

SoLeMia: Gift and Curse

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
February 2019

For the City of North Miami, it comes with a mixed blessing



o crib from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy, SoLeMia's gifts offer both a blessing and a curse.

The self-evident blessing for the City of North Miami was unwrapped on the brilliant crisp morning of January 14. Fences and semaphores were set aside and SoLeMia Boulevard opened, linking Biscayne Boulevard and 143rd Street to 151st Street and the road to Florida International University.

Motorists, cyclists, and walkers can now view the first stages of a \$4 billion project, which is on track to add, over the next 15 years or so, 10,000 souls, more funds to the municipality's hungry coffers, and the potential transformation of the polity in this hard-bitten, often riven city of promise, abundance, scarcity, corruption, and bloat.

On that day, the twin 17-story Shoreline Towers opened for potential tenants, offering 397 rental units priced from \$1740 for a studio to \$3715 for a three-bedroom unit with an ocean view. Apartments come with Internet, full appliances, a vast gym, and fifth-story pool. Visitors streamed through the offices for tours in the first week and started signing leases. Move-ins were to begin February 1.

Just to the south, crews have filled in the beach of the new seven-acre saltwater lagoon with the

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striking aquamarine color of the Caribbean. It will be open to SoLeMia residents only and is shielded with layers of protective cover from underground ammonia, methane, and carbon dioxide that linger as enduring souvenirs of the 183-acre site's previous incarnation as a toxic landfill.

By the time you read this, the new, enlarged Costco on SoLeMia property just south of 151st Street may be up and running, as it is slated to open Wednesday, February 6, thanks to a \$2 million North Miami land lease amortized over 99 years. That blessing holds the seeds of a potential curse.

The new Costco will offer more parking and expanded access, to replace the bottlenecks at the old North Miami Beach Costco, which is slated to become an upscale furniture store.

To open traffic further, crews are working at yet another route from Biscayne Boulevard, linking the corner of 146th Street to the SoLeMia tract, in an effort to relieve growing congestion. It's only a matter of time before SoLeMia Boulevard gets a traffic light at 151st Street, as it is now almost impossible to turn left from that intersection during school opening and closing hours, with David Lawrence K-8, Alonzo and Tracy Mourning High, Florida International University, and the MAST Academy on FIU's campus all on one street.

As for the Arch Creek East Nature Preserve, which FIU plans to open to traffic to link 151st Street to 135th Street, there is no news -- just yet. Last year FIU won its right-of-way through the Florida Legislature, partly with the help of Rep. Joe Geller, but Bobcats and bulldozers have yet to arrive. Naturalist Sam Van Leer still leads excursions to expel invasive species from the 13-acre preserve, which was designated by the City of North Miami in 2007, largely to check FIU's ambitions.

People to watch in this discussion include Geller, county Commissioner Sally Heyman, Councilman Scott Galvin, FIU President Mark Rosenberg, and newly elected state Sen. Jason Pizzo.

Beyond that, over the next decade, in accordance with the tides of market demand, SoLeMia plans ten 40-story condo towers southeast of SoLeMia Boulevard, with retail on the northwest side. Years ago, Richard LeFrak -- billionaire New York developer and one of Donald Trump

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rare friends -- told the *Biscayne Times* that SoLeMia and North Miami are highly desirable destinations positioned directly between Miami and Fort Lauderdale, and that the LeFrak and Aventura Soffer real estate dynasties are making this their signature South Florida real estate play.

The City of North Miami's tax rolls should see benefits from SoLeMia slowly, starting in October 2019, as the towers and the Costco received temporary certificates of occupancy just before the new year. The Warren Henry car dealership on 151st Street will not open until at least spring and therefore will not make the tax rolls until the following year.

Which brings us to the curse. Here one can turn to the New Testament, and Matthew's Parable of the Talents, in which the master entrusts three servants with his "talents," or personal property. The first two are rewarded for investing their talents wisely by putting them to work: "Well done, thy good and faithful servant." The third servant buries his talent in the ground for safekeeping, and the master condemns him, saying, "And throw that worthless slave into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

For the City of North Miami, SoLeMia's gifts -- a good \$25 million so far -- appear to have been spent rather than harvested.

To wit, we offer the ongoing, and ugly, personnel board hearings of fired assistant budget director Terry Henley, who says deputy city manager Arthur H. "Duke" Sorey III cursed him out before other employees, essentially ordered him to camouflage deficits as surpluses, and ultimately fired him. Henley portrays himself as a whistleblower; Sorey calls Henley incompetent.

In essence, Henley says the city balanced a \$4.9 million deficit for 2017-18 by swallowing the \$2 million Costco check in one swoop rather than amortizing it over 99 years as intended, and cornered city manager Larry Spring into taking \$3 million of reserve and contingency funds to cut the city's operating reserve to \$7.3 million, among other things.

Just days after the city's last budget hearing in September, at which Henley said the council asked him no questions, Henley was sacked and escorted out of his office by seven police officers. His performance reviews had ranged from satisfactory to exemplary.

Under questioning and cross-examination on January 24, Henley retained his command of the facts, but sometimes snapped at attorney Brooke Ehrlich, retained by the city. Sorey testified for three hours the first night, and Henley more than four the second night. The hearings were scheduled to continue in council chambers at 6:00 p.m. January 31 and, if needed, 6:00 p.m. February 11.

On her January 23 votersopinion.com blog, Stephanie Kienzle linked to an explosive appellant's memorandum from Henley's lawyer, Bill Amlong, at one point citing a September 3 memo in which Henley described Spring defying an April decision to return the Costco check, saying "they can go f*** themselves."

On the stand, Henley issued a sharp warning about the budget process that will likely produce gnashing of teeth in the upcoming May 14 municipal election.

"That's pawning the ring to make the rent this month," he said. "But guess what? That revenue's going to come due again."

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