

MIAMI TODAY

June 10, 2020

Circulation: 28,665 / UMV: 32,940

37 Years MIAMI TODAY

WEEK OF THURSDAY, JUNE 11, 2020

A Singular Voice in an Evolving City

WWW.MIAMITODAYNEWS.COM \$4.00

AUTONOMOUS VEHICLE DEMONSTRATIONS TARGET MICRO-MOBILITY TRANSIT TIES, PAGE 3



FPL RATES STAND: In an issue stemming from US tax cuts approved in 2017, state regulators rejected an effort to force Florida Power & Light to reduce base electric rates. The state Office of Public Counsel, which represents consumers, and two business groups long argued that FPL had not properly passed along savings from the 2017 tax overhaul to ratepayers and filed a case at the state Public Service Commission seeking lower rates.

But the commission closed the case Tuesday.

NO COUNTY ROAD FEES: A ordinance that would bar municipalities in Miami-Dade from charging fees, imposing requirements or requiring permits for work on county-owned roads or rights-of-way has cleared the first of three legislative hurdles before becoming law. The amendment to the county code, sponsored by **Eileen Higgins**, is next scheduled for a hearing at the Health Care and County Operations Committee July 15. "Prohibiting municipalities from requiring permits or the payment of a fee for work on county-owned or county-maintained rights-of-way would help streamline both county public works projects and private construction projects that affect county rights-of-way," an accompany memo said. Ms. Higgins's item also amends a recent ordinance by **Joe Martinez** that requires any person or entity that damages a county-owned right-of-way to replace the damaged area with materials of equal or greater quality than what had been there before. Mr. Martinez's item required that repairs be made within 45 days "to ... legally permissible preexisting condition, including private property damaged during construction," with violators subject to \$500-per-day fines. Ms. Higgins's item shortens the repair window to 30 days.

TENANTS' RIGHTS EDUCATION: Residents renting apartments, townhouses and single-family units in Miami-Dade may soon be more knowledgeable about what their rights are when landlords try to evict them with methods like illegal lockouts and utility shutoffs. A resolution that on Monday cleared the Housing, Social Services and Economic Development Committee would, if approved July 8, direct Mayor **Carlos Giménez**'s office to collaborate with pro bono law group Legal Services of Greater Miami Inc. to develop a tenant right and education program. The program would focus on tenants' rights enumerated in state and local statutes, what steps tenants can take to seek redress with agencies that provide utility services to their homes, which agencies tenants can contact for assistance and other information that they may need. The resolution, sponsored by Commissioner **Daniella Levine Cava**, would also direct the mayor's staff to find funding for the program and report within 60 days on progress to create the program.

THE ACHIEVER



Christina Crespi

Leading Downtown Development Authority into recovery
The profile is on Page 4

Open paths to outdoors dining gain

By **JESSE SCHECKNER**

Businesses that have struggled due to social distancing to serve as many customers as they did before Covid-19 may soon have more room to expand outdoors.

Miami-Dade commissioners in committee June 9 gave a preliminary OK to an Esteban Bovo Jr. resolution that would help municipalities temporarily close and reroute traffic away from roads near street-side businesses.

The item, due a final vote July 8, would also direct the mayor's office to "review and process on a prioritized and expedited basis all ... permit requests received from municipalities, as well as applications pertaining to county roads."

It follows a prior directive to allow restaurants in unincorporated Miami-Dade to temporarily expand for outdoor dining, which Joe Martinez sponsored once restaurants were cleared to return to 50% capacity indoors and up to 100% of occupancy with outdoor seating.

Temporarily redirecting some traffic, Mr. Bovo's item says, will enable restaurants to do just that while also helping "businesses to reopen, as well as the public to safely and more fully utilize outdoor spaces for improved health and well-being."

Miami and Miami Beach acted similarly, with Miami's Downtown Development Authority (DDA) urging "all respective governmental entities with responsibilities over any streets within [the area] to consider" temporary road closures.

By law, the county has authority "to review traffic flow and maintenance of traffic throughout the county," the DDA resolution said.

Transit Alliance Miami Campaign Organizer **María Cristina Chicúen**, the only resident to comment on the item Tuesday, said all 13 commissioners should move quickly to prioritize district streets to close, both to help businesses and to accommodate non-motorized mobility.

"Many residents are turning to bicycles to move about the county," she said, "and they need a safe space to ride."

Bids final step to flow fresh water to Everglades

By **MARILYN BOWDEN**

Contractors have until the beginning of next month to bid on a project to raise a 6.5-mile segment of the Tamiami Trail, the final step in infrastructure to increase the flow of fresh water to the Everglades and Florida Bay.

"The deadline for bids is early July," said **Alecia Collins**, deputy communications director for the Florida Department of Transportation, which is co-managing the project with the National Park Service. Tamiami Trail, the southernmost 275 miles of US 41, runs through Everglades National Park.

The Florida Department of Transportation advertised the Tamiami Trail Next Steps Phase 2 Project on April 28 as a low-bid design-build contract. Ms. Collins said the department won't release information related to responses prior to the final selection at the end of July, but typically bids from contractors come in just before deadline.

"Construction is expected to begin this fall," she said, "and will be completed in spring 2024."

Gov. **Ron DeSantis** recently called the project "a key component of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan," which was authorized

by Congress in 2000 to "restore, preserve, and protect" the South Florida ecosystem while providing for other water-related needs of the region.

The plan, estimated to cost more than \$10.5 billion within a 35-year timeline, is the largest hydrologic restoration project ever undertaken in the US, according to the National Park Service's website.

Improvements to the Tamiami Trail began in 2008 with construction by the Army Corps of Engineers of a one-mile bridge at the trail's eastern end. In 2019 the Florida Department of Transportation completed Tamiami Trail Next Steps Phase 1, which involved removing the existing roadbed and constructing two new bridges.

Gov. DeSantis announced a year ago that, with \$60 million from the US Department of Transportation and \$40 million from the state, full funding for Phase 2 of the Tamiami Trail Next Steps project had been secured. Ms. Collins confirmed that the budget remains unchanged.

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan seeks to repair injuries done to the Everglades ecosystem during construction of the Tamiami Trail in the 1920s. The roadway

has blocked water flow from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay ever since.

"Because we have such a flat landscape, the way to make water flow in South Florida is to raise the water level," said **Steve Davis**, communications director & senior ecologist at the Everglades Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to restoration of the Everglades and nearby protected natural areas.

"Bridges help," he said, "but the real key is to raise the water level to get more water under the bridges. Because the trail was not built to modern roadway standards, we currently can't do that."

The Tamiami Trail Next Steps Phase 2 project, Dr. Davis said, "will scrape it down to bedrock at an elevation that allows us to raise it to levels that have been cut off for nearly a century."

The next piece, he said, will be construction of the Everglades Reservoir, described in the restoration plan as "an above-ground reservoir directly south of Lake Okeechobee, in the 500,000 acres of sugarcane fields that make up the Everglades Agricultural Area."

"We hope," Dr. Davis said, "to see funding from the federal government to start this year."

Christina Crespi took over in time to lead downtown team...

Since she came back home from college, Christina Crespi has been involved in government. A Miami Beach native, her fondness for Miami Beach's parks and recreation led her to her hometown city's government, where she worked as a case worker in homeless services. Her boss at the time then recommended she apply for a former county management training program, where out of 150 candidates she was one of four selected.

She quickly transitioned into permanent staff positions, working under former county manager George Burgess and then Alina Hudak, the first woman county manager. Then Alice Robertson, former executive director of the Downtown Development Authority, told her of an opening at the agency working in government relations. Some of Ms. Crespi's first initiatives included addressing the homeless issue downtown and attracting more schools into the area, which led the county school board to invest millions in a middle school downtown, as well as attracting Mater Brickell Preparatory Academy to the area.

She continued moving up the ladder to deputy director, and in April the Miami City Commission ratified her appointment as executive director — just as Covid-19 came into the picture.

As the unexpected makes its way into the fray, Ms. Crespi says it's important to embrace change. It's something that was instilled in her by her parents, and something that as a single mom she's teaching her children.

"My parents are from Cuba and Venezuela, but they're business owners here in Miami Beach and have evolved in all different types of capacities, so I learned from them to embrace change and move things forward no matter what the circumstance."

Ms. Crespi videocalled Miami Today reporter Gabriel Poblete.

Q: Can you explain what the DDA is and touch on its history?

A: The DDA was formed in the '60s. It's an economic development agency focused on the economic vitality of Downtown Miami. We have a Downtown Enhancement Team (DET) of formally homeless individuals that cleans the streets of downtown. We're part of that homeless solution that way because we're giving them jobs.

People think, "why is an economic development agency doing that?" Well if you don't have beautiful area to sell and promote to our businesses and to bring in residents to live there, how can we do that? That's why the board got behind that initiative and it's been a really successful program that's been expanded into different areas. That's one focus that we call Enhanced Services at the DDA.

The other area that we focus on is economic development. We recruit businesses into the district, both internationally and nationally. The main focus has been the Northeast in the recent years. I went to Chicago and New York and helped to educate about all the quality of life benefits of moving into Miami, and Downtown Miami in particular. We're still getting companies calling us who want to come. Locally, ensuring that our



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The Achiever

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local businesses are able to, for instance, navigate the permit process at the city.

Now that 100,000 residents live in this very dense area, along with a 250,000 daytime work population, making sure that we are addressing walkability and access. We have a team that deals with all aspects of that, from opening up our Baywalk, which is almost a five-mile linear park along the bay from Brickell into Edgewater. Making sure we connect the pinch points that are still not connected. We do a lot of advocacy around projects like that, getting capital funding from the state and the feds to try to finish projects of that sort.

We have a 15-member board that sets our policy. The agency was a lot smaller 10 years ago and grew into this role as the population continued to grow. I like to call us a mini-city without the enforcement aspect, but everything from connecting our advocacy groups and the community that exists in downtown.

Our board consists of residents in downtown, business owners, corporations in downtown. We meet monthly every third Friday. With the leadership of our new chairman [Commissioner Manolo Reyes], he's about getting things

done and going back to the basics. He's been great leader and we've been able to get a lot of things done under his leadership.

Q: What is the relationship between the City of Miami and the DDA?

A: We're a quasi-governmental agency of the City of Miami. The state of Florida formed the DDA and created a special taxing district. Anyone that owns property downtown pays an additional millage as part of the City of Miami's budget, and that's allocated to the DDA to run all the initiatives. The city approves our budget every year.

They also have the authority to approve a chairman every year, and it doesn't have to be the district commissioner. Our chairman isn't the district commissioner but the commission decided to put him on.

Q: How has downtown and its population changed?

A: I grew up here. I saw it go from very quiet, not too eventful atmosphere to this bustling 24/7 community. During the recession, the agency worked really hard to bring millennials into the condos that were vacant, and that created this vibe of very young energy that wasn't necessarily there before.

What do you see now? You see families, these millennials now got married, they had children. The school initiative came out of all of this and being able to keep people in downtown.

I would say Brickell and the Central Business District (CBD), and even up in Edgewater, are very different in their layout but they're very much the same in the sense of the amount of people that live there and the passion to make it a place that people want to stay and live in. Everything from the cultural institutions that weren't there 10 years ago, even the Maurice Ferré Park, and how that park came into its own. Now it's a completely different landscape and it ties into the museums.

Just having that beautiful waterfront that is the backdrop of this community and this downtown is really special and unique. We have a historic district in the CBD. You can walk around and see buildings from the early 1900s, Olympia

Theater is one that is my personal favorite; walk down the street and then you have a Zaha Hadid signature landmark, beautiful condo. It's a very interesting landscape and that renaissance that's happened even in architecture.

We're one of the biggest financial districts in the nation, next to New York. The technology industry and the start-up community that's been coming out of this has been really neat as well. I see downtown evolving into a real hustle-and-bustle downtown.

Q: What are some of the things the DDA's been doing to help the downtown residents during the pandemic?

A: Early on it was all about information and making sure our residents were aware of the closures, the CDC recommendations and all the things that came in that first week.

We called every restaurant in the district once they were deemed essential. The team did one-on-one consultations and listened to what the needs were and very quickly it was financial. We very quickly initiated a small business task force. We helped about 80 businesses within that time frame. We're still doing that.

We created a Go Local campaign with the restaurants to help promote their businesses and the delivery direct concept. Third-party apps like the Uber Eats, Postmates were still charging the fees at the time. We came up with this concept of delivery direct, which really helped the businesses also evolve. Also, in that third-week time frame, we did a partnership with the South Beach Food and Wine Festival in FIU. They leveraged about \$1.4 million and we threw in a small amount of money and were able to get 80 restaurants \$180,000 of funding.

We created a DWNTWN Vibes series. Every Friday at 6 p.m. we feature a DJ on our social media that would have worked at a bar in downtown or restaurant. That took off, which led to the David Guetta event that we had. They reached out to us through one of our board members and wanted to do a charity event at the condo the Icon, and we partnered with them to make sure we had security in place. We had over 20 million people watching that event worldwide. It was two-hour set, and it was so inspiring to see how the entire world really came together during that time. And the donations that came in were just amazing, \$700,000 raised locally for Feeding South Florida.

Now our focus has been recovery. Now that businesses are open, our board established a recovery committee. Once the city issued their plan in phases, we have a similar approach. We have an ambassador team that walks around downtown, and they wear orange shirts. These are the gentlemen and women that help you find your way. What they're doing now since we don't have as much of foot traffic is sanitizing and getting ready for the reopening.

Q: What is the DDA doing to help those people experiencing homelessness in the downtown area?

A: Homeless individuals have a higher level of protection within the City of Miami than other places in Miami-Dade County [because of the Pottinger

...in developing ways to cope with Covid-19, now to recover

Agreement]. As a result, you have a lot of homeless individuals migrating into the area, more with the situation.

What the DDA has tried to be is very solution-oriented and trying to come up with holistic partnerships that help to get people off the street and get them the services they need. We're not in the business of direct-service providing. We do fund beds at Camillus House for instance in a partnership with the City of Miami, which is part of the Pottinger settlement that the police and the case management team at the city can offer bed to a homeless individual instead of arresting them.

Through the DET team, we employ folks that live at Camillus House and at Chapman. That program has expanded into the Omni CRA area and the city wants to expand it even further.

Recently, our chairman sponsored an ordinance to create a feeding permit program, which just got passed in first reading. They're working out the details of that program, partnering with the Homeless Trust to provide services.

Our Pit Stop Program is a bathroom initiative that started a couple of years back and part of this whole Pottinger Appeal settlement. There needed to be a bathroom within a certain radius before the police could ever engage. The board got behind an initiative to create public restrooms. Out of that pilot came our first public restroom, which was by the library in downtown. It recently had to be moved by the college station.

As a result of the Covid-19 crisis, and all of the homeless individuals that are unfortunately now on the street, we wanted to make sure that they have a humane option to go to the restroom, so the board and the city allocated dollars in partnership with Camillus House, over \$1 million, to install three to four permanent bathrooms over the next year.

We're working closely with the Homeless Trust and Judge Steven Leifman. He's been a huge advocate for many years on homeless issues, in particular mental

health and substance abuse. Through his leadership and our advocacy at the state level, we've been able to get his diversion program funded every year, over \$500,000 a year, which helps our sick, chronic homeless individuals avoid having to go to jail.

He has been working with the county on opening another facility at the former state hospital. It's under construction and it will be a state-of-the-art one-stop shop facility where our severely chronic, mentally ill homeless individuals and substance abuse individuals can actually get help. That's to be opening in the next two years, hopefully sooner.

Q: What are some those initiatives to make downtown more pedestrian-friendly?

A: The Baywalk initiative, using our waterfront as another option has been a focus. Another big initiative has been Biscayne Green. It's taking over the parking in the middle of Biscayne Boulevard, working with the Miami Parking Authority on what that could mean in the future. We've been right now in the lane elimination study that's required by the Florida Department of Transportation to see if we can reduce a lane of traffic and create this linear park on the middle of Biscayne Boulevard safely but also reduce the cars that are on the street and that way give people that option.

The board got behind the Brickell Bridge issue, which is a lot of the reason why we have that gridlock in Brickell. This is a federal process and it's very lengthy. We're trying to get the different entities to adjust the hours of the closure periods and we got to a point where they were willing to pilot a change and they did and now it's the next step. We got them to allocate funding the pedestrian arms that would come down, were causing a lot of this backlog and time delay.

Moving forward, what the Covid-19 situation and this pandemic has shown us is people enjoy walking and biking more now than before.

We were working very closely with

Commissioner [Eileen] Higgins, who is our vice chair, and Ken Russell, our district commissioner, on a bike network that would connect all of downtown. I'm proud to say that through their leadership, four bike lanes will be installed in coming months. They're in design right now.

Q: How is the DDA making downtown more attractive for residents in the county and the city?

A: Being a local, I take pride in doing exactly that. I want to create a vibe in downtown where our locals can come back and enjoy all that we have to offer. Another thing we worked a couple of years back was particularly in the CBD we created a Flagler specialty district because the footprint for businesses to open, bars and restaurants in particular, is tight, and the city had a requirement of distance. You couldn't have another bar within 500 feet of one, and that hindered business development. We got that changed, and over the past two years we've seen 18 or so bars and restaurants come into the district, more up in the Edgewater area and really create this vibe and this scene that's unique to anywhere else in Miami. Places are smaller, they're more intimate.

I have younger siblings in their mid-20s. I use them as my case-study. "We go to Downtown Miami, Mama Tried and Black Market." It was really neat that we were able to be a part of that movement, and bring our locals back to downtown. Brickell, we have some of the best restaurants, for me, in the world.

Also, to make sure that people have options to come into Downtown that don't involve getting in the car. Really getting behind an east-west connection and the SMART plan at the county, the Baylink that's connecting us to the Beach, and once that happens, that's going to be huge opportunity to bring our locals back from all areas of the county. A lot of the hindrance is "gosh, I have to drive in traffic."

Making sure that we're pushing those

projects forward, which are moving, is really important. You can get on the Metro and come from Dadeland and into downtown without ever having to use your car. We need that east-west and up north, too, so that everyone can also enjoy that ease.

Brightline opened up to a whole other market. What a neat concept where I'm a local, I can go into West Palm and have lunch with my friends and brunch and come back home and I never have to get in my car.

There are special spots like the Olympia Theater that a lot of people don't realize are still there. Creating that awareness that we have this historic landmark that you can go see a concert in, that's not necessarily a big venue like an American Airlines Arena, but we have everything from that to historic. We promote everything around that and partnering with one of our big developers in the district to activate Flagler in particular while we're waiting for this construction project to happen. What we've done over the past year is bring in local artists to vacant retail storefronts.

Q: How would you imagine downtown 10, 20 years from now?

A: Dubai, I think of that but with a mix of Chicago. The architecture that we have, more modern architecture with the lighting of the buildings. Our waterfront is so unique and we're a downtown on the bay with one of the most beautiful parks. That skyline and those visuals that came out of the David Guetta event gave me chills.

Creating more resilient buildings is what we're going to see moving forward. Possibly greener roofs, repurposing spaces so that people can congregate in different ways. I see it like a more futuristic city but also with that local charm that we have. I see a walkable environment with everything from digital kiosks around, things of that nature, where people can find information easier. A very tech-savvy downtown is what I'm foreseeing.