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The largest mall in America is getting closer to approval in Northwest Miami-Dade | Miami Herald



Rendering of an artificial beach at the American Dream Miami retail theme park, a project planned for Northwest Miami-Dade. A final vote before the County Commission is scheduled for May 17. **Triple Five**

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

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The largest mall in America moved closer to winning a key approval in Miami-Dade on Monday, as a county planning board gave a thumbs up to a \$4 billion retail theme park that expects 30 million visitors a year.

[American Dream Miami](#) promotes itself as a local alternative to Disney World, and a shopping and entertainment destination spanning more than 6 million square feet and large enough to employ 14,000 people once it opens.

"As a mother of four small children," Homestead resident Summer Davis told the Planning Advisory Board at Monday's hearing, "I'm very excited about the prospect of having a theme park for them. ... In order for us to take a family vacation to Orlando, it's very expensive."



An artist's rendering of American Dream Miami, the six-million-square-foot retail theme park planned for Northwest Miami-Dade.
Triple Five Miami

The project by Triple Five, the Canada-based developer of Minnesota's Mall of America, also expects to generate roughly 100,000 vehicle trips per day to a 175-acre triangle of wetlands and pastures where I-75 meets Florida's Turnpike.

Environmental advocates warn of runaway development in a sensitive area, and residents say they're already plagued by traffic and don't want to endure the gridlock that would come from Miami-Dade's largest tourist attraction.

"I don't see how anyone with even the most vivid imagination can accommodate those cars in the surrounding roads," said Derek Cintron, a Miami Lakes resident. "I'm just begging you to consider ... what the residents have with regards to their quality of life."

The advisory board granted near unanimous approval of the American Dream development agreement negotiated by the administration of Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez. That clears the way for the County Commission to take its final vote on the project next week, on Thursday, May 17.

In early 2017, [the 13-member commission granted preliminary approval](#) for both American Dream and an even larger commercial and residential project by the Graham Companies on 300 acres to the south.



A rendering of the indoor amusement park for American Dream Miami, a retail theme park planned in Miami-Dade that promises to vie with Disney World for local entertainment dollars.
Triple Five

While the commission has already given tentative approval to the projects, the development agreement is new. It contains a string of terms committing developers to addressing various impacts from a project, including managing storm water runoff so it doesn't flood nearby areas and paying the county to boost transit services around the mall.

Owners of some of Miami-Dade's largest malls are trying to block the venture. While the group — backed by the owners of Dolphin Mall, Bayside Marketplace and other large retailers — privately assumes easy passage of the needed changes to the county's master development plan and zoning designations next week, its members are hoping to impose restrictions that might make it harder for Triple Five to actually build the project.

The main effort centers on Miami-Dade imposing a requirement in the agreement that Triple Five not accept government subsidies for the project. That tactic may require persuading county commissioners to ignore their lawyers. On Monday, assistant county attorney Dennis Kerbel said he didn't think it was legal to insert a funding component into a land-use matter.

"I'm still not entirely sure even addressing that issue is appropriate," Kerbel said. "It will be something we'll have to have an answer ready for the County Commission if they decide to take it up."

The projects would still need various permits and regulatory approvals to build. There's also the need for financing what's sure to be the most ambitious retail project in the country, with American Dream developer Triple Five having upped its original development estimate from \$3 billion to \$4 billion.

Triple Five representatives noted the land itself sits inside the county's Urban Development Boundary and is already zoned for industrial uses. The zoning change is needed to allow for retail and entertainment there — central elements for a project promising submarine rides and an artificial ski slope.

"You can build millions of square feet of industrial product there," said Edgar Jones, a real estate executive representing American Dream. "I, for one, would like to see a theme park."

The vast majority of American Dream visitors would arrive by car, and Miami-Dade's Metrorail system does not have a stop within five miles of the project. Triple Five has agreed to build a bus depot on the project and buy new buses to extend several county routes into the mega-mall. Transit service was a sticking point, with the county writing in April that Triple Five's transit plans "primarily serve the needs of visitors and tourists" but not workers and residents.

"Because this mall will be the largest self-contained shopping/entertainment experience in the United States, it is imperative that careful consideration is given when planning the future transit service," Albert Hernandez, an assistant director for planning at the county's Transportation department, wrote in the April 14 memo.

At Monday's hearing, Transportation representative Claudia Diaz said the development agreement had the department's backing and that a follow-up letter would be submitted into the public record. Broward County, however, is [warning of potential litigation](#) if American Dream doesn't address northern traffic issues for a project just a few miles south of the county line.

The one Miami-Dade planning board member who voted no, Robert Ruano, said he was skeptical of claims that planned new interchanges around the mall site and the widening of roads would absorb the new traffic.

"I just don't see how you can justify it," he said. "This development is really out of scale from anything we've seen before."

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