

Dealing with Density: A South Florida Growth Boundary and the Planning Predicament

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In 2006, Miami, Florida's real estate market was still feverishly pushing outward and experiencing development pressures which threatened to force expansion of Miami-Dade County's urban development boundary ("UDB"). Though less well known than the growth boundaries in places like Portland, Oregon, Miami-Dade's UDB has concentrated the built environment away from many agricultural and ecologically sensitive lands immediately adjacent to the Florida Everglades. However, increasing speculation outside of the UDB from developers was sending land values skyward despite existing infrastructure shortages and other problems facing the region. This essay traces the conflict between a campaign to "hold the [UDB] line", and the still unresolved tension between sprawl and infill densification in contemporary public discourse and land use decision-making.

In the fall of 2005 I was a community organizer, a profession once derided and later affirmed in the national elections for the 44th president of the United States. While employed by a national environmental non-profit I found myself, through chance and circumstance, as the coordinator of a grassroots campaign to raise awareness and exert political support for "holding" the existing Miami-Dade County urban development boundary ("UDB").

Seventeen separate proposals to expand the UDB were to be brought before the county commission in the coming months, culminating in a vote the following April. Support was needed to bolster the county's own planning staff recommendations, which for the majority of locations advised maintaining the UDB's existing boundary line. When I arrived, municipalities across the county had already been approached to endorse resolutions in support of "holding the line." It was an impressive start. Organizations of all sorts were brought into the coalition. Over a dozen cities and villages in and around Miami officially signed municipal resolutions to hold the UDB, and more than just conservation groups were among the list of organizational supporters (Miami Herald, March 9, 2005). We were able to galvanize groups around issues of the environment (the Everglades were not far from the UDB's edge), the schools (existing classrooms were overcrowded and concurrency was exceeded in many schools at the urban edge), human services (existing urban communities would be deprived of County resources going to the suburban fringe), small farmers (much of the land up for grabs was near tropical fruit growers and nursery owners), failing infrastructure (billions of dollars worth of unfunded projects were easily

found across Miami), and among transportation advocates (concerned with the lack of non-automobile options and traffic surges following UDB expansion). It also helped that the Mayor of the County early on became a supporter of non-expansion of the UDB.

Once I took over for the initial campaign organizer, the foundations for the campaign were laid and I worked to expand the list of supporters and to make sure the broad citizen concern was heard at County Hall. Letter-writing campaigns were initiated and public comments gathered. After several months we had a coalition of over 140 organizations and business-owners, in addition to municipal leaders from various pockets of the County. Even the Governor, Jeb Bush, was beginning to weigh in, saying he had grave concerns over present expansion of the UDB in Miami-Dade County (The Miami Herald, March 6, 2005).

Planning meetings were held for the various communities where UDB expansion was proposed on County land. In each meeting, the County's planning staff was cogent, professional, and dispassionate in their rationale for recommending denial of UDB developments.

When the time eventually came for the thirteen-member County-Commission to vote on the UDB proposals in late 2006, it was clear that despite a broad base of support, allies on the Commission were tenuous at best. This resistance came despite a recent poll by a local Miami news channel that confirmed that across racial and ethnic lines and for a variety of reasons, there was overwhelming public support for "holding the line." But would the County Commission listen? They had scoffed at early hearings, chiding staff and some citizens from the

dais. At the decisive hearing, the mayor of Miami Beach came out and gave a charismatic appeal to reason during public comment, as did the Chairwoman of the County's School Board (The Miami Herald, November 22, 2005). Another mayor from the small nearby community of Surfside, Florida, who had once been a planner in St. Bernard's Parish in New Orleans before Katrina and the levee failures, spoke of the ignored warnings he had given there against ecologically insensitive development (the diminishment of coastal marshes had been established as a large factor in the devastation of Katrina) (The Miami Herald, September 14, 2005). Scores of elderly activists in the vein of Marjory Stoneman Douglas, the champion of the Everglades' "River of Grass," invoked the ornery Douglas and decried the gradual clearing of the remaining open landscape throughout South Florida and Miami that they had witnessed for decades. The \$500/hour developer lobbyists were out-gunned and out-manned, despite whispers that they had bused in many of their supporters in the chambers, who donned t-shirts urging support for the "American Dream" (via UDB expansion) but who largely sat quietly during the proceedings.

After two days of hearings, the Commission did what many similar bodies in other states are not in a position to do: they temporarily deferred the matter to the state (The Miami Herald, December 1, 2005). In Florida, the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) is a state-level planning entity with powers to comment on local development proposals and, in certain instances, intervene. The County Commission had sought the wisdom of the state to ease the political weight bearing down on them by these contentious UDB proposals and so they transmitted the review upward and out of their hands. In the intervening months, as the DCA was drafting their comments, the public learned that the County, despite insufficient infrastructure and the impending salt-water intrusion and related issues, was seeking expanded daily water withdrawals from the underlying Biscayne Bay aquifer. In addition, in the weeks preceding the DCA's review and recommendations, the South Florida Water Management District had come down sternly on Miami-Dade County. The County was only reclaiming 5 percent of its wastewater for reuse (while surrounding counties were reclaiming upwards of 60 and 70 percent) yet now it wanted to draw-up increasingly more from the aquifer (The Miami Herald, January 27, 2006). The federal and state partnership to restore the Florida Everglades (recast as America's Everglades) was also underway and the superintendents of both Everglades National Park and Biscayne Bay National Park had attended UDB hearings relating that the National

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Parks Service was indeed concerned that sprawl of this sort jeopardized the over \$8 billion ecological restoration effort (The Miami Herald, December 3, 2005). Taking these facts into consideration, the state, via the DCA, recommended denial of UDB developments, citing many of the issues the "hold the line" campaign had raised for months and detailing how Miami's latest water woes were a further sign of the inappropriateness of allowing development outside the UDB and elsewhere in the County (The Miami Herald, February 22, 2006). The UDB, like other growth boundaries in places like Portland, had experienced occasional movements, but nothing major had happened in over a decade. At this stage of the review process the state could only recommend denial, saving possible legal action for a later time only if it deemed the County's final decisions were not in the interest of the health and welfare of citizens. While sobering, the strong recommendations from the state were not the final word; the County Commission would still weigh in, this time with the third party assessment from the state to support the increasing community opposition.

With the state, the county planning staff, and hundreds of residents having voiced concern, and several of the original developers pulling out before the hearing, a sufficient voting bloc within the County Commission was able to successfully hold the UDB. With the exception of a tract of brownfield land beyond the UDB, a former landfill suitable for development, the UDB was ultimately maintained in its current position (The Miami Herald, April 20, 2006). Though diminished largely by continuous state and regional agency skepticism and by the real estate downturn, attempts in recent years continue from a handful of interests seeking to further expand the Miami-Dade County urban development boundary.

Was it a campaign to slow or stop sprawl, save the Everglades, support urban communities and teachers in overwhelmed classrooms? Yes. But I also learned over the course of more than a year on the campaign that there was an underlying issue yet to be resolved in Miami-Dade and much of South Florida. If not to the fringe, where would the ever increasing population go? In 2006, it was said that 1,000 or more persons were moving into Florida every week. This state, where natural wonders and historic communities are truly one of a kind in the U.S., rightly should say "no" to ceaseless development in every last corner of flat land or risk losing its unique natural wonders and historic communities. But where can they say "yes" and allow room for their population to grow?

The intellectuals within the campaign were well versed in the language of "Smart Growth" and "New

Urbanism” and did consistently voice the need for infill development and affordable housing (one of the County’s preeminent affordable housing developers was a vocal supporter). Position papers were written and forums held to illustrate the need for development in the established core, pointing to the vestiges of a wavering movement referred to in some South Florida circles as “Eastward Ho!” Eastward Ho! was a state initiative that first emerged in the mid-1990s as an unmandated “engine to promote, among other things, mixed-use development” and “encourage moderately higher urban densities.” But during various hearings leading up to and even at the final County Commission hearings, some supporters donning “Hold the Line” t-shirts would also occasionally, and hypocritically, rise to oppose a housing project near their home or community. This was because the UDB proposals were all bundled with several other large-scale projects within the UDB, since all were a part of the two-year submittal window of allowable comprehensive plan changes.

I realized I could not control the comments of every citizen who might have joined the coalition for reasons more NIMBY than noble. However, what chance do Homestead, Florida’s farmers, the Everglades, or the struggling communities of Little Haiti have when the call to stop sprawl is followed by an echo against greater density? The County planning staff, however, was more consistent than some of the “hold the line” supporters. They were saying “no” to sprawl development but they were also saying “yes” to the many other less noticed proposals bundled within the sometimes Byzantine process of comprehensive land use change review in South Florida. The planning staff, throughout the process, recommended the denial of wholesale UDB expansion, and so the campaign was often simply lending more voices to the existing opinions of the County’s own employed experts, whom the Commission seemed unwilling to heed. If only the campaign could have managed greater consistency in the remarks and sentiments regarding infill at certain stages of public input. This issue was not ignored, and many involved worked hard to relay this vital piece, but with limited resources, the appeal to resist change drowned out the need for innovative ideas to absorb growth.

Before the recent deafening burst of the real estate bubble, and certainly at some point again in the future, Florida will continue to grow at a pace that reveals, through the outcomes of land use development, the potential for community planning. As the nation struggles during a time

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of bust rather than boom, matters of growth and prosperity seem distant. Yet planners are the harbingers of change, whether felt as growth or contraction. The densification of cities, both large and small, is a primary challenge facing planners now and always. Wedged between an ocean and the Everglades, Miami and its surrounding communities offers a glimpse into the future challenges many growing regions will inevitably confront. The general pushback to greater densification is an expected impulse, but one that can be overcome with intelligent outreach. Municipalities must be careful in framing the argument for greater densification so as to not appear complicit with a real or perceived one-sided development agenda. It is not the easiest thing, but we all grow up at some point. Our cities can be no different. Did not the newly elected president say: “it is time to set aside childish things”?

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