

Incorporation Makes the Ballot

Written by Hortense Leon, Special to the BT
July 2018 - Last Updated July 2018

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I'm not partial to change, especially when it's change for the sake of change. That may explain why I found the June 5 Miami-Dade County Commission meeting unsettling. At that meeting, commissioners passed a resolution that will allow residents to vote next November on the incorporation of neighborhoods in northeast Miami-Dade.

"Don't fix it if it ain't broke." That's my motto, and what I saw and heard at the commission meeting failed to convince me that the Skylake and Highland Lakes neighborhoods, plus the Ojus commercial district -- all of which are part of the unincorporated municipal service area (UMSA) -- need to be incorporated.

The pro-incorporation advocates at the meeting spoke passionately about what they see as a need for more police in the area, both for their children's safety and their own. In a separate interview with me, Lenny Feldman, past president of the Skylake/Highland Lakes Homeowners Association, complained that there were only a handful of Miami-Dade officers patrolling a

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sprawling 17-square-mile area, including the area targeted for incorporation.

If a portion of the area becomes a city, he said, it would then have 28 officers, spread over three shifts, to cover the new 3.5-square-mile municipality, which would have a population of roughly 19,000.

Residents who spoke about the need for greater security tend to live in the more fashionable, more tranquil parts of the proposed city. It's filled with single-family homes and well-manicured lawns, with little traffic clogging the streets. Opponents of incorporation, meanwhile, tend to live in 1960s-era condominiums, many of which are in need of repair. They told the commissioners that they're happy with the status quo, and that they see incorporation as an existential threat.

Cheerleaders for incorporation, seated on the left side of the commission chambers, were dressed like a sports team, in identical bright-blue T-shirts emblazoned with the message "Let Us Vote." On the right side of the chambers sat those in opposition, a group of mostly elderly Hispanic residents, clad in largely unlettered red shirts or blouses of different styles.

When the members of "Team Red" spoke, many in Spanish with the aid of an interpreter, they pleaded for the preservation of their homes. Housing costs throughout the county have already gone through the roof, and people with low to moderate incomes are being driven out of their neighborhoods. They said they worried that incorporation would encourage rezoning and allow higher density, thus attracting investors and developers who would then cajole condo owners into selling their units, leaving them out in the cold because the sale proceeds would fail to cover housing costs elsewhere. These residents were also concerned that incorporation would mean higher property taxes.

"Where would I go if I have to leave here?" one woman asked the audience, adding that she wants to live in her home until she's carried to the cemetery.

These fears persist, in spite of the proposed budgets that have been prepared for the unnamed city -- including one developed by PMG Associates Inc., an economic, marketing, and management consultant firm -- that indicate higher taxes will not be necessary to support a new city. Today the area is a "donor community" and actually contributes \$1.5 million more than it receives back from the county in services, according to Commissioner Sally Heyman, whose

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district encompasses the area.

Feldman says there are ways to manage costs for the new city. For example, he suggests, the new city could rent existing office space rather than build a city hall, and city officials could work for \$1 a year.

But there's no guarantee that this is how incorporation will play out. Plus, residents' preferences change. Perhaps five years from now, they *will* want a new municipal building.

On the other hand (and, unfortunately, I only have two hands), the tall, sleek buildings going up along W. Dixie Highway would contribute a lot of ad valorem tax revenue to whatever governmental body is in control.

It's hard to know if either of these camps' hopes or fears have a basis in fact. A number of people I talked to believe that the threat of redevelopment is real, but no one could name specific developers who were on the hunt for property to exploit. It's interesting to note, however, that many of Heyman's campaign contributors, according to the Miami-Dade Elections Department, are in the real estate business and/or real estate-related occupations. None, however, made contributions of more than \$1000.

Still, one has to be blind not to see that land-hungry developers are looking under every rock to find sites to redevelop in the county. Along Miami Gardens Drive, just west of W. Dixie Highway, empty lots once occupied by single-family homes are now construction sites for mostly commercial buildings. Will 191st Street, which is replete with aging condominiums, be next?

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