

Nation's largest mall wins Miami-Dade approval as county backs American Dream Miami | Miami Herald



A rendering of the proposed American Dream Miami retail theme park in Northwest Miami-Dade. The County Commission approved zoning and land-use changes for the project on Thursday, May 17. Triple Five

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

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The [American Dream Miami retail theme park](#) won final zoning approval Thursday from Miami-Dade County, clearing a significant hurdle toward building a \$4 billion mega-mall on undeveloped land off the Florida Turnpike with enough space for an indoor ski slope and a submarine lake.

In a 9 to 1 vote, county commissioners approved changing Miami-Dade's growth plan and zoning designations to allow Canadian developer Triple Five to create an even larger version of its current signature property, Minnesota's Mall of America, in Northwest Miami-Dade. With six million square feet of retail and entertainment space, American Dream Miami predicts 30 million visitors a year and about 70,000 vehicle trips in and out of the property, roughly equivalent to some of the [busiest stretches](#) of the Dolphin Expressway.

"This is the biggest project we've ever had in Miami-Dade County," said Mayor Carlos Gimenez, who championed the deal and whose administration negotiated the development agreement that was part of Thursday's approval.



Megan Sorbo speaks against the American Dream Miami retail theme park, calling the proposed development an environmental abomination during a meeting of the Miami-Dade County Commission on Thursday, May 17, 2018. The commission approved the project.
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Triple Five allied with the Graham Companies, the Miami Lakes developer that still owns a large chunk of the 175-acre American Dream site and plans an even larger commercial and residential project on 300 acres to the south. Commissioners also approved that project Thursday, setting up a transformation of nearly 500 acres west of Miami Lakes and north of Hialeah into 10 million square feet of new construction.

American Dream — a project first unveiled by Gimenez in 2015 after negotiations with Triple Five to purchase some government land on the development site — has attracted most of the attention and opposition.

Triple Five still faces significant hurdles before it can start construction on a project it has said will cost roughly \$4 billion to develop. It must obtain a string of permits from the county after clearing regulatory milestones, including environmental mitigation, sewage capacity and water use. The company can't proceed without Florida implementing about \$200 million worth of roadway improvements.. Florida has already agreed to some of the roadway widening and interchange expansions, but Triple Five must pay for anything that the state won't fund. Alice Bravo, Miami-Dade's transportation director, said no county dollars would be used for American Dream road projects.

Triple Five also has to line up commercial loans to build the 175-acre project at a time when traditional malls are under siege from the rise of online shopping.



Miami-Dade County Commissioner Xavier Suarez, left, speaks with Chairman Esteban "Steve" Bovo at the county commission meeting where the American Dream Mall came up for its final vote before the elected board.

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But Thursday's vote caps two years of extensive lobbying, negotiations and closed-door maneuvering from the Canadian-based developer and its deep-pocketed foes in South Florida's existing retail industry. The effort led up to what would be the final vote before Miami-Dade's elected board, barring any requested amendments to the development agreement that accompanied Thursday's approvals or future requests by Triple Five.

Daniella Levine Cava was the only commissioner on the 13-seat board to vote against the two projects, citing American Dream's traffic, low-wage jobs and a lack of a plan to recycle water at a theme park that plans to make its own snow and run a water park. She said Miami-Dade should have insisted on more concessions from the developers.

"We had more leverage than we used," she said.

Commissioners Audrey Edmonson and Jean Monestime were not present for the vote, which occurred shortly after 6:30 p.m.

A lobbying group formed by the owners of rival malls, including Sawgrass Mills and Bayside Marketplace, targeted the project with an effort to preemptively ban it from seeking government subsidies as a condition of the county's land-use approvals. That effort failed to secure a ban on American Dream seeking state funds, but county commissioners did vote to adopt a county budget policy — which could be waived by a later vote — against spending Miami-Dade tax dollars on the American Dream project.

"I learn from past mistakes," said Commissioner Rebeca Sosa, who voted [for the unpopular 2009 public financing deal for Marlins Park](#). "All I want is to make sure no public funds are used."



Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, left, and Triple Five head Eskandar Ghermezian pose before the county commission voted to approve Triple Five's American Dream Miami project in Northwest Miami-Dade. The two negotiated a land deal in 2015 that allowed the developer to pursue a retail theme park that would be the largest mall in America.

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Commissioners also faced warnings that American Dream would swamp traffic in nearby Miami Lakes and beyond, with Broward County just days ago threatening to sue over the developer traffic study Miami-Dade accepted and which claimed no "significant" impacts on roads just a few miles to the north.

Levine Cava noted the Graham project is expected to eventually generate another 50,000 vehicle trips per day. "We're talking about a tremendous increase in the volume of traffic," she said.

Environmentalists complained the developer hasn't yet provided a plan to manage storm-water flooding on the 175-acre site, which mostly consists of wetlands, and warned the low-lying area on the way to the Everglades was too vulnerable for such a large project.

"Is this another example of climate denial?" asked the Sierra Club's Jonathan Ullman during the nearly nine-hour meeting ahead of the vote.

Advocates noted the site, where I-75 meets the Florida Turnpike, was already zoned for a large commercial complex and sits just inside Miami-Dade's Urban Development Boundary, which protects the Everglades from extensive development. With Triple Five projecting about 14,000 full-time jobs on what would be South Florida's first official theme park, backers touted American Dream as an historic boon to Miami-Dade's economy.

"What are we waiting for?" asked Hialeah Mayor Carlos Hernández. "The working people of Hialeah are crying out for something like this."

Thursday's approval followed a last-minute agreement secured by Chairman Esteban "Steve" Bovo to require the addition of dedicated bus lanes on roads connecting to the American Dream site, including one running more than 30 blocks east along Miami Gardens Drive to Northwest 57th Avenue. Bovo had tried to get the developer to agree to an extension to Northwest 27th Avenue, but dropped that request after it seemed to briefly derail the path to approval.

"For a long time now you have heard me speak about transportation and the sins of the past in the way we would develop," Bovo said. "I want to stop that dynamic."

American Dream would be served by county buses, and is about eight miles from the county's Metrorail system. The developer expects to pay about \$60 million in impact fees to the county, and commissioners opted not to restrict the money for any one purpose.

Triple Five rejects descriptions of its project as a mall, saying its American Dream properties — a 4.5-million-square-foot American Dream Meadowlands is under construction in New Jersey — serve as entertainment centers that have far broader appeal beyond shopping.

"We're not building a mega-mall," said Don Ghermezian, Triple Five's president. "We're not in the mall business."

A summary of the project by Miami-Dade lists 3.5 million square feet of retail space, and 1.5 million for entertainment. Ghermezian showed commissioners renderings from the company's New Jersey American Dream venture, which he said would be a model for the Miami-Dade project. Those attractions included a Dreamworks-themed water park (including a Shrek Swamp), a Ferris wheel, and a Legoland mini theme park. For Miami-Dade, Triple Five has talked about (but not pledged as part of its development agreement) an indoor ski slope, a lake with submarine rides, a roller coaster, aquarium and permanent Cirque du Soleil show.

Miami Lakes residents led the charge against American Dream's traffic claims, warning the attraction was bound to swamp nearby roads. Broward this week backed off from its lawsuit threat after accepting an American Dream pledge to spend about \$650,000 on modernized traffic lights along Miramar Parkway. Broward's traffic consultant claimed Triple Five was steering too many cars onto the Turnpike, which in turn minimized the impact on other roads in the developer's traffic study. Miami-Dade and Triple Five both rejected that claim.

Triple Five also faced push-back on its economic claims. While it's touting 14,000 jobs, Triple Five only committed to 7,500 in a [no-bid \\$12 million land purchase](#) from Miami-Dade in 2015 under Florida's economic-development law. Triple Five's own economic impact study said 60 percent of the full-time jobs at the mall once it opens would earn less than \$25,000 a year. Triple Five said more than 20,000 better-paying construction jobs would be created in building the complex.

"I think we've looked at every aspect of this," said Commissioner Jose "Pepe" Diaz, whose district includes the American Dream site. "I think this is a good day for us."

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Megan Sorbo speaks against the controversial American Dream Mall calling the development, an abomination

American Dream Miami, a retail theme park that would be the largest mall in America, wins approval from the Miami-Dade County Commission. Developer Triple Five says project will include an indoor ski slope, submarine lake and in \$4 billion project. **C.M. Guerrero** / cmguerrero@miamiherald.com



Miami-Dade County commissioner Jose 'Pepe' Diaz speaks with Mayor Oliver Gilbert of Miami Gardens at the county commission meeting where the American Dream Mall project is under discussion on Thursday, May 17, 2018. **C.M. Guerrero** cmguerrero@miamiherald.com



County Commissioner Daniella Levine Cava votes against the American Dream Mall during a hearing at the Stephen Clark Government Center on Thursday, May 17, 2018. **Daniel A. Varela** dvarela@miamiherald.com



Miami-Dade County commissioner Rebecca Sosa at the county commission meeting where the American Dream Mall project is under discussion on Thursday, May 17, 2018. **Daniel A. Varela** dvarela@miamiherald.com



County Commissioner Barbara J. Jordan during the American Dream Mall hearing at the Stephen Clark Government Center on Thursday, May 17, 2018. **Daniel A. Varela** dvarela@miamiherald.com

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