

Reject industrial facility in South Miami-Dade. It needs agriculture and a healthy bay, instead

BY RICHARD GROSSO
AND KATY SORENSON



The proposed South Dade Logistics District — hailed by its investors as a job-creating savior for south Miami-Dade County — is instead destructive and unnecessary industrial development.

The long-term health and prosperity of south Miami-Dade County depends not only on jobs, but on a healthy Biscayne Bay, clean water, protection of the Everglades and a viable agriculture industry. That's why we're calling on the Miami-Dade County Commission to follow staff's recommendation and vote No on May 19.

Jobs? Similar large developments already proposed or under way in South Dade — in locations where industrial use is currently allowed — offer the potential for at least 6,400 additional jobs, according to the county's professional staff. In fact, previously approved warehouse-style development projects remain largely unbuilt, due to waning demand. Why would the Miami-Dade County Commission convert 800 acres of productive agricultural land providing long-term jobs in South Dade to allow more warehouses?

In its 1,400-page analysis of the project, the county determined the investors behind this land-use change, Aligned Real Estate Holdings and South Dade Industrial Partners, have not substantiated their inflated jobs numbers, which assume a full build-

out of the 800-acre site. And there's not even an actual development plan for the majority of the 800 acres, which the applicants do not actually own.

The developers argue that a new major employment center to attract jobs is desperately needed for South Dade, and that there isn't enough available land in South Dade to support those jobs. This is verifiably false. The county report concludes: "Given that South Tier's current industrial land supply currently has the capacity to sustain industrial growth beyond the year 2040, increasing the acreage more than twofold . . . as proposed in the application, runs contrary to the policy objectives of prioritising the use of existing sites currently inside the [Urban Development Boundary.]

"Additionally, the application does not demon-

strate why available industrial parcels within the UDB are not adequate for the proposed industrial development."

Farmers and state agricultural experts contradict the applicant's claims that the land is not agriculturally useful, saying the project will eliminate agricultural production and jobs.

If this application is approved, it will result in a windfall for investors — a substantial increase in property values and more entitlements for the use of the land. What it will not do is provide an economic boon to the region's residents. And it will come at the expense of county taxpayers who will be on the hook for long-term maintenance of new public infrastructure needed for this massive development — which is in an area proven prone to flooding.

Then there's Biscayne

Bay. The project would do damage to decades of planning to protect and restore Biscayne Bay and the surrounding environment. The applicants' claims that their project will protect the bay and related ecosystems are absurd, refuted by every local, state and federal environmental agency that has reviewed its plans.

Those agencies, as well as a group of well-respected independent scientific, technical and economic experts, have made clear that building an industrial facility on top of 800 acres of unique farmland and open space — strategically located for restoring freshwater flows into Biscayne Bay and its surrounding wetlands — threatens to compromise ongoing Everglades restoration projects needed to restore the Bay.

County rules preclude putting new urban infrastructure on this low-lying

land that is vulnerable to sea-level rise and coastal storms. The developer portrays the project's major environmental problems as somehow a fiction created by "some environmental groups."

The reality is that the county's environmental and planning staff have issued two damning reports and rebuttals of the applicant's claims — relative to almost every aspect of the project. State environmental and agricultural experts agree with those criticisms and raised many of their own.

Commissioners should reject this request to upend longstanding rules needed to ensure the health and prosperity of south Miami-Dade for a flawed land-use scheme. The economic and environmental promises are empty.

Richard Grosso is an environmental land-use attorney with 30 years of experience in South Florida. Katy Sorenson served on the County Commission, representing District 8, from 1994-2010.

KEEP YOUTH HEALTHY IN MIND AND BODY

Miami-Dade Schools are replacing an excellent sex-ed curriculum with a harmful step backward

BY LAUREN COSTANTINO
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Before the pandemic, Miami-Dade Public Schools had an excellent sex education curriculum. It was comprehensive, age-appropriate, inclusive and often delivered by professional sexual health educators through community providers such as Planned Parenthood, Trinity Church and Be-Strong.

All of that changed last month, when school board members voted to pass a textbook as the sole sex education for all public middle and high schools. This is a step backward.

Replacing comprehensive sexuality education with a single textbook means less sex education in general. That's a disservice to students and will take a toll on their mental and physical health.

LESS FLEXIBILITY

The problem is not the specific textbook — "Comprehensive Health Skills" (there's a version for middle school and one for high school) is a typical research-based health education textbook with chapters on things like nutrition, physical activity and sexually transmitted diseases. It meets *most* of the sex ed state standards. There are no chapters on human trafficking, which is a requirement by Florida statute.

But textbooks are static, rigid ways to deliver information, and they go out of date quickly. They're also costly, making them difficult to replace with an up-to-date version.

Pre-pandemic, Miami-Dade used a system called the three Rs: Rights, Respect and Responsibility. It follows the National Sexuality Education Standards and is geared to be age-appropriate for each grade level. It's comprehensive, so it addresses "both the functional knowledge related to sexuality and the specific skills necessary to adopt healthy behaviors," according to Advocates for Youth, a nonprofit that works to improve sexual health policy on local, state and federal levels.

It can be delivered in parts, meaning educators

can decide when to use lessons that fit into an existing curriculum. And there's an extensive teacher guide on how to use the lessons in a real classroom, which is important because many teachers aren't professional trained health educators.

The three Rs program feels like it's designed for a real person rather than a robot. It approaches sex education as something that students have the right to learn about, inviting curiosity and questions rather than using pressure or fear to discuss a topic often shrouded in shame.

REDACTED CHAPTERS

In the new textbook, only four out of 24 chapters explicitly address sexuality or disease education. There would have been more, but the district is removing a chapter called "Understanding Sexuality" from both middle and high school textbooks.

The board claims the reason for the removal is that the topics are not required under state standards. But, it's likely that the "Parental Rights in Education" bill, which bans teacher-led instruction of gender and sexuality in grades K-3 or in a manner that is not age or developmentally appropriate, has something to do with the redaction. The chapter is not available on the district's website, so we can't see what students will be missing. It may well be about gender identity and sexual orientation — two topics that would serve LGBTQ students well. But in DeSantis' "free state of Florida," not all kids are able to get the education they need.

Another reason our students need better sex ed: Miami-Dade has one of the highest rates of new HIV diagnoses in the country. Also, Miami-Dade and Broward have some of the highest cases of syphilis in the state, according to the Florida Department of Health.

Malaika Woody, a MD/MPH candidate at the University of Miami who's completing her pediatric residency, says many of the teenagers she treats have a lack of understanding about STDs or STIs — even after they've contracted one.

"They've heard of HIV, they know it's a disease, and that's the extent of their knowledge," Woody said. Woody says adults often assume that teen-

agers know more than they do when it comes to safe sex. Sometimes, she'll have to have difficult conversations with patients about basic concepts like consent.

"They really don't comprehend consent," Woody said. "It's really startling to me."

WHAT HAPPENED?

After Florida passed sex ed legislation in 2021 that requires school boards to review and approve sex ed materials annually, all active programming was put on hold in Miami-Dade. All school districts in Florida now have to choose a sex ed curriculum that can be used across every school in the county. A textbook is an understandable choice, as it's easier to regulate and get approval from board members. But it means the better, more complete curriculum gets tossed aside.

The legislation also requires districts to inform parents of the sex ed curriculum ahead of school board meetings so that they have time to weigh in — and makes it easier for parents to opt out.

More parental involvement isn't necessarily a bad thing — except it didn't really work this time. According to discussion at the school board meeting on April 13, not many parents reached out either in favor of or against the textbooks. Maybe there wasn't enough outreach. Or maybe the bill was never really about parental involvement, but more about pleasing a conservative voter base that believes sex ed should mostly be taught at home.

"We represent a very conservative district," noted school board member Marta Pérez, at an April 6 meeting, adding that many parents in her district might not want their middle schoolers looking at pictures of condoms and IUDs during school.

The good news about the new legislation is that Miami-Dade has another chance next year to get it right. School board members must put aside their biases and remember that — politics aside — comprehensive sexuality education helps young people lead happier, healthier lives. That's a goal we can all agree on.

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May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Young people are at higher risk of having suicidal thoughts and the COVID-19 pandemic has made that trend worse.

Depression and suicide among children and teens are alarming in post-pandemic era



BY KATHY COPPOLA
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It's expected that, after two years of multiple disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, there would be repercussions on our collective mental health. As recent research has shown, it is heavily impacting children and teens.

Since 2009, rates of suicide among youth and young adults have been on the rise. Depression, hopelessness and suicide ideation among them are alarmingly widespread, a trend challenging families across the country, including in Miami-Dade County and the Keys.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. It is more important than ever to become educated about mental health and warning signs of ill health and suicide risk. The isolation, stress and loss of parents and family members from COVID-19 exacerbated a worrisome trend.

The statistics are alarming. In 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that suicide was the second-leading cause of death for people between ages 10 and 34, and ninth among all age groups. In 2021, a CDC survey showed that about 20% of high school

students and 40% of LGBTQ youth said they had contemplated suicide.

FINDING HELP

Although children and teens are disproportionately affected by this mental-health crisis, adults, particularly people of color, also are feeling the effects. Most mental illness goes untreated, especially in communities of color. In an advisory issued in December 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy warned that young people are facing "devastating" mental-health effects as a result of the challenges experienced by their generation, including the pandemic.

We know that people do not know where to turn for help. The psychological and financial blows of the past two years have increased the urgency of outreach and education efforts at the National Alliance on Mental Illness in Miami. We also know that resources to help people who need support are stretched thin. But it is imperative that we work together as a community to raise our literacy about mental health, substance use and suicide prevention.

There are resources to help those in Miami-Dade and the Florida Keys, including those who are uninsured. Thriving Mind South Florida, funded in part by the Florida Department of Children and Families, is an outstanding organization that oversees an extensive network of mental health and substance-use providers, including facilities for

those in crisis operated by Banyan Health Systems (Miami-Dade) and by Guidance Care Center (Monroe County).

FREE PROGRAMS

In addition, NAMI Miami-Dade, the local affiliate of the largest peer-led mental-health organization in the U.S., offers mental health programs, such as support groups, peer mentoring, educational classes and outreach. From suicide prevention training for families and peer education and support, NAMI has a broad portfolio of programs to help us gain mental-health literacy. These programs are always offered at no cost to participants, led by trained peer-leaders and confidential.

Mental health is essential to our well-being. Individuals can recover from a mental-health condition and lead gratifying and balanced lives. Let's work together to end the silence about mental health and help all who are struggling realize that they are not alone.

For more information and to learn about NAMI and community mental-health resources, join us on May 21 for the Miami-Dade Walk for Mental Health Awareness. More at NamiMiami.org. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 800-273-8255.

Kathy Coppola is executive director and Susan Racher is board president of NAMI Miami-Dade.