

## Broward threatens to sue over traffic plan for American Dream Miami mega-mall | Miami Herald



A rendering of the proposed American Dream Miami retail theme park in Northwest Miami-Dade. Broward County claims it will cause significant traffic problems on some of its highways. Triple Five

### MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

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The largest mall in America plans to open just south of the Broward County line, but developers behind the project insist highways to the north face no "significant" traffic problems from [American Dream Miami](#).

"Our traffic study shows that there are no significant impacts to Broward County roads," said Miguel Diaz de la Portilla, a lawyer and lobbyist for Triple Five, the Canadian developer behind Minnesota's [Mall of America](#) that now wants to build a larger version in Northwest Miami-Dade. It's expected to draw about 75,000 vehicle trips a day to a 175-acre wedge of undeveloped land where I-75 meets the Florida Turnpike.

Broward claims the analysis is flawed and underestimates the number of vehicles that will be making their way each day through Broward roads to American Dream Miami, one mile south of the Miami-Dade line. This week the Broward County Commission authorized a lawsuit against Miami-Dade if developers Triple Five and the Graham Companies don't pledge to help ease gridlock to the north.

"This mega-mega mall that's going to attract so many visitors — obviously a lot of them are going to come through southwest Broward," said Broward Commissioner Steve Geller. "You've got to be pretty naive to think there won't be any traffic impacts in Broward."

The dispute highlights the central role American Dream's own traffic assumptions play in Miami-Dade's process for approving the project, a \$4 billion retail theme park so mammoth it plans to have an indoor ski slope and a submarine lake.

On 300 acres to the south would be Graham's unnamed commercial and residential project.

Both require changes to Miami-Dade's master growth plan, and the administration of Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez is recommending approval. County commissioners are set to take a final vote on the projects on Thursday, May 17.

While planners and traffic engineers working for Miami-Dade have reviewed [the study](#), the developers' report is the main analysis being used to calculate whether the projected 30 million visitors a year can be accommodated without making the area's congested roads even worse. Miami-Dade has not produced its own traffic report, and the assumptions in the American Dream report have raised questions in the past.

Last year, Lisa Colamares, a Florida transportation planner, [wrote Miami-Dade](#) to say the state couldn't vouch for the parameters used to generate American Dream's traffic flows.

"The Department is concerned with the trip distribution and assumptions included in the traffic analysis," she wrote in a March 15, 2017, letter to Jack Osterholt, the deputy mayor in charge of planning and zoning.

Representatives for American Dream say their traffic analysis has endured two years of scrutiny and been accepted at the county and state level after some revisions. Earlier this week, Miami-Dade's Transportation Department told a planning board that agency officials had no objections to the proposal.

American Dream brands Broward's complaints as a bid for excessive impact fees from Triple Five, owner of Minnesota's Mall of America, and Graham, one of the most successful developers in South Florida.

"Everybody has had a shot at it. These are not easy guys to deal with," Triple Five consultant Robert Gorlow said of state and county engineers scrutinizing the traffic numbers since they were submitted in 2015. "We're not adjusting the traffic [study] because someone has one opinion or another. We're using a scientific method."

The consultant Triple Five and Graham hired to produce a traffic study, Leftwich Consulting Engineers out of Orlando, predicts American Dream will attract about 75,000 trips a day and another 60,000 from Graham by 2040. The developers will be required to pay millions of dollars toward some road-widening projects and the construction of new interchanges to accommodate traffic for the new projects.

American Dream wants to build about 6 million square feet of retail, entertainment and hotel space in its project, and Graham plans another 4 million of mostly office and business space, plus 2,000 homes.

"Of course there will be impacts when you do this," Diaz de la Portilla told a county planning board on Monday, before the Miami-Dade panel gave nearly unanimous support to the proposal. "When you create the kind of unique destination we're planning to create ... We want to make sure we address the impacts, because that is in our interests, as well everyone else's."

Darlene Fernandez, assistant transportation director for Miami-Dade, said she has strong confidence in the traffic study, which was subject to intense review by the county and other agencies during the review process.

"We're confident with that traffic study," she said. "We spent three years on it."

She added that the key is not just the traffic counts, but what road improvements Triple Five has agreed must be completed before American Dream opens. "We didn't ask for the bare minimum," she said. "We asked for everything we can, and more."

Even with American Dream required to pay for road widening and interchanges — including new off ramps on I-75 — not all of those improvements are designed to avoid gridlock. The developers' traffic analysis shows that some of the main roads and highways serving the American Dream site are already busy enough to be considered failing. Adding a sprawling mall and theme park in 2022 — the scheduled opening — won't change the failing status.

For example, Miami Gardens Drive is set to widen from four lanes to six, with Triple Five helping pay for the improvements. Leftwich's 2016 traffic study already ranks the road's capacity at "F," the lowest possible ranking, without any improvements or any new construction in the area. Once the new lanes are added and American Dream opens, the consultant still predicts an "F" rating.

Even so, American Dream sees its location just inside the county's urban-development boundary as ideal for a large attraction because it offers easy access to a pair of major highways. With visitors able to travel north and south along I-75 and the Turnpike, the Leftwich study predicts use of the two highways will avoid significant strain on other roads.



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**

A lobbying group formed by some of the region's largest malls to fight American Dream [has already objected](#) to the parameters used to churn out traffic predictions in the model. Broward's traffic consultant also objected, saying American Dream's "forced trip diversion" onto the Turnpike affects travel patterns for about 30 percent of the theme park's visitors.

When Broward's traffic engineers reworked the assumptions to have far more visitors arrive directly from I-75, the results showed enough of a strain on a stretch of the Miramar Parkway to justify the developer paying impact fees for improvements.

In a presentation delivered to American Dream and Miami-Dade staff at a Jan. 22 meeting in Fort Lauderdale, Broward planners said roughly one in three vehicles visiting American Dream would drive through Broward. The predicted share was slightly lower for the Graham project — 36 percent versus 33 percent — but the traffic would still be enough to fill a six-lane interstate highway, according to the presentation. It predicted roughly 50,000 vehicle trips a day through Broward. While American Dream's projections show 75,000 trips a day, the analysis also estimates only 70,000 of them will represent trips that wouldn't otherwise occur in the area. Half the trips are into the mall and half are out.

Scott Brunner, the Broward transportation planner who gave the presentation, said the two analyses generated the same number of car trips per day. But Broward's assumptions brought more traffic through the southwestern part of the county.

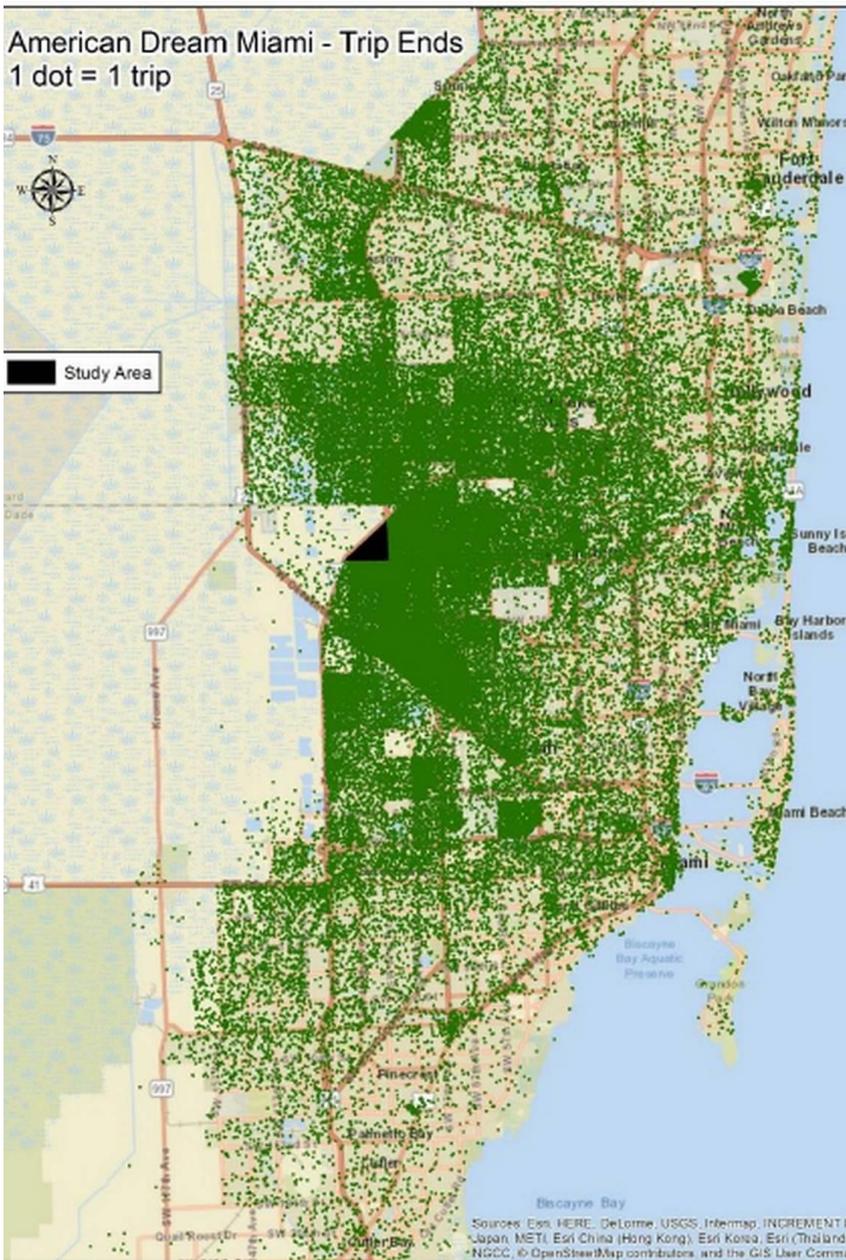
American Dream's own traffic analysis seemed to underestimate the number of day trippers and tourists who would drive down for a visit from Palm Beach and beyond, Brunner said. He said Broward's analysis found the original traffic study used roughly the same average trip length of between 10 and 11 miles for both the Graham and the American Dream project — despite one being a standard commercial complex and one being a retail theme park with roller coasters and an artificial beach.

"A regional entertainment complex would be expected to attract trips from much further away than what was used in the impact study," Brunner said Wednesday.

Scott Leftwich, author of the developers' traffic study, agreed that the vast majority of American Dream's traffic will arrive from Broward and Miami-Dade. The model produced only about 500 American Dream drivers from Palm Beach County, just north of Broward. That doesn't mean tourists won't visit the mega-mall. Significant numbers will arrive from hotels throughout the region, and American Dream plans to build 2,000 hotel rooms within the complex itself.

"American Dream Miami is designed to actually keep the people who are coming for longer stays," Leftwich said. "They want them to stay in the park."

Leftwich based the traffic study on patterns at the Mall of America, saying that Triple Five project is the best model given the entertainment and theme-park options at both. American Dream would be about 50 percent larger than the Minnesota park, with roughly 1 million more square feet of retail than what the Mall of America had at the time of a 2016 study. Both are modeled as destinations with entertainment options designed to keep visitors longer than they would for a traditional mall. While the Mall of America has a light rail stop, American Dream is paying for a county bus center for new routes from Broward and Miami-Dade to transport visitors and workers.



A plot of where Broward County says visitors to American Dream Miami will end up after visiting the proposed \$4 billion retail theme park. The county is using its traffic analysis to say there will be more strain on Broward roads than American Dream claims.

The stakes in the Broward flare-up may not be that high. Geller, the county commissioner, said Broward is seeking about \$4 million from the developers to pay for sophisticated traffic signals to help with intersections feeding into Miramar Parkway. Diaz de la Portilla said Broward had been seeking more than \$20 million when talks began in early 2018.

The talks continue, with Diaz de la Portilla saying Miami-Dade and Broward officials are meeting Thursday over the dispute.

In a letter released Thursday, Gimenez wrote Broward Mayor Beam Furr saying Miami-Dade's staff has found no evidence American Dream and Graham would contribute more than 5 percent of the daily traffic on any Broward roads. That, he said, would be the trigger for Broward to demand fees from the developers.

"To be clear, our analysis is not that there are no impacts in Broward County," Gimenez wrote, saying he was eager to resolve the dispute. But in applying accepted rules for when a project is causing significant traffic problems, "the impacts to Broward County roads do not rise to a threshold that requires the developers to provide mitigation."

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