

Preschool Pressures in Buena Vista

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer
October 2019

A new and expensive private school meets with resistance from neighbors



Leila Centner says she and her husband just want to bring happiness to young children's lives, and teach them Mandarin, too.

"The idea is to take traditional education, turn it upside down, where our focus is calm, peaceful, happy minds," she says. "Because when you're calm and peaceful, the sky is the limit."

But some residents of Miami's Buena Vista neighborhood aren't so happy with the prospect of parents lining up their vehicles to drop off children along the area's congested streets.

They've appealed the issuance of a "special exception" that would allow the operation of a school for children between the ages of two and a half and six in what was originally meant as an office building.

After being deferred twice, the appeal by four Buena Vista homeowners is tentatively scheduled for the Miami City Commission's October 26 meeting. Those residents -- including current Buena Vista Heights Homeowners Association president Ulysee Kemp -- want to overturn a June 6 decision by the Planning Zoning & Appeals Board (PZAB) that allowed for the transformation of a three-story office building at 4136 N. Miami Ave. into the Centner Academy, a facility owned and operated by David and Leila Centner, philanthropists who have been

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donating funds to various causes in Miami-Dade, including Lotus House and various schools.

Their appeal has the support of around 100 Buena Vista residents who signed a petition opposing the school. Their attorney charges that the Centners, in response, have threatened litigation against some of the opponents, and have sought to game the system by hiring an attorney who was until recently affiliated with the law firm where City of Miami Mayor Francis Suarez serves as of counsel, and by giving \$10,000 in campaign contributions to Commissioner Keon Hardemon, whose district includes the Buena Vista area.



David Winker, attorney for the Buena Vista appellants, says his clients just want the building to be used for what the city's zoning code allows -- an office building. "The residents are being painted as the bad guys here because they're holding up the development," Winker says. "This is a situation where [the Centners] bought a building that they were fully aware of the zoning restrictions, and the zoning does not allow them to do a preschool."

But Leila Centner says some of the neighbors have the mistaken impression that she and her husband are the bad guys.

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“We’re not big bad developers here,” she says. “What we’re doing is for the kids.”

And there won’t be that many kids, she points out. During negotiations with city planning staff, the Centners agreed to reduce their student body from 195 to 120. And in the school’s beginning, there will be fewer than 15 students attending. Neighbors will also only experience traffic twice a day, which will be handled by a complicated valet system run by a company owned by the former president of the Buena Vista Heights Neighborhood Association.

In comparison, she argues, a regular office building holds at least 205 people, with traffic entering and exiting from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. “If you look at the substance of it, there really isn’t any [problem],” she says.

But Rosa Ramos, vice president of the Buena Vista Heights Neighborhood Association and a plaintiff in the appeal, says there’s no way the valet system will be able to efficiently handle the drop-off of little children on a busy street during morning rush hour.



Besides the inconvenience for residents, there’s a safety issue for the kids.

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“My concern has always been the children,” she told the Centners during a community meeting, hosted by the couple at the FunDimension amusement center in Wynwood last month. “You talk about education. What good is that if a car comes and hits your child? Child safety or education? Both are very important.”

Last year David Centner, who was raised in the southwest Miami-Dade neighborhood of Westchester, sold his New York-based tech company to a multibillion-dollar private equity firm. Thereafter, he and his wife started buying properties in the Biscayne Corridor. Those buys include the shuttered Aspira Arts charter school in Wynwood for \$12.8 million; a vacant plot of land by The Related Group’s Paraiso project in Edgewater for \$13.64 million; and six parcels of land at 34th Street and Biscayne Boulevard for \$11.5 million. The two-year-old, 20,000-square-foot Buena Vista office building was purchased by the Centners for \$10 million this past June.

Leila Centner says most of the properties will be used for educational purposes, either schools or workforce housing for teachers. “We want to transform education by bringing mindfulness, happiness, and emotional intelligence, starting from when they’re little,” she says, adding that they hope to build a K-12 school in the future.

Mara Gonzalez, an administrator for Centner Academy, says the early education school will be the first Mandarin language immersion school in South Florida and will include three bilingual teachers from China who will speak to children in English and Mandarin. Another first for the region, according to Gonzalez, is that the Centner Academy will also focus on emotional intelligence, using a curriculum designed by Tal Ben-Shar, a Harvard-educated lecturer and founder of the Happiness Studies Academy.

Attending the school won’t be cheap. Tuition will cost \$24,000 per student. However, Leila Centner says she intends to offer some scholarships to local families with financial needs.

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