

Hey, You Can't Say That...

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
November 2019

Is this the city you love to hate or hate to love?



ermit me a confession before sharing news nuggets.

North Miami is exasperating to cover. It's like rubbernecking an accident. You can't quite turn away, and you sometimes just want to get the Sam Hill out, by the sea -- rising, of course -- or in the far hills, as we did in Virginia's George Washington National Forest last weekend with the advent of fall colors.

On the drive back, some in our famished family party were seeking a winery with an open kitchen. Only one was available: the Trump Winery. Hunger thus trumped principle. The winery was lovely indeed in the rolling foothills near Charlottesville, as was the Sauvignon Blanc. A plump 50ish fellow with a blond buzz cut, gray eyes, sweet smile, and flushed face walked around the bucolic grounds like Christ among the apostles, wearing a blue Trump 2020 toga over his trousers and orange-and-green plaid shirt. He told anyone who would listen that he was just doing his bit to arrest the Republic's moral decline. And why not? Just ask any Kurd.

As Alice in Wonderland cried: Curiouser and curiouser.

Back home in North Miami, one might long for deliverance through municipal martial law, receivership, and governance by a commission of wise elders to end the cronyism and worse and get this town's crazy house in order. But why do we still like this place, its people, its contradictions with all its shaggy diversity, affable weirdness, voter apathy, immigrant optimism, NIMBYism, and groupthink?

Last month's crisis-laden column read a bit like a jeremiad by one sanctimonious frog in the kettle reminding the others that the water was slowly boiling. Which it is. So, you're welcome.

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Yet one can only say “ain’t it awful” so much before getting sick of it. Over time, Alice’s cry devolves into a mumble, a roll of the eyes, a shrug of the shoulder, a sardonic crack. That won’t do.

Let’s pause the rumination button for three or four straight news bits:

First, that massive construction project behind the fence just south of the Costco in Solé Mia is elaborate prep work for the University of Miami Health System’s UHealth Medical Center at Solé Mia, scheduled to open in 2023. Of course, building atop an old landfill and Superfund site is tricky (see “Game Changer,” June 2019). And yes, there is irony that the bowels of said landfill include compacted medical waste, and worse, from 40 years ago. So particularly in a medical facility, one must mind the soil beneath with great care and dynamic compaction. First, do no harm.

Second, that big construction project by FIU’s Bayfront campus is the new building for the Marine Academy of Science and Technology (MAST), a highly rated magnet high school founded in 2013, and the only such Miami-Dade school on the campus of a public university. Enrollment is capped at 500.

Third, we have a temporary cease-fire over North Miami’s Arch Creek East (ACE) Environmental Preserve. FIU desperately wants to widen the old Interama roadway that people use as a nature trail. On Friday, October 18, state Sen. Jason Pizzo brokered a deal for a road study to explore different options. Signing off were representatives of FIU, county Commissioner Sally Heyman’s office, and North Miami Councilman Scott Galvin.

Pizzo seized that ball on July 22, hosting a workshop with Florida Secretary of Transportation Kevin Thibault at the Kovens Center.

“It surprised me that after all these years, there had never been a road study of options, conducted by a completely neutral third party with no skin in the game,” Pizzo says.

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Over the last decade, the *BT* has written much about the huffing and puffing over the fate of the ACE Preserve, capped by FIU President Mark Rosenberg's successful 2018 legislative blitzkrieg, giving FIU superior rights over ingress and egress.

There is little argument that FIU needs a second access point, or that widening the old road would be the cheapest option. But at what social cost?

For now, the chess game is paused, pending the road study.

Speaking of transportation, it is worth noting that Northeast Dade mass transit has returned to the foreground, but with a certain ambivalence. The county commission on October 11 approved a \$76 million Brightline/Virgin station and development at 197th Street in Aventura, with a pedestrian bridge to the mall. A deal to create workforce housing swayed the commission toward a lopsided vote allowing the no-bid contract to go forward. But a \$9.75 projected ride cost to downtown Miami seems a bit rich, when Metrorail and the bus run \$2.25.

Where does this leave those projected commuter stops on 79th Street or 151st Street, let alone on 125th or 163rd streets, if they ever come to pass?

Here, the answer just got murkier. The City of North Miami has put together plans for upzoned (that is, denser) residential "transit-oriented" development in the area just west of the tracks and south of 151st Street, and where 123rd bends up to 125th Street.

"We're doing what we should do as a city to prepare," North Miami city manager Larry Spring tells the *BT* in a recent interview. "We are creating the zoning environment to encourage transit development in our city, whether it's today along 151st or tomorrow along 125th Street."

Returning to our ruminations, we tip the hat yet again to blogger Stephanie Kienzle at votersopinion.com, who offers addictive snark with a laser eye for corruption and stupidity.

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Some weeks back, she reported on various surveys throwing shade on North Miami.

Business Insider ranked North Miami as the 25th most miserable city in America, citing the 23 percent poverty rate, propensity to full-moon flooding, and 2780 septic tanks. North Miami Beach ranked 33rd most miserable, with a 20 percent poverty rate, 32 percent of the residents without health insurance, long commutes, and tumultuous politics.

Kienzle also reported on North Miami's abysmal rankings at the website roadsnaacks.net, which offers "the stuff about where you live that no one else has the guts to say." It ranked North Miami as Florida's seventh worst place to live, the fifth worst Miami suburb, and the "second most ghetto city in Florida for 2018."

Roadsnaacks concocted the latter noxious appellation and ranking through a formula of income levels, crime, education, and cheap and discounted retail outlets. Daytona Beach was No. 1.

Ouch! Why was my first reaction to take umbrage? I smelled a certain Schadenfreude? Maybe after nine years as a North Miami resident, I've turned into a defensive homie. Hey, you're talking family.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com