

# Miami Herald

## Rival malls want county to ban subsidies for \$3 billion American Dream Miami project | Miami Herald



Rendering of the American Dream Miami retail theme park. Triple Five

### [MIAMI-DADE COUNTY](#)

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<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article209713174.html>

April 24, 2018 07:54 PM

Updated April 24, 2018 08:52 PM

The showdown between some of the Miami area's largest malls and a new one that would dwarf them all may hinge on whether county commissioners deny tax subsidies that [American Dream Miami](#) has not requested — at least not publicly.

A lobbying group formed by the owners of the Dolphin Mall, Bayside Marketplace and other major Miami retailers lost the first round Tuesday when a Miami-Dade panel unanimously recommended a development agreement [for the American Dream project](#) that is silent on public money going into the \$3 billion retail theme park. The project would bring the country's largest shopping destination to undeveloped land in Northwest Miami-Dade.

But the real showdown looms before the County Commission, which is set to vote on the project on May 17. In past meetings, commissioners have said they want no public dollars spent on the Miami version of Minnesota's Mall of America, Triple Five's most famous development.

The project's lobbyist won't comment on whether Triple Five will ultimately ask for some form of public money. But Mayor Carlos Gimenez said they did so privately several years ago. And a bill in Tallahassee was flagged by the county attorney's office as one designed to let American Dream Miami recoup some of its property-tax revenues through a special district that could be formed around the sprawling retail theme park.

Eager to head off construction of a mega-mall that expects 30 million visitors a year, rival malls see the issue of public dollars as a way to scramble Triple Five's extensively negotiated development deal with the Gimenez administration and inject a restriction that would bar American Dream from seeking financial help from county government in the future.

**Read more:** [American Dream Miami's mega-mall plan: economic miracle or a mirage?](#)

"We think part of a level playing field means that American Dream shouldn't get public money that wasn't made available to current taxpayer malls like Dadeland, Dolphin Mall and International Mall," said Jeffrey Bercow, the lawyer and lobbyist who represents the group formed by the mall owners to fight American Dream.



Former state Sen. Miguel Diaz de la Portilla during a 2017 meeting before the Miami-Dade County Commission on behalf of his client, Triple Five, the developer behind the proposed American Dream Miami mega-mall in Northwest Miami-Dade.

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Triple Five needs a change in the county's land-use rules to move forward with its development partner, The Graham Cos., which requested its own set of approvals to build a 300-acre commercial and residential project just south of American Dream. The proposals include no request for public subsidies, though American Dream representatives did seek them in private meetings as they began pursuing the Miami-Dade project three or four years ago, according to past comments by Gimenez.

At Tuesday's meeting before Miami-Dade's Development Impact Committee, a collection of county staffers who review major construction projects, Triple Five said it would be improper to invent a public-funds restriction just for American Dream.

"It has not been attached to anybody else's agreement or application that I've been involved with in the 30-plus years that I've been involved in the public process of zoning and land-use planning in Miami-Dade County," said Miguel Diaz de la Portilla, the Triple Five lawyer and lobbyist who used to sit on the County Commission.

The appearances before the obscure Development Impact Committee offered a preview of the high-stakes confrontation looming next month when both sides are expecting a fight on the public-funds question for the nearly 200-acre development where I-75 meets the Florida Turnpike near Miami Lakes and Hialeah.

Diaz de la Portilla branded the existing malls' request for a funding restriction as a blatant example of big businesses trying to thwart competition from a project so large it's boasting of creating more than 14,000 permanent jobs at a shopping theme park that's supposed to have its [own ski slope, submarine lake and artificial beach](#).

"This is far from wanting a level playing field," Diaz de la Portilla said of the mall group's demand on a subsidy ban. "That is intended to be a poison pill, that is intended to be an unequal playing field."



Rendering of an artificial beach at the American Dream Miami retail theme park, a project planned for Northwest Miami-Dade.

### Triple Five

Triple Five's [economic-impact study](#) said most of the American Dream jobs would be in retail and hospitality, with about 60 percent of the permanent workers earning less than \$25,000 a year. The study predicted about 23,000 jobs would be created to build the project, and about 15,000 people would work there once it opened. It would be the largest private employer in Miami-Dade. Triple Five predicts roughly 30 million visitors a year.

In early meetings with Triple Five representatives before details of the project were unveiled in 2015, Gimenez said the Canadian company did press for public dollars. Gimenez said those requests were rejected.

In 2016, a Florida bill sponsored by Diaz de la Portilla while he was in the Senate would have authorized special taxing districts to let large projects like American Dream recoup some of their property taxes to pay for some development costs. The bill didn't pass.

A legislative summary prepared by Miami-Dade's county attorney's office said the bill's "language is targeted at the proposed megamall in Northwest Miami-Dade." At the time, Diaz de la Portilla said the taxing-district portion of the bill came from another lawmaker and wasn't his creation. He denied the language was designed to help his client, Triple Five.

In an interview after Tuesday's hearing, Diaz de la Portilla declined to answer questions about whether Triple Five ultimately wants government help in financing a project he called "the greatest job-development application in the history of Miami-Dade County."

"All we have is a development agreement," said Diaz de la Portilla, whose brother, Alex, is running for a vacant seat on the Miami-Dade commission. "All we have is a zoning application. Period and end of story."

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