

It was once part of the Everglades. Now Miami-Dade wants to use it for a highway | Miami Herald

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Celeste De Palma, Director of Everglades Policy of Audubon Florida, talks about conflicts of the proposed Dolphin/836 Expressway extension

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ENVIRONMENT

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On the western fringes of Miami-Dade County, street after street of barrel-tiled houses squeezed within shouting distance of one another come to an abrupt stop at a marshy basin that was once part of the Shark River Slough.

The slough — the flowing heart of the Everglades' famed River of Grass — was supposed to be the boundary to what a county plan anointed Miami's "aggrandizing urban front."

But that front now threatens to march farther into the marsh. Miami-Dade County is pursuing a \$650 million plan to extend the Dolphin Expressway, a logjam of a highway counted among the 50 worst in the U.S. The proposed path would pave a 13-mile-long stretch somewhere through the sprawling wetlands, formally known as the Bird Drive Basin.

While county transportation planners are still trying to nail down the exact path — Thursday evening County Mayor Carlos Gimenez announced that the road had shifted another third of a mile west — the proposal is drawing opposition from both environmental groups and smart growth advocates. Expressway officials on Friday said the latest route had not yet been posted on the project website and did not respond to a request for a copy.

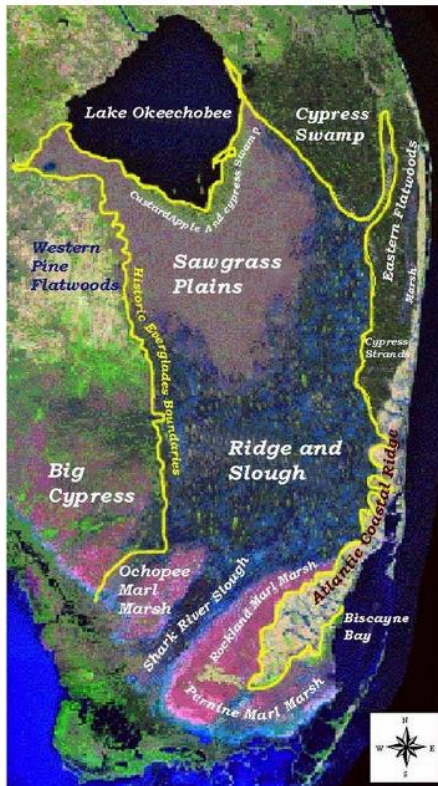
"Our traffic problems aren't going to be solved by adding more highway and, by the way, paving over wetlands that are going to recharge our groundwater," said Celeste De Palma, director of Everglades policy for Audubon Florida. "That just seems crazy."



Miami-Dade County wants to extend the Dolphin Expressway 13 miles across wetlands, shown here at the corner of Southwest 157th Avenue and the Tamiami Trail in 2012. Miami Herald archives

Tentative proposals take the expressway, also known as State Road 836, first across the Pennsuco wetlands, another sensitive area outside the urban boundary that's being restored to make up for marshes destroyed by rock mining and other development. It then veers south through the center of the basin, a fragment of the shrinking Everglades and a rare empty swath of land critical to replenishing the shallow aquifer that supplies the county's drinking water. It's also home to a menagerie of native animals, wading birds and rare

plants.



Before human intervention, the Everglades covered most of South Florida. Source: U.S. Geological Survey

The basin is also part of ongoing Everglades restoration and included in the 2000 plan to move more water south to marshes damaged by flood control. Much of the land is already owned by the Department of the Interior and the South Florida Water Management District, purchased with money specifically designated for repair work. The Miccosukee Tribe also owns several large tracts, bought to restore the tribe's historic homelands.

But gridlock — Miami ranked fifth among U.S. cities on INRIX's 2017 traffic scorecard— may now provide the ammunition needed by county transportation officials who've been considering an expansion for the last decade. "There's a very pent-up need for traffic relief in this area," said Miami-Dade Expressway Authority consultant and project manager Albert Sosa. "We're not saying we're the perfect answer either, but it's all part of the solution."

Gimenez has made the extension of the 836 a priority during his final term in office after failing to get earlier support for a 2014 plan reboot. And MDX is promoting it heavily, with a campaign-style website that asks visitors to "imagine the possibilities." A link takes visitors to a petition to register letters of support for a June 20 public hearing. By Thursday, the agency tweeted that it had received 6,000 such letters.

"This area has grown enormously with no infrastructure," MDX spokeswoman Tere Garcia said. "Seventy percent of the workforce comes out of Kendall, the southwest area," with an average daily commute of an hour and a half.

But critics say there's a host of reasons why the extension is shortsighted. It will further damage an area long eyed for restoration — the 1990 county study called it "biologically productive, albeit stressed," where bobcats, alligators, eagles and 100 different species roamed among rare native plants including wild coco and tiny orchids. An environmental study to narrow alternative routes has been completed, but a fuller study looking at overall impacts and required by the U.S. Corps of Army Engineers to pave over wetlands has not yet been done.



The Bird Basin wetlands once provided habitat for about 100 different species, including snail kites like the one pictured here, eagles and ospreys. Miami Herald archives

Expanding the mega highway, critics also say, will only bring more traffic — planners call it "induced demand" — rather than ease congestion with more reliable public transportation options located closer to commuters.

"It's the perfect sh-t storm of bad ideas," said Paul Schwiep, former chair of the Citizens Independent Transportation Trust that oversees a half-penny sales tax for transit projects. "It's just a frigging six-lane 836 extension. If you think the 836 is a walk in the park, call it a parkway. Because that's what this is going to look like."

Micosukee leaders are also annoyed that MDX failed to consult the Tribe and warned that the failure "may be deemed disrespectful to the Tribe's sovereignty and its rights." Last year, the Tribe suggested running the highway along Krome Avenue, where widening work is ongoing, to avoid damaging wetlands and impacting tribal land.

Sosa said planners decided a Krome path would be more damaging to the Everglades. They considered a route down Southwest 157th Avenue, a two-lane road just inside the boundary, but ruled it out because homes would need to be condemned and about 2,000 people uprooted. They never performed a cost analysis, assuming the price would be too high, he said.

"It just wasn't feasible," Sosa said.

They've also continued to shift the route west after residents along 157th Avenue complained, drawing the attention of South Florida water managers. The road will not be elevated, although the section across the Pennsuco wetlands will be raised to allow water to flow south. Matt Morrison, who coordinates Everglades projects for the district, said the agency has been consulted about the project, but without a final route he could not say for sure how the highway might impact restoration projects or the drinking water wellfield.



Much of the land in the Bird Drive Basin is already publicly owned, purchased with money intended for Everglades restoration. Source: South Florida Water Management District

Using Everglades land will also require the district to swap it out for land elsewhere. Normally, the district likes to acquire land near other projects, said Steve Collins, who oversees the district's land holdings. What land would be used also remains unknown, he said.

To try to appease critics, planners say they'll set aside about 1,000 acres around the road for conservation and include 'linear' parks and a 14-mile bike trail. And future developers won't be allowed to use the space freed up on surrounding roads by the extensions to prevent more congestion, Sosa said.

"The idea is to prevent the congestion you have out there today from recreating itself," he said.

But a number of studies have shown that expanding highways creates more traffic over time, rather than less, by lowering the "cost" of driving. A 2015 University of California study boiled it down to simple supply and demand: "When prices go down, the quantity of driving goes up," the study said. In 2003, the Florida Department of Transportation looked specifically at southwest Miami-Dade and found that once road improvements were made in the congested area, development quickly followed. Broward's Sawgrass Expressway was dubbed the "road to nowhere" when it opened in 1986. Today it's largely credited, or blamed, for the county's westward expansion.

"From the inception, it was thought the road would help spur development," Mitch Ceasar, former chairman of the Broward County Expressway Authority, told the Sun Sentinel in 1994. "Western Parkland and Coral Springs weren't fully developed. Sawgrass Mills was not on the drawing board when we started."



Miami-Dade County transportation planners want to extend the Dolphin Expressway beyond the urban boundary shown here along Southwest 157th Avenue. Pedro Portal - Miami Herald

The 836 critics say the expansion also undermines the county's SMART plan intended to provide a road map out of the gridlock. Excess toll money collected by MDX, along with the half-cent sales tax, is supposed to help pay for projects. But if it's tied up paying off bonds for a new highway, critics say those projects don't get done. Juan Toledo, MDX director of engineering, said excess toll money would only be used until

the extension collects enough to pay for itself. But he could not say how long that would take.

"It's not an easy question to answer because all these things are being looked at by our financial advisers," he said.

Without that information, critics say it's hard to believe the county would move forward.

"If they have another new bond that costs God knows how much, then they're going to have less left over to fund the SMART plan," said Laura Reynolds, a consultant for Friends of the Everglades. "You can't continue to build more six-lane highways to try to build our way out of the problem the same way we did in the 70s."

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