

Five things to watch for as Miami-Dade prepares for American Dream mega-mall vote | Miami Herald

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American Dream Miami can move much closer to reality Thursday if Miami-Dade commissioners approve the \$4 billion project, which would bring the largest mall in America to Northwest Miami-Dade.

Backers, led by Mayor Carlos Gimenez, tout the retail theme park as a boon to the region's economy for bringing an attraction large enough to employ about [14,000 people full time](#) and offer both an indoor ski slope and a submarine lake. The Canadian developer, Triple Five, owns the Mall of America in Minnesota, and wants American Dream to be an even larger version of that shopping attraction, with 2,000 hotel rooms for vacationers.

Critics, led by environmental groups and nearby residents, say it's too close to the low-lying Everglades. They warn of a traffic nightmare for converting a 175-acre wedge of wetlands and wooded area between I-75 and the Turnpike into South Florida's leading shopping destination with an estimated 30 million visitors a year.

With only one No vote, commissioners early last year gave preliminary approval to American Dream and an allied commercial and residential project by the Graham Companies on 300 acres to the south. Both projects would rise on land that's within Miami-Dade's urban-development boundary, meaning some sort of large development is bound to go there eventually.



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

Those factors make an outright rejection of the American Dream project an unlikely outcome for Thursday's 9:30 a.m. meeting at the Stephen P. Clark Government Center, when commissioners are scheduled to take their final votes on zoning and land-use changes needed to build the project. But that doesn't mean there won't be a

big fight on the dais or by the various parties trying to influence the requirements for approval.

Here are five things to watch for at Thursday's meeting:

1. Will commissioners trust the traffic study?

Triple Five and the Graham Companies hired the consultant that produced the traffic study Miami-Dade is using to determine whether the projects' transportation plans comply with county rules for congestion limits and road improvements. It projects about 70,000 vehicle trips a day, with 5,000 an hour during the evening rush hour.

American Dream is relying on most vehicles coming in from the north and south on I-75 and the Turnpike, rather than the east-west roads that run through Miami Lakes and other nearby neighborhoods. Broward County calls the study flawed and is [threatening to sue over its conclusion](#) that American Dream won't cause any "significant" traffic problems for Broward, despite the project sitting just a couple of miles south of the county line.

Triple Five notes the extensive traffic analysis has been subject to intense scrutiny from Florida and Miami-Dade planners. While some of the plan's assumptions have changed since the first draft was submitted in the fall of 2016, Miami-Dade's Transportation Department has endorsed the findings. Also, the developer is helping pay for about \$200 million in highway improvements that must be completed before the project could open as planned in 2022. Those improvements include new interchanges around the project site and widening nearby roads like Miami Gardens Drive.

2. Will more images of the project be revealed?

While some of the most ambitious elements of American Dream Miami have been part of past presentations, including an indoor beach and roller coasters, Triple Five could wow admirers in the audience by rolling out renderings of planned retailers and entertainment components at the park. There's been talk of [sea lions, Legoland, and a Cirque du Soleil theater](#).

3. Will rival malls win a restriction on public dollars?

A group of existing large Miami-Dade retailers, including the owners of Bayside Marketplace and the Dolphin Mall, are trying to rattle Triple Five's plans by pressuring the 13-member commission to insert a ban on government funds for American Dream in exchange for approving the land-use changes needed for the project.

Triple Five hasn't asked for public dollars, but is also resisting the request as inappropriate. Triple Five head Eskandar Ghermezian pressed Gimenez for county subsidies in their private talks before the county revealed the American Dream proposal in the spring of 2015. Gimenez said no to the request. A county lawyer who helped negotiate the proposed American Dream development agreement with Miami-Dade recently said he doubted commissioners could legally insert a public-funds ban into land-use and zoning approvals set for a vote Thursday.

4. Will politics make a difference?

The rival mall group, which calls itself the South Florida Taxpayers Association, has been running television and radio ads urging the public to pressure individual commissioners to ban government dollars from going to American Dream. The group is also sending out advertisements by text messages with the office number of the recipient's commissioner with the same request.

Chairman Esteban "Steve" Bovo on Wednesday called the messages "a misinformation in full swing."

The scheduled mall vote comes just four weeks before the June 19 deadline for candidates to file for the six even-numbered commission districts that are up for election this year. That includes the American Dream site's District 12, represented by Jose "Pepe" Diaz, who so far has no announced opponents. If any commissioner is concerned about a mall vote drawing a challenger, that could make a deferral to a later meeting an attractive option for Thursday.

5. Will commissioners decide how to spend the mall money?

Triple Five estimates it will have to pay about \$60 million in impact fees to Miami-Dade as part of its development approvals. Those fees are calculated later as the developer applies for building permits, but elected officials are already saying where they want the money to go.

Commissioner Xavier Suarez [this week proposed spending the impact fees](#) on an elevated mini-train system connecting American Dream to the county's Metrorail system about eight miles away. On Thursday, Miami Lakes Mayor Manny Cid released a letter to Gimenez and the county commissioners urging them to pledge to spend all the money to help traffic in the surrounding areas.

Cid wrote that the request was justified, given the "magnitude and regional significance" of the projects and the fact that "Northwest Miami-Dade is already heavily burdened with traffic congestion."

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