom, and direct water-taxi access. Two months later, the Omni Fort Lauderdale opened next door as the district's anchor hotel — 801 rooms, seven dining venues, a Mokara Spa, and 120,000-plus square feet of meeting space, including the 30,000-square-foot Waterway Ballroom, the largest in Greater Fort Lauderdale. The project is projected to generate more than $450 million for the local economy and support over 3,000 jobs. That's not incremental hospitality inventory — that's a city building the infrastructure of a global meetings and capital-markets destination, on purpose.

A few blocks away on Las Olas Boulevard, The Whitfield — a five-star, 81-key hotel with 17 ultra-luxury condominiums priced from $3.7 million to $15 million, joining the Leading Hotels of the World collection — is under construction and targeting 2027, becoming just the third hotel on Fort Lauderdale's most fashionable street. Down at Bahia Mar, a St. Regis Resort and Residences anchors a $2 billion redevelopment. This is a hospitality build-out sized for the clientele private capital brings with it, not the clientele of a beach town.

The Airport and the Port

Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL) is mid-transformation as part of a multi-billion-dollar terminal program. It currently runs roughly 66 gates across four terminals; Terminal 5, a 230,000-square-foot concourse opening in 2026, will add five more, with further phases planned as the airport pushes toward substantially expanded capacity. Pair that with Port Everglades next door — one of the busiest cruise ports on earth and a major cargo gateway — and you have air and sea access few Wall Street South contenders can match on the same footprint.

Then there's the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show, the largest in-water boat show in the world, drawing more than 100,000 attendees and generating an estimated $1.8 to $2 billion in economic impact over five days. Mayor Dean Trantalis has put it bluntly: the show's impact "more than doubles" that of the Super Bowl — an event that, cumulatively over the years, rivals hosting the Super Bowl multiple times over, every autumn, like clockwork.

The Migration Is Already Moving North

Here's what I see from my own backyard: the corridor's center of gravity is drifting north. Miami-Dade absorbed the first wave of headline relocations — Citadel, Blackstone, Goldman Sachs expansions, Palantir's move to Aventura — but the density and cost that come with that wave push the next one further up the coast. Executives who anchored in Brickell a few years ago are now buying in Fort Lauderdale's waterfront neighborhoods and along Las Olas, trading Miami traffic for a 25-minute commute to the same clients, airport, and port — without leaving the Wall Street South footprint. Fort Lauderdale sits at the geographic and infrastructural center point of that migration, anchored by an airport, a port, and a convention district neither Miami nor West Palm Beach can match in combination.

The conference calendar backs this up. The rebuilt convention center's 2026 bookings read like a cross-section of corporate America choosing Fort Lauderdale on its own merits: Colgate-Palmolive, Alnylam Pharmaceuticals, the 1,200-person Sandler Summit, a Willkie Farr & Gallagher partner retreat, the American Association of Insurance Services, and the U.S. Travel Association, among dozens of others — national organizations that could have chosen Miami Beach, Orlando, or Las Vegas and chose Fort Lauderdale instead. That is how a city stops being a stop on the corridor and starts being its center point.

The People Are Already Here

Skeptics will point to Miami's scale or West Palm Beach's marquee relocations. Fair enough. But look at who is actually living here, and for how long, and the picture changes.

Fort Lauderdale's population has climbed past 190,000, up nearly 15% since 2010 — modest by national standards, but the story isn't the top-line number. It's downtown. According to the mayor's own April 2026 newsletter, families with children downtown are up 83% since 2018, with kids under 14 now the fastest-growing age group in the urban core. That's not a tourist statistic — it's the signature of a neighborhood converting, in real time, into a place people build a life. Add a new YMCA Family Center under construction at Holiday Park — 48,000 square feet, paired with a Broward Health emergency department, breaking ground in early 2026 and opening in 2027 — and you have the civic infrastructure of a real, permanent residential downtown, not a seasonal one.

The Huizenga Precedent

If you want to know whether Fort Lauderdale can produce and hold serious capital, look at its own history. Wayne Huizenga is, by every account, the only entrepreneur in American business history to build three separate Fortune 500 companies from scratch — Waste Management, Blockbuster Entertainment, and AutoNation. He did it from Fort Lauderdale, starting with a single garbage truck, and lived here until his death in 2018. What city in the world can make that claim? None that I'm aware of. The infrastructure now being built — convention district, hotel inventory, airport capacity, residential downtown — is what makes it possible to produce the next one, and the next fund, without anyone having to leave.

The Talent Pipeline Is Already Built

A jurisdiction of choice needs more than convention centers — it needs schools that produce the people who staff and run the firms that move here. Fort Lauderdale doesn't need to build this from scratch.

Pine Crest School, founded here in 1934, has been named the number one private school in the nation multiple times by the Jay Mathews Challenge Index, and Newsweek ranks it among the top STEM high schools in the country. St. Thomas Aquinas High School has built one of the most decorated athletic programs in America: 17 state championships, seven consecutive — a Florida record — and more NFL Draft picks over the past decade than nearly any high school in the country, with alumni including Michael Irvin and Joey and Nick Bosa. It's also the alma mater of Michael Connelly, author of The Lincoln Lawyer.

For the business talent this corridor runs on, there's Nova Southeastern University's H. Wayne Huizenga College of Business and Entrepreneurship — home to the largest MBA and Master of Accounting programs in Florida, AACSB-accredited, and fittingly named for the same entrepreneur who built three Fortune 500 companies from this city.

A City With More History Than It Gets Credit For

Despite its title, "Miami Vice" used Broward County locations throughout its run, including a scene at a hotel in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea and creator Michael Mann's own intracoastal-front home here, used repeatedly as a recurring set. St. Anthony Catholic School, a Fort Lauderdale landmark built in 1926, counts Michael Connelly among its alumni — as well as tennis legend Chris Evert. And Leslie Nielsen, star of "Airplane!" and "The Naked Gun," made Fort Lauderdale his home and is buried at the city's historic Evergreen Cemetery, alongside many of its founding families.

None of this builds a convention center or fills a gate at FLL. But it's the texture global capital and talent notice — real institutions, real history, real culture, not just new towers on reclaimed waterfront.

The Roster of Names Already Here

Start with finance. Donald Sussman, founder of the hedge fund Paloma Partners, spent the past decade assembling a waterfront compound in Fort Lauderdale's gated Harbor Beach — and in 2024 sold it for $70 million, a Broward County record at the time. Terry Stiles, the late chairman of Stiles Corporation, is the developer most responsible for turning Fort Lauderdale from a spring-break town into a serious commercial skyline, with more than 43 million square feet built. And Huizenga's own roots run deeper than most realize: he graduated from Pine Crest in 1956, then founded Waste Management here in 1971.

Sports has planted its flag here too. The Florida Panthers — back-to-back Stanley Cup champions, owned by Virtu Financial founder Vincent "Vinnie" Viola — now train out of the Baptist Health IcePlex, a $65 million practice facility built inside Fort Lauderdale's own Holiday Park. And despite the name, Inter Miami CF has played and trained in Fort Lauderdale from day one — Chase Stadium, built on the old Lockhart Stadium site, is where Lionel Messi and Inter Miami won the 2025 MLS Cup. Messi himself lives minutes away, in Fort Lauderdale's Colony Bay neighborhood. NFL Hall of Famer Jason Taylor, the Dolphins' all-time sacks leader, calls Fort Lauderdale's Millionaire's Row home too.

This is not a city waiting for its first marquee name. It already has a deep bench of them across finance, sports, and culture — it simply hasn't gotten credit as the corridor's center point for holding them.

Why I Never Left

I have a personal stake in this thesis, and I'll say it plainly.

My wife and I relocated to Fort Lauderdale in 2012 with four young children, all under six, to lead the charge on building the APEX empire here in the Americas. We could have planted that flag almost anywhere. We chose Fort Lauderdale for reasons that had nothing to do with spreadsheets: proximity to the beach, easy reach of Miami without living inside it, and an American suburban feel that fit raising a young family while building something ambitious.

Fourteen years later, we haven't moved an inch. Our kids thrived in their schools and built friendships that last. We built our own — the greatest friendships of our lives, personal and business alike, came out of this city. And the business itself has exploded. I used to fly to New York, London, or Hong Kong for meetings that now happen minutes from my front door, often on Las Olas Boulevard itself. The capital, the talent, and the relationships that once required a passport now require a short drive. That's what this whole article has been describing — it just happened to me first.

If you're weighing where to plant a flag of your own, get in touch. We're here to help across every aspect of it — personal, business, professional. We provide the bridge from no knowledge to a lot of knowledge.

Waking the Giant

Miami will keep the headlines. West Palm Beach will keep collecting the marquee relocations. That's fine — a corridor benefits from more than one center of gravity. But global asset managers, family offices, and fund founders scouting this region owe it to themselves to look at Fort Lauderdale on its own terms: a rebuilt convention and hospitality district, an airport and port expanding in tandem, a downtown population growing up rather than just through, and a track record of producing the kind of builder the capital-management world claims to be looking for.

The corridor calls itself Wall Street South. Fort Lauderdale has quietly built the runway, the ballroom, the waterfront, and the neighborhood to be its capital. It's time the rest of the world woke up to it.

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