

Posted on Mon, Feb. 14, 2005

## Urban Development Boundary: The Next Battle Line

BY MATTHEW HAGGMAN

[mhaggman@herald.com](mailto:mhaggman@herald.com)

### IS THIS THE FUTURE OF MIAMI-DADE COUNTY?

Unlike Broward, Miami-Dade's Urban Development Boundary has held development stretching to the edge of the Everglades at bay. Now that may change.

Standing between a row of cabbages on a wide expanse of farmland in western Miami-Dade County, Douglas Wilson stared at suburban homes and a strip mall looming on the eastern horizon.

Despite the encroaching urban sprawl, the farm land leased by Wilson and his brother, Daryll, has been protected from large-scale development for decades. The reason: It sits west of the county's Urban Development Boundary, the line providing a green buffer between densely populated areas and the Everglades.

But now home builder D.R. Horton wants to put roads, homes and shops on the land Wilson farms -- and is asking the county to move the UDB to do it.

"I guess it's inevitable," sighed Wilson, 53, who previously farmed the south Miami-Dade land that was turned into the residential subdivision Country Walk. "We're going to have to look for new land."

With a dwindling supply of developable land in Miami-Dade County and Broward County nearly built-out, a host of powerful developers are now targeting land previously off-limits for large-scale development.

The activity, sure to prompt a fierce and lengthy battle, represents the biggest push in years to move the UDB, which has been altered just once in the last decade and has not been moved for a residential development since 1993.

### OPPOSING POINTS OF VIEW

On one side of the issue are the developers who argue the county's growing population and surging home prices have created a crisis in affordable single-family homes in Miami-Dade. The only land left to build reasonably-priced homes on, they contend, is the broad expanse beyond the UDB.

On the other are environmentalists, citizens associations and civil rights groups who say development outside the current line will choke already clogged roads, threaten Everglades restoration and open the door to incursions into rural and environmentally sensitive lands.

Developers, anticipating it's only a matter of time before the boundary is moved, have begun buying up land beyond the UDB. Home-building giant Lennar Corp. has an option to buy nearly 2,500 acres near Florida City. It hopes to build homes on 981 acres there and expects to file an application by April to amend the UDB, said Anthony Seijas, president of Lennar's Miami-Dade division.

The Miami-based home builder has also bought an 823-acre parcel in western Miami-Dade outside the UDB.

D.R. Horton, a Fort Worth, Tex.-based builder, has a pending application to amend the UDB for a development with more than 5,000 residential units along Krome Avenue near Kendall Drive. The 854-acre parcel includes the land where Douglas Wilson farms.

Meanwhile, Edward W. Easton of The Easton Group, Neighborhood Planning Company's Armando J. Guerra and Agustin Herran, and home builder United Homes all have snapped up property outside the UDB.

## **DIFFERENT RULES**

Unlike Broward, which permits development to the Everglades' doorstep, Miami-Dade established the UDB in 1975. Running generally north-south, it limits any building outside the boundary to one dwelling per five acres.

Through the years, several amendments pushed the UDB further west, but the line has hardly moved at all during the past decade.

Now as developers eye the wide open spaces beyond the boundary, opponents are girding to save the current configuration at all costs.

"Moving it is totally dangerous to the Everglades," said Nancy Liebman, president of the Urban Environment League. "And totally dangerous to people who like to have a quality lifestyle and don't want to be trapped in endless traffic gridlock."

Developers say they are ready for what will likely be a bruising contest over the line's fate.

"Am I fearful of engaging and being a participant in sometimes contentious discussions about growth and how it should occur? No," said Stuart Miller, CEO of Miami-based Lennar. "The population is crying out for development, and I think we will represent the population well."

If more land is not made available, developers argue, then families will continue to be priced out of South Florida's surging real estate market.

But a 2003 report by Miami-Dade's Department of Planning and Zoning determined there is enough developable land to last until 2020. It also concluded the UDB should not be moved.

In recent years, faced with dwindling open space in the suburbs, local developers have focused more on urban in-fill projects, neighborhood redevelopment and high-rise condominium projects near town centers and the coastline.

## **NEEDS NOT MET**

But Lennar and D.R. Horton argue the county's population growth and increasing housing needs cannot be met by in-fill projects alone. And, they say, many of the high-rise condominiums are way too expensive for most buyers.

"Not everyone wants to live in high-rise condominiums, especially families," said Easton, chairman of The Easton Group. "There is a need for single-family homes."

That housing shortage and lack of available land is feeding the upward spiral in prices, said lobbyist Miguel De Grandy, who represents D.R. Horton. "That is creating a situation where you are seeing redevelopment in older neighborhoods with prices skyrocketing so folks living in those neighborhoods can no longer buy product there."

Critics of moving the line say simply opening up new land won't automatically temper soaring housing prices. "It will take more than moving the line out," said Rod Jude, Sierra Club Miami chairman. "Prices will still be high."

## **SAFETY ISSUES**

There are also other concerns about pushing out the boundary line. Monroe County officials, for example,

express worry that development outside the UDB in south Miami-Dade could impede evacuation efforts from the Florida Keys.

And some critics just don't buy the notion that Miami-Dade is out of developable land. "They are trying to create this specter of people living in boxes if their development is not approved," said Richard Grosso, executive director of the Environmental and Land Use Law Center in Fort Lauderdale. "That is not true."

Grosso cites the county's own conclusions in its 2003 Evaluation and Appraisal Report of Miami-Dade's comprehensive master plan.

"The area within the UDB provides enough countywide capacity of residential land to accommodate projected development until 2020," the report concluded.

## **UPWARD REVISIONS**

The date when the county's inventory of residential land is expected to run out has since been revised upward to 2021, according to Mark R. Woerner of Miami-Dade's Department of Planning and Zoning.

But Easton responded that every single-family home builder he has spoken with in Miami-Dade County says the biggest problem now is finding developable lots.

"That is my barometer," Easton said.

The last time a small portion of the line was pushed westward was in 2002 to make way for the 436-acre Beacon Lakes industrial park west of Miami International Airport. That effort, led by developer Armando Codina, received so much attention that the Harvard Business School did a case study last year on the long-running battle.

Amendments to the UDB are considered in April of every odd year.

## **THE PROCESS**

Here's how it works: A developer submits a detailed plan to the county and South Florida Regional Planning Council. The plan goes through a comment and revision process, in which state agencies critique the project. That process can run for a year or more.

Ultimately, the plan goes before the Miami-Dade County Commission. A super-majority -- two-thirds of the county commissioners -- is required for approval.

The push to move the line comes as the county commission prepares to launch a new study on the UDB. Another study that could have implications for the UDB, the South Miami-Dade Watershed Study, is due to be completed later this year.

Some suggest the county should defer action until each study is submitted.

Miami-Dade Commissioner Dennis C. Moss, who proposed the UDB study, said Friday he will not support any UDB changes until the study is completed.

"I am hoping that within the next six to eight months the study will be done," said Moss, who added that constituents in his south Miami-Dade district are increasingly getting priced out of the market. The pricey condos being built in Miami, he said, aren't a solution for them.

"I want there to continue to be a greenbelt," Moss said. "But I am also not one who thinks the sky will fall if we expand the UDB."

## FORMING A DEFENSE

In the face of developers' efforts, opposition groups are scrambling to organize and mount a defense. Last month, Liebman said, a group was formed called the Coalition for Livable Communities. It includes the Urban Environment League, Sierra Club and Tropical Audubon Society, among others.

Late last month, in what it called "an opening salvo," the UEL commissioned a poll of registered voters' feelings about traffic in Kendall, Hialeah and South Miami. Some 55 percent said they were spending more time in traffic than a year ago and 77 percent deemed traffic a "lot worse" than when they first moved to the area.

Grosso said the Environmental and Land Use Law Center is putting together a white paper on the subject.

But developers are assembling formidable, high-priced teams, too.

D.R. Horton has hired De Grandy, real estate analyst Andy Dolkart and lawyer Joseph Goldstein -- the same attorney who got the Beacon Lakes boundary amendment passed for Codina.

According to Lennar's Seijas, Lennar has retained Goldstein and lobbyists Luis E. Rojas and Miguel Diaz de la Portilla, the defeated Miami-Dade mayoral candidate and former county commissioner.

## ARGUMENT QUESTIONED

Meanwhile, some question developers' affordable homes argument.

"When it is painted as a battle between those who need affordable housing and hard-core environmentalists, it really does an injustice to the issue," said Daniella Levine, executive director of the Human Services Coalition.

DeGrandy shrugs off such comments, noting that the UDB was set up with an eye toward moving it to accommodate growth.

"The UDB was never meant to be a line in stone," said DeGrandy. "The UDB is there to be a buffer for additional development until such time it is necessary to move the UDB."

"The question for the commissioners is, is this the right time?"



PRODUCE OR HOMES? Farm workers harvest cabbage

in a field just east of Krome Avenue between Southwest 104th Street and Southwest 120th Street where developers want to build up to 5,000 homes. To do this the Urban Development Boundary would have to be moved. TIM CHAPMAN / HERALD STAFF



LIVING ON THE EDGE: Weston homes on edge of I-75 looking north into swamp of the Everglades Conservation Area. J. ALBERT DIAZ / HERALD FILE PHOTO



CROWDED ROADS: Traffic at dawn works its way south on Krome Avenue at Southwest 120th Street just west of where developers want the Urban Development Boundary moved. Traffic is already at a maximum and further development would require that Krome Avenue be widened. TIM CHAPMAN / HERALD STAFF