

## Dade County: The Politics of Managing Urban Growth

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**Miami.** One morning last November, James Bassage, a horticulturist and avocado grower who lives near the town of Homestead, had left home early to appear here before the Metropolitan Dade County Commission. He was speaking in support of the county's newly adopted metropolitan master plan, particularly with respect to its promise of allowing his "Redlands" farming area to remain pretty much as it is, at least through the year 2000.

Bassage began by describing for the commissioners his trip up the Dixie Highway that morning. "It [took] about an hour and a half to make the 30 miles. The rush-hour traffic jams were monumental." Moreover, he added, evidence of air pollution from automobile emissions was unmistakable and visual blight was at every hand. "We looked around at the scenery, such as it is, [and saw] strip zoning and architectural bankruptcy—a landscape without redeeming social value."

Adding to his sense of unease, Bassage indicated, was his awareness of the county's other growth-related problems, such as overcrowded schools, overloaded sewage treatment plants, persistent threats of water shortage in time of drought, and contamination of existing water supply well fields. Indeed, as for the latter, Bassage could have noted that a report made to Congress by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency the previous June had revealed that Miami had more chloroform—a suspected carcinogen—in its water supply than any of 79 other cities surveyed.

Bassage told the commissioners nothing that they had not heard many times before, and nothing that had not been described in various government reports, such as the *Profile of Metropolitan Dade County: Conditions and Needs* released in 1972 by the Office of the County Manager. The fact is, urban sprawl and largely uncontrolled growth have actually endangered Greater Miami's continued viability. In particular, a safe and dependable water supply may be lost if

promiscuous development encroaches further upon areas vital to recharging the Biscayne Aquifer, which underlies much of the Everglades and nearly all of Dade County.

Whether Dade keeps from sliding into deeper trouble may depend upon its success or failure in managing growth under the new master plan. This plan is one of the most advanced and meaningful metropolitan plans ever developed in the United States, especially inasmuch as it is legally enforceable and not merely advisory. How it has come to be adopted in the face of substantial political opposition from development interests makes a case study worthy of the attention of the citizens of other metropolitan areas that are still to come to grips with the problems of poorly controlled growth and urban sprawl.

Dade and other metropolitan areas are largely on their own in dealing with these problems. Realistically, the state and federal governments cannot and will not take on the burden of detailed metropolitan planning and growth management. They will at best provide some financial help and enforceable guidelines for planning and land use, and perhaps intervene directly in the case of large-scale developments and "critical" areas that are of more than local significance—as they did several years ago in forcing the Dade County Port Authority ultimately to abandon its plans to build a huge regional jetport in the Big Cypress Watershed near the Everglades National Park. In Florida, the current limits of state involvement in such matters are set forth in the land and water management acts of 1972 and in the Local Government Comprehensive Planning Act of 1975.

### "Metro" and the First Master Plan

In size and population, Dade County is something of a mini-state. Extending over 2257 square miles, this county is a bit larger than the state of Delaware, and its population of about 1.4 million—divided almost equally between the county's 26 cities (Miami, Hialeah, and Mi-

ami Beach being the largest) and its unincorporated areas—is greater than that of a fourth of the 50 states. Since World War II, urbanization has blanketed virtually the entire northeast corner of the county. In some places, such as Miami Beach, development has been chock-a-block, with high rise motels and condominiums crowding in upon one another and even preempting much of the beach. But, more typically, development has taken the form of the spread city, consisting mostly of a vast aggregation of separate, loosely related, and frequently nondescript developments of single-family homes.

Urbanization also has extended well to the south of Miami, having occurred in a patchy fashion on either side of the Dixie Highway (U.S. 1) nearly as far down as Homestead. And it has spread westward, again patchily and unevenly, 5 to 10 miles beyond the low coastal ridge into what was once the eastern edge of the Everglades, thus intruding upon the area of aquifer recharge. During the 1960's, the county's urbanized area grew by more than 60 percent.

Yet, at the same time that urban sprawl was proceeding almost unchecked, Dade had under way a promising experiment in metropolitan government which could have helped make growth management possible. In a 1957 referendum on a home rule charter, Dade voters chose, if by only a slender majority, to place nearly all governmental functions of county-wide significance under a new "Metro" government while leaving it to the municipalities—except in the unincorporated areas that had become urbanized—to discharge purely local functions. The two-tier metropolitan system resulting from this arrangement was the first of its kind in the United States. Among the powers vested in the Metro commission, which today is comprised of nine members elected at large, was the authority to provide or regulate all water and sewer systems and public transport facilities and to "prepare and enforce comprehensive plans for the development of the county."

But Metro was to be largely ineffective in managing growth and development during its first 15 years of existence. Besides suffering from generally weak leadership, the Metro commission perceived no strong, clear political mandate for growth management. Although local conservation leaders whipped up effective opposition to some major development projects that threatened to degrade the almost pristine condition of south Biscayne Bay, the more persistent, unre-

mitting political pressures on Metro came from people and institutions having a stake in either the buying, selling, or development of land—landowners, contractors, labor unionists in the building trades, local mortgage lenders, zoning lawyers, and numerous outside investors, including some major eastern banks, insurance companies, and national corporations.

Also, city officials clung fiercely and successfully to what they wrongly regarded as their right to undisputed control over all land use within city boundaries. And, because of the high prospective cost, Metro for a long time felt unable to begin implementing plans for a county-wide sewer and waste treatment system, with the result that many developments continued to rely on septic tanks or small and usually inefficient “package” plants for waste treatment.

Although a general land use master plan for the county was adopted in 1965, this early plan represented less a vision of the future than an extension of the past, for it was based chiefly on projections of past population growth and land use practices. The population was expected to more than double by 1985, rising to 2.5 million—a total now not expected to be reached until well after the year 2000.

Too often, the plan simply evaded hard choices, as in calling for the enhancement of agriculture in the Homestead area, yet making it clear that agriculture would ultimately have to yield to residential, commercial, and industrial development. Furthermore, even to the extent that the plan could be considered a positive guide to the future, the Metro commissioners generally gave it little heed. Prepared virtually without citizen participation, the plan represented chiefly the work of professional planners and carried almost no political weight.

#### Origins of the New Master Plan

When the environmental movement in the United States was peaking in the early 1970's, Dade County had a ready-made cadre of experienced and sophisticated environmental leaders because of the intense battles that had been fought during the 1960's over south Biscayne Bay. This was one of the major factors in the development of a new Dade County master plan.\*

Another factor was the sense of alarm generated by the severe drought of 1971.

Salt water intruded into eight of Miami's water supply wells, causing them to be shut down. Because of excessive drainage and other mistakes in water management, the water table in the Biscayne Aquifer had simply dropped below the point necessary to maintain the hydraulic head required to keep the salt water out.

The events which led directly to the new master plan began in early 1972. An aroused association of property owners forced an intransigent Metro commission to call a referendum on whether moratoriums should be declared on the issuance of building permits in selected areas, pending studies to see whether existing zoning should be “rolled back” to lower densities or less intensive uses. The proposition carried resoundingly, despite warnings from the Builders Association of South Florida that the moratoriums would lead to widespread unemployment among construction workers. And, in due course, building moratoriums were declared for various parts of the county, ultimately to be followed by some major zoning changes, as when extensive “industrial” acreages in the East Everglades area were rolled back to agricultural or general use status.

In the fall of 1972, Mayor Stephen P. Clark and three other development-oriented commissioners were defeated for reelection by candidates supported by the Committee for Sane Growth, a new group put together by some of the politically resourceful veterans of the battles of south Biscayne Bay. Metro's new mayor, John B. Orr, Jr., soon came on strong as an advocate of developing a master plan for controlling growth and stopping urban sprawl.

Unlike his predecessor, Orr was too much of a political maverick to have ever been in any sense tied to Greater Miami's rather loosely defined commercial and political power structure. His last job before running for mayor had been as an assistant state attorney responsible for rooting out malfeasance in local government, an assignment in which he could appreciate both the ins-and-outs of corrupt zoning practices and the need to open up local government to extensive citizen involvement.

By background, two of the other new commissioners were even more committed than Jack Orr to land use planning and growth management with strong citizen participation. One was Harvey Ruvin, a young attorney who had led the effort to force the referendum on the moratorium issue, and the other was Beverly Phillips, former president of the Dade

League of Women Voters. Both had been leaders in the controlled growth movement from its outset.

By January 1973, Metro's Planning Advisory Board (PAB) had appointed six citizens' advisory task forces and asked them to propose goals and policies for the new master plan. Altogether, 133 persons served on these task forces, each of which was assigned a separate study topic, either land use, population, economics, environment, public service, or plan implementation. The task forces were made up of some city officials and local educators, environmental leaders, architects, urban planners, engineers, attorneys, realtors, developers, and other businessmen and professionals. And, although chaired by members of the PAB and assisted by Dade Planning Department staff people, the task forces were encouraged to come up with their own conceptions as to how best to manage Dade's growth.

During the spring and summer of 1973, the task forces produced hundreds of tentative recommendations. Then, in the fall, they met together in a series of workshops and finally agreed on a total of 410 recommendations to be submitted to the PAB in December as “proposed Metropolitan Development Policies.” Once it was reviewed by the PAB and the planning department and put in a form acceptable to the Metro commission, this policy document would provide the basis for an official *Environmental Protection Guide and a Metropolitan Development Guide*.

The document was, however, intensely controversial. Although developers and realtors had made up nearly a tenth of all the task force members, they had found themselves heavily outnumbered in the working session by members whose chief concern was environmental protection and ensuring a better quality of life. Perhaps because of this, some of them simply stopped attending. And, certainly, given the far-reaching nature of some of the proposals, such unsympathetic reactions were entirely predictable, even on the part of developers who would favor at least enough growth management to keep new development closely in step with the extension of essential public services.

The task force recommendations called for population growth to be sharply restrained, with allowed densities set at levels much lower than in the past. Indeed, an overall population ceiling or “cap” would be fixed in keeping with the county's “carrying capacity,” to be determined by applying criteria such as the

\*For further detail see *The Florida Experience: Land and Water Policy in a Growth State*, by Luther J. Carter (published for Resources for the Future in 1975 by the Johns Hopkins University Press).

sufficiency of water supplies, the cost of services, and the desirability of preserving prime farm lands and natural areas. Further, "the general configuration of metropolitan growth should emphasize concentration around centers of activity, rather than directionless sprawl." Moreover, the new master plan would be tied to zoning maps, with developers having to show that their proposed projects conformed to the plan.

Groups such as the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce and the Miami Board of Realtors offered detailed critiques of the plan at the series of ten public hearings conducted by the PAB in early 1974. The *Miami Herald*, which wields immense influence in local affairs, was generally supportive of the plan, but it joined the developers in scoffing at the population ceiling.

By June, the PAB and the planning department had drafted their own "recommended metropolitan development policies" in a public workshop and submitted them to the Metro commission. Omitted from this document were several things advocated by the task forces, including the population-cap proposal and proposals for "transfer of development rights" (as from wetlands to higher ground) and for a citizens watchdog committee on land use. But, on the whole, the recommendations of the PAB and the planning department were similar in thrust to those of the task forces.

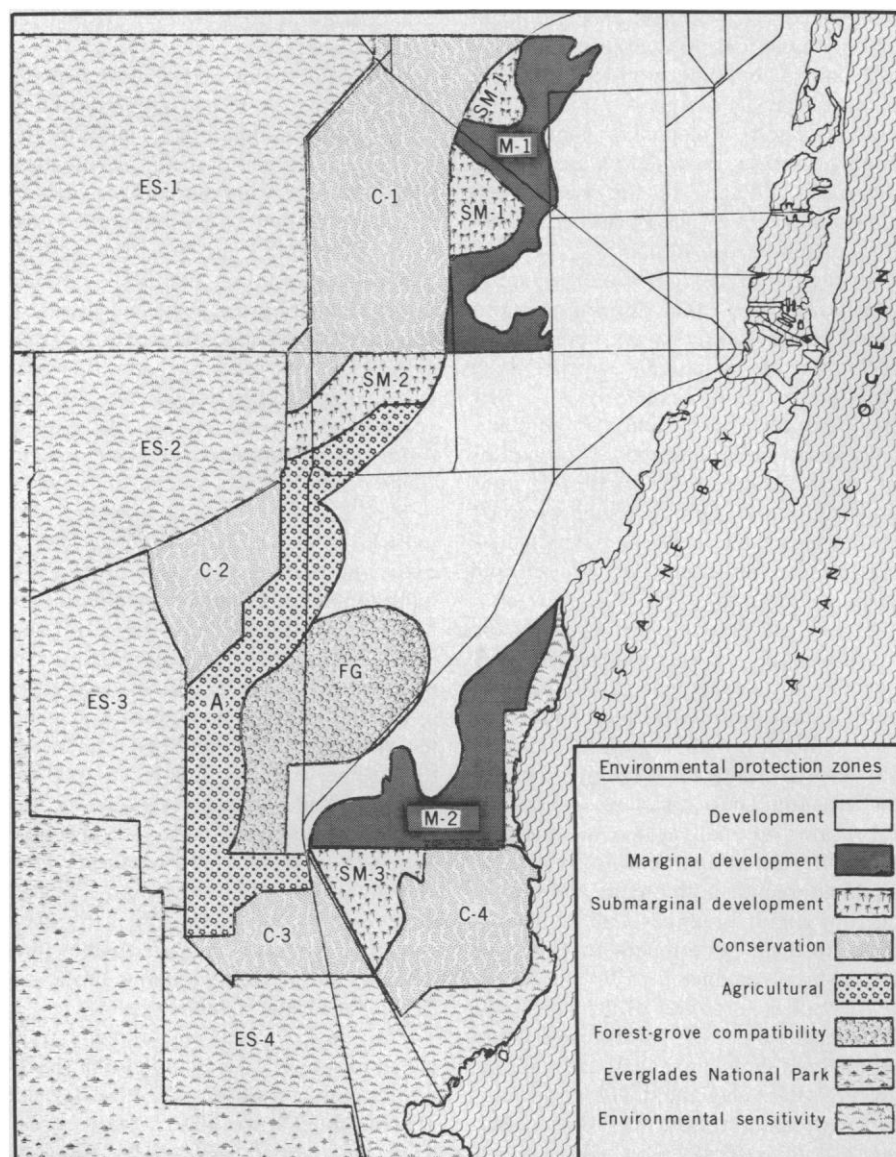
Before the Metro commission took action on the proposed development policies at the end of 1974, there were some important intervening events which indicated that the concept of growth management was still gaining in political cur-

rency and favor. In the spring of that year Mayor Orr learned that he had cancer. In late July, Orr died, and although some people had disliked and distrusted him, the prevailing view seemed to be that (as the *Miami Herald* put it) he had made Metro "come alive."

Stephen Clark, the former mayor and building contractor whom Orr had beaten 2 years earlier, promptly became a candidate to regain his old job, and he succeeded. But this time Clark gave the voters to understand that he, too, could be counted on to favor controlling growth according to a well-conceived master plan. In the same election, James Redford, chairman of the Committee for Sane Growth, also won a seat on the Metro commission by defeating a former commissioner who had been executive director of the Builders Association of South Florida. Redford's victory was all the more significant given the fact that, with the national recession, hard times had come to the Dade construction industry and there was increasing unemployment.

Nevertheless, the Metro commission seemed to equivocate in its first action on the master plan, to the anger and dismay of many of the people who had been on the citizen task forces. The commission chose, on a 5 to 4 vote, to formally adopt not the full statement of metropolitan development policies but only a brief recitation of blandly stated goals. But a more significant test of the commission's commitment to growth management would come 4 months later, when action was to be taken on the environmental protection and development guides prepared by Metro's planning department.

These guides *were* in fact the master plan, for they contained specific statements of policy and the maps showing generally where development, at various densities, should and should not go. On the environmental protection zones map (at left), most of the undeveloped land in the county outside the area presently zoned for urban use was classified in a manner implying severe constraints on development. And the two "metropolitan development pattern" maps, for 1985 and the year 2000, would keep urbanization from extending more than a few miles, at most, west of the Florida Turnpike. The Chamber of Commerce, together with other development-oriented groups, looked upon the development pattern maps with strong disapproval. The chamber argued vigorously that the more generous outer limits for urbanization defined in the 1965 master



Map by Eleanor Warner

Environmental protection zones established as part of the new Metropolitan Dade County Master Plan, which is designed to stop urban sprawl.

plan should not be hastily abandoned.

But the commission adopted the environmental protection and development guides largely without change, motivated in part by two compelling considerations. One had to do with the old problem of ensuring adequate water supplies of high quality. The other involved obtaining the huge federal grants necessary to build Metro's proposed \$1.3 billion fixed-guideway rapid transit system.

In the case of the water problem, existing well fields remained under the threat of salt-water intrusion and continued to suffer contamination from storm run-off and other polluted surface water, which readily infiltrates the highly porous limestone of the Biscayne Aquifer. In fact, Metro would later seek and obtain voter approval of a \$97.5 million water bond issue needed to establish new well fields in or near the East Everglades area; they were to be 8 miles or so west of the existing well fields but only a few miles beyond the existing urban area. To allow urbanization to leap farther west into this important aquifer-recharge and potential well-field area did not make sense. The commissioners had recognized this in rolling back the zoning on several big tracts of East Everglades land.

Funding for the rapid transit project was linked to the master plan because officials of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Urban Mass Transit Administration regarded adoption of the plan as a project prerequisite. Besides stopping urban sprawl, the plan was expected to redirect growth "inward," in part by fostering development of compact, densely populated "activity centers" at various points along the corridors of the fixed guideway transit system, as, for example, along the Dixie Highway corridor in South Dade.

Although some developers protested that the commission had embraced a "no-growth" policy by adopting the master plan, this clearly was not the case. An analysis made by the planning department in 1974 had shown that existing residential zoning in the municipalities and unincorporated areas could accommodate a population substantially larger than that of 2,050,000 forecast for the year 2000.

#### Implementing the Plan

Today, more than a year has gone by since the commission's adoption of the master plan. How faithfully has the plan been implemented and adhered to? The record is mixed, but taken overall, it appears creditable.

In June 1975, the commission enacted

a series of ordinances to ensure consistency between new development and the plan. For instance, special review procedures were established for all private projects above a certain size; even clusters of townhouses on sites of 10 acres or larger became subject to such review. Especially intensive reviews were called for in the case of projects of "county-wide" impact. At the heart of the review process is the newly created Development Impact Committee, which examines sizable projects from all relevant points of view. Its key members include the heads of three Metro departments—planning, building and zoning, and environmental resources management—plus an assistant county manager (who chairs the committee) and the county manager's specialist on capital improvements.

Metro has asserted, by formal ordinance, that it will go to court to stop any municipally sanctioned project which conflicts with the master plan. Few of the Dade municipalities have much vacant land left for development, but in all the cities there is of course the possibility of some major redevelopment.

The Metro commission has denied numerous applications for zoning changes on grounds of incompatibility with the master plan. In one instance where the commissioners, on a close vote, allowed a deviation from the plan, they quickly learned that such actions would not be accepted lightly. The headline in the next morning's Miami *Herald* read, "Rezoning Violates Dade Plan." Also, a citizens league promptly filed suit and succeeded in having the change of zoning enjoined as a plan violation. The judge held that the plan's provisions carry a "presumption of correctness" and must be followed "unless there are some compelling reasons to depart therefrom."

The decision was immediately hailed as a clear and surprisingly strong affirmation of the master plan's legal status. The Florida Local Government Comprehensive Planning Act of 1975 also requires zoning actions to be consistent with county and municipal plans, and this too is expected to reinforce the Metro plan's legal significance.

Before 1976 is out, the importance and integrity of the master plan as a guide to growth will undergo further tests. For instance, the Metro commission must face up to what now seems a pressing need to designate the East Everglades area as one of "critical environmental concern" subject to special land use regulations over and above existing zoning restrictions. A critical-area ordinance for this

part of the county actually was drafted in 1974 but never acted upon. Under its protective provisions, no alteration of natural drainage systems would be tolerated, and not more than 5 percent of any particular site could be covered with non-permeable surfaces, such as roofing or paving.

Another impending test of the master plan, and the one that could be the most revealing of all, turns on the outcome of the first annual review of proposed amendments to the plan, a process which is now well under way. Instead of considering amendments at random throughout the year, the Metro commission has prescribed a carefully structured annual amendatory procedure that allows plenty of room for citizen participation. By 24 February, the deadline for this year's proposed amendments, a total of 27 had been received, most of them calling for redesignating certain tracts of land beyond the urban fringe from "agricultural and open land" to industrial or other development classifications.

The Metro commission is committed to act on the amendments by 30 June. If many of the requested changes in land classification are allowed, land speculators and developers will know that, despite all the talk about a new day in Dade County, the old zoning game is still being played.

#### Politics and Zoning Lawyers

After proposed amendments are disposed of, the next big test for the master plan comes this fall when all nine Metro commissioners will be up for reelection. Some of the incumbents are clearly more committed to the plan than others. Also, if the past is any guide, the local zoning lawyers will be pouring money into the campaigns of candidates whom they identify as potential friends at court. The bold intensity of the greed that can be involved in land dealings was pointed up again last year when a zoning lawyer and three members of the Metro commission, since removed, were convicted in a bribery case.

Today, Dade County can look on its master plan as a blessing and opportunity. But everything continues to depend on faithful observance and implementation of the plan, and, for this, the county can look only to its own citizens and elected officials. The people of Greater Miami must themselves decide whether they are to try to create a well-planned semitropical garden spot or simply to try to adjust to life in another sprawl-city, U.S.A., with all its trials and problems.—LUTHER J. CARTER