

# Memorandum



**Date:** August 4, 2022

**To:** Honorable Chairman Jose “Pepe” Diaz  
and Members, Board of County Commissioners

**From:** Daniella Levine Cava  
Mayor *Daniella Levine Cava*

**Subject:** Potential Homeless Encampment or “Transition Zone” on Virginia Key

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Miami-Dade County is committed to taking all possible steps to address our community’s urgent housing crisis, including helping provide permanent housing to those experiencing homelessness through our continuum of care model.

It’s essential that we do all we can to solve homelessness in Miami-Dade with care and compassion for those most vulnerable in our community. We are committed to working alongside our partners in our municipalities to develop and test innovative strategies that can help tackle the housing and affordability crisis.

The City of Miami’s proposal to provide transitional housing on Virginia Key raises a number of important questions and concerns that the County is now exploring to understand potential challenges with the site – including access to basic services, the safety and wellbeing of people experiencing homelessness who might be relocated there, the historical significance of the site, infrastructure considerations, environmental concerns, and more.

Those areas of concern are summarized below.

## **Social services considerations**

This potential project addresses a complex issue using a narrowly focused intervention that could exacerbate the challenge the community faces in providing the most effective solution – extremely low-income housing. While there are an estimated 970 persons living on the streets of Miami-Dade County, there are nearly three times that many in shelters or other temporary settings being supported by Homeless Trust resources. The greatest challenge in exiting shelter or moving individuals directly from the streets to supportive housing is the unavailability and unaffordability of even what we classify as affordable housing options.

A transitional housing site far from basic services is likely to exacerbate the problem. An estimated 23 percent of persons experiencing homelessness are chronically homeless, meaning they are struggling with a disability and have been homeless for at least a year. Often, temporary shelter is not an option they seek. Providing a safe and desirable, permanent housing option is the fastest way to reduce the concentration of people on the streets, promote housing stability for vulnerable populations and foster clean, revitalized neighborhoods that address the quality of life for all. A shelter-only zone like the proposed “Transition Zone” will exacerbate the bottleneck that is created when insufficient safe and healthy extremely affordable housing options are available for those experiencing homelessness.

### **Emergency evacuation and public safety considerations**

As we know, Miami-Dade is in the middle of “Hurricane Alley” and is at very high risk for extreme weather events. Even Category 1 storms like Katrina, Wilma, and the close call with Irma, are reminders that “weaker” storms and near-misses can still create significant strains on our community and pose a very real risk to the safety of our residents – especially the homeless. Virginia Key is in an identified high-risk area for Storm Surge (see enclosed maps). Placing temporary or transitional housing that will not be considered safe from either high winds or storm surge will necessitate that additional evacuation resources be committed. This area is in evacuation Zone A, requiring any residents to be evacuated from this area should a hurricane of any strength threaten this area. Since most of the tenants would lack transportation, the County and City would need to make a concerted effort to provide the resources needed to assure everyone put in harm’s way was brought to safety.

In addition, we will need to evaluate the availability of police and fire rescue services from the City and County at this location, including planning for fire suppression and the capacity of nearby rescue units to provide emergency medical services to the proposed location.

### **Historical importance**

Virginia Key contains the Historic Virginia Key Beach Park, an environmental and historic landmark in the City of Miami. Virginia Key was the first beach in Miami designated for Black residents during the Jim Crow era. The Park was opened in 1945 in response to a successful civil rights campaign led by local Black activists protesting the exclusion of Black residents from Miami’s beaches. The new Park attracted over 1,000 visitors on any given weekend and served as a vibrant community hub for Black Miami from 1945 until the 1960s. The Virginia Key Beach Trust has overseen the Park and its restoration since 1999. Added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2002, the Park remains a regional symbol of civil rights activism and exemplifies the historical, cultural, and social trends of Miami’s Black community. The Park retains its historic integrity along with a rich ecosystem of natural and exotic tropical vegetation.

Proximity of the proposed transitional housing to the historic Black Beach would likely create significant friction within the community and fails to recognize the historic significance of the site.

### **Infrastructure considerations**

The proposed site is adjacent to the County’s Central Wastewater Treatment Plant. Besides the operational concerns about several hundred people being next to the sewage treatment plant, there are no residential-scale sewer lines available in the area to provide service. If such a plan were to move forward, the rough estimates provided by WASD would be expected to cost between two and three million dollars. The location also raises concerns about access to basic infrastructure needs such as electricity as well as access to transportation options, particularly for a population that is likely to be reliant on public transit.

### **Environmental considerations**

Miami-Dade County’s Department of Regulatory and Economic Resources Department, Division of Environmental Resources Management (DERM), through its Biscayne Bay Coastal Habitat Restoration

and Enhancement Program, has been actively restoring, enhancing, and in some instances creating a variety of coastal upland and wetland habitats on the barrier island of Virginia Key since the late 1990s. These habitats include tidally connected mangrove swamps and fringing mangrove communities, vegetated beach dune systems, coastal strand, subtropical maritime hammock, and isolated freshwater wetlands within the coastal band. In addition, DERM has stabilized unconsolidated and eroding shorelines on Virginia Key with natural limestone boulders and native slope-stabilizing vegetation, which helps to improve water quality by reducing the resuspension of sediments along the shore. This work has included considerable interagency coordination and partnerships with a number of local nonprofit organizations.

Overall, we have spent over \$2.5 million on restoration and enhancement activities on the Key. Lack of access to garbage collection services, and the sensitivity of some of these restored wild places to nearby residential use, would also raise significant concerns.

The County is also in the process of placing the land adjacent to the proposed site on the Environmentally Endangered Lands (EEL) Acquisition List for conservation. To the extent that this surrounding land serves as habitat for endangered species, additional consideration may be needed to address the impacts of lighting on the potential EEL site. Additionally, State or Federal approvals may be necessary in connection with sea turtle nesting habitat in neighboring beaches.

### **Potential conflicts in proposed use**

The City of Miami's 1982 Master Plan, which was reviewed and approved by the County, called for this property to be developed into a park. The City of Miami also adopted the Virginia Key Consensus Master Plan in 2010, although it has not been implemented.

In the words of the original Master Plan, the plan "reconnects Virginia Key to Miami by enhancing its natural areas and providing for recreational opportunities that range from active sports fields to passive environmental education trails. The goal of the Master Plan is to provide for multiple and diverse forms of activity and recreation for the residents of Miami while also instilling a deep appreciation and respect for nature by enhancing the natural areas and providing opportunities for environmental education. The plan, therefore, includes park amenities that range from protected mangrove and wildlife areas, contiguous waterfront promenades and beach trails, an improved public waterfront marina and boat storage system, expanded public aquatic center and pools, opportunities for active recreation and sports, mountain biking trails and eco-camping. Virginia Key has the opportunity to truly be the Central Park of Miami, or the 'lungs' of a city that would provide refuge and vitally needed open space in a burgeoning and crowded metropolis."

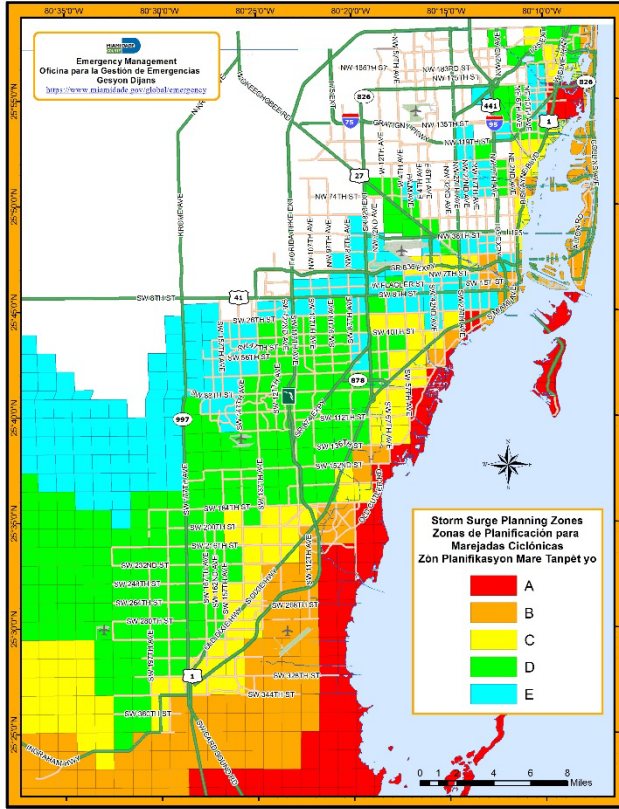
Since the property is governed by city zoning and the existing master plans, it is recommended that the County conduct title searches to understand the consistency of use of Virginia Key as a proposed site to provide services for residents experiencing homelessness. Additionally, there is a large parcel of land on Virginia Key that was conveyed from the County to the city in 1982, and we are in the process of confirming whether this parcel includes the area intended for the proposed encampment. It is important to ensure that the proposed use of this property does not run counter to any conditions in a potential

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property conveyance or conflict with any County deeds. I have directed the Internal Services Department to conduct the necessary title searches for this property.

Attachment

c: Geri Bonzon-Keenan, County Attorney  
Gerald Sanchez, First Assistant County Attorney  
Jess McCarty, Executive Assistant County Attorney  
Office of the Mayor Senior Staff  
Lourdes M. Gomez, Director, RER  
Rashid Istambouli, Director, DERM  
Ray Jadallah, Chief, Miami-Dade Fire Rescue  
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Victoria Mallette, Executive Director, The Homeless Trust  
Jennifer Moon, Chief, Office of Policy and Budgetary Affairs  
Yinka Majekodunmi, Commission Auditor  
Basia Pruna, Director, Clerk of the Board



### Storm Surge Simulator

Enter your address (e.g. 11200 SW 8th St, Miami, FL 33199) ...

or click

Which hurricane category?

What type of structure?   
 Person  House  Villa

Projected storm surge depth:   
 15 ft  
 12 ft  
 9 ft

Virginia Key Outdoor Center - Kayak Paddleboard  
 Mabel F. Torres Miller Walking  
 Duck Lake

**Legend:**

- 1 ft
- 2 ft
- 3 ft
- 5 ft
- 7 ft
- 10 ft
- 15 ft
- 20 ft

**Additional Information:**  
 The color-coded zones on the map illustrate a worst case snapshot of hurricane category under 'perfect' storm conditions.

FIU FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY **FIU** Computing & Information Sciences  
 The Storm Surge Simulator is a public service provided by Florida International University. For any inquiries, contact Prof. Shu-Ching Chen ([chen@cis.fiu.edu](mailto:chen@cis.fiu.edu)).

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