

Magical Thinking

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
October 2019

It fails before the joint crises of North Miami and Biscayne Bay



The word “crisis” derives from the ancient Greek krisis, for trial, or the anxiety of decision making, and, in medical parlance, the point at which an illness turns to either recovery or death.

It’s hard to imagine a better word, whether discussing the health of Biscayne Bay or the state of North Miami’s body politic, let alone that of the state, nation, and world. Urgency intrudes.

In Minnesota, where I wrote this column, and in Greater Miami, this summer ranked among the steamiest and wettest ever. In the Minnesota State Capitol, at Miami Beach City Hall, and around the world, marchers, many of them students, protested the climate crisis with signs reading “There Is No Planet B.”

On September 20, Florida International University’s Biscayne Bay campus hosted its second Biscayne Bay Marine Health Summit. Biscayne Bay is in dismal condition, with stormwater runoff, septic tank seepage, cracked pipes, and plenty of scientific and visual evidence. The conference sounded alarms for a state of emergency for Biscayne Bay.

Two events provided hammer blows. In August, a two-square-inch crack in a 55-year-old underground county sewer pipe 12 feet under the Oleta River in North Miami spewed more than 1.6 million gallons of waste into Biscayne Bay, forcing a no-contact advisory from Haulover Beach to Aventura.

Magical Thinking

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
October 2019

Earlier, during Memorial Day weekend, an immense raft of sargassum strangled sea life throughout Biscayne Bay, with fishkills darkening the canals and stench wafting into Keystone Point yards and homes. These rafts, sometimes 100 miles or more across, have devastated the Caribbean, suffocating seas, beaches, and economies, all thanks to agricultural runoff from the flooded Mississippi Basin, from Brazil's Amazon or Venezuela's Orinoco, congealing in the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic.

So the problem is at once local and global, or "glocal," to use an unprepossessing but apt new portmanteau.

Moving from the cosmic to the ridiculous, the September 17 North Miami City Council mud-wrestled with a 2019-20 budget that is a masterpiece of wishful thinking as it envisions a balanced budget of \$75 million the next fiscal year. That evening's heroes were various residents from eight neighborhood or homeowners associations who one by one rose to give the city some informed and well-deserved hell.

As of this date, near the close of a fiscal year, the city reports a deficit of \$8.5 million and anticipates a magical increase in fees and taxes to get out of it. At the same time, the city council is giving itself a 20 percent raise -- the second in two years -- which would translate into roughly \$60,000 a year base for council members and \$72,000 for the mayor. This follows the council members rewarding themselves with \$12,000 raises in 2017.

North Miami's "part-time" elected officials are already among the most extravagantly paid in Miami-Dade County. Plus, the city manager and city attorney both get \$240,000 a year. It's also worth noting that with just six years' service, council members get an additional deposit -- equivalent to 48 percent of their salaries -- into the state's pension funds. Then add health insurance, expenses, and car allowances. This isn't a reassuring move among a city ridden with cronyism, bloat, and worse.

We've written, too, about the \$7000 in discretionary funds each council member is issued each year. This is their kitty for pet projects of all kinds. So if you take three years at \$21,000 each, the breakout goes something like this: District 1 Scott Galvin: \$61,000; District 2 Carol Keys: \$23,900; District 3 Philippe Bien-Aime: \$178,000; District 4 Alix Desulme: \$204,000. The mayor, mostly former ex-Mayor Dr. Smith Joseph: \$134,000.

Magical Thinking

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
October 2019

Add it up, and you're talking better than \$600,000 on a "budget" of \$105,000 (or \$21,000 x 5).

What are the consequences for going overbudget? None that we can find -- other than rewarding themselves with 20 percent raises.

That's not all. The cost of the mayor and council budget is up 50 percent year over year. About \$95,000 allocated to the Ms. North Miami Scholarship Pageant actually appears to be a sham item funneled directly to the North Miami and Haitian-American chambers of commerce.

One can argue that this is but a drop in a big budget bucket. Yet one can also argue that how you do anything is how you do everything. As the current fiscal year ends, North Miami reports \$56.2 million in revenues and \$64.7 million in expenses -- hence the \$8.5 million hole.

How then will the \$75 million magically appear?

"It's robbing Peter to pay Paul," said Judy Brown of the westside Sunkist Grove Homeowners Association on September 17. "We need to get fiscally responsible. Where are our values?"

Where to begin? We might join the residents who suggest two priorities: more library funding and modest best practices for the climate crisis, one lot at a time.

Walk into the North Miami library around 2:30 any school day, and it's mobbed with kids of all ages hitting the computers, jamming the Internet to near-paralysis, with the shelves hungry for books. It has a dedicated, competent staff and administration. To its credit, the council heeded residents and put a bit more in the library's budget, but why not move some of that self-serving overhead fat to the library and give it more needed muscle?

Or how about shifting money from the council and manager to improve after-school recreation

Magical Thinking

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
October 2019

programs? The Parks and Recreation Department was once the pride of the county; there's a lot to build on there. *Reward* those who work hard and want to offer something of value; *encourage* those who want to learn and do better; and *fire* the lazy and those who coddle them, *all the way to the top*. That should be true in *any* department.

As for the climate crisis, some news. In August, the firm Department Design Office of Cambridge, Massachusetts, won a competition sponsored by the Van Alen Institute and the City of North Miami to establish a slough with an imaginative design at a repetitive-loss flood-zone property at 901 NE 144th St., to relieve runoff in a neighborhood prone to flooding.

The city owns two such properties, but more than 70 have been identified and more will spread.

The odds may seem steep, but optimism of will is the only antidote for pessimism of intellect. It is past time to allay or reduce the disease in our body politic and the land and waters in which we dwell. The young must be part of this, as they will inherit crises that are now as sure as the tides.

Magical thinking alone cannot provide. The clock ticks.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com