Village of Biscayne Park

Commission Agenda Report

Village Commission Meeting Date: **January 6, 2015**

Subject: **Resolution supporting the preservation of a rare tract of rockland**

Prepared By: **Commissioner Barbara Watts**

Sponsored By: **Commission**

Background

The University of Miami has sold a tract of extremely rare pine rockland located near S.W. 152nd St. and S.W. 127th Ave. for mixed use development. Over 20% of the plants in this ecosystem are found nowhere else in the world and five of them are federally listed as endangered or threatened species. In addition, this tract is one of the largest remaining tracts of pine rockland in Miami-Dade County that is not protected, and it should be.

This resolution was brought forward at the November 6th meeting and a motion to pass failed due to a lack of second. Following that the Mayor stated it could be brought back for further discussion and with additional information provided.

Fiscal / Budget Impact

Recommendation

Approval of Resolution 2014-78

Attachments

- Resolution 2014-78
- Related articles

Links:

- www.miamidade.gov/environment/pine-rocklands.asp
- www.fws.gov/southeastfire/documents/MSRP_PineRocklands.pdf
- www.weather.com/news/science/environment/endangered-florida-pine-rockland-forest-walmart-20140714

RESOLUTION NO. 2014-78

A RESOLUTION OF THE VILLAGE COMMISSION OF THE VILLAGE OF BISCAYNE PARK, FLORIDA, OPPOSING THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT OF APPROXIMATELY 88 ACRES OF PINE ROCKLAND GENERALLY LOCATED ALONG S.W. 152ND STREET AND S.W. 127TH AVENUE WITHIN UNINCORPORATED MIAMI-DADE COUNTY; PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE

WHEREAS, it has been recently reported that approximately 88 acres of forest land generally located along S.W. 152nd Street and S.W. 127th Avenue in unincorporated Miami-Dade County is to be developed as a mixed use development (the "Property"); and,

WHEREAS, the Property consists of one of the last intact tracts of endangered pine rockland ("Rockland") within Miami-Dade County; and,

WHEREAS, Rockland is a globally imperiled habitat containing an array of rare plants, animals, and insects which are rare and exclusive to that habitat; and

WHEREAS, some of the endangered species for which Rockland provides habitat include the bald eagle, indigo snake, the Florida bonneted bat, and two rare butterflies; and

WHEREAS, preservation of the native Rockland, and the species for which it provides a home, is of great importance for the protection of our native forest's unique and endangered environment; and

WHEREAS, the Village of Biscayne Park (the "Village") is concerned about the loss of this valuable Rockland and desires to express its opposition to the development of the Property; and

WHEREAS, the Village Commission finds that this Resolution is in the best interest and welfare of the residents of the Village.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED BY THE VILLAGE COMMISSION OF THE VILLAGE OF BISCAYNE PARK, FLORIDA:

Section 1. The foregoing "Whereas" clauses are hereby ratified and confirmed as being true and correct and hereby made a specific part of this Resolution upon adoption hereof.

Section 2. The Village Commission hereby opposes the proposed development of the Property.

Section 3. The Village Commission hereby authorizes the Village Clerk to transmit the Resolution to the Board of the Miami-Dade County Commissioners and Craig W. Aubrey, South Florida field supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services.

Section 4. This Resolution shall become effective upon adoption.

PASSED AND ADOPTED this ____ day of _____, 2014.

The foregoing resolution upon being put to a vote, the vote was as follows:

Mayor Coviello: ___
Vice Mayor Jonas: ___
Commissioner Anderson: ___
Commissioner Ross: ___
Commissioner Watts: ___

_____
David Coviello, Mayor

Attest:

_____
Maria C. Camara, Village Clerk

Approved as to form:

_____
John J. Hearn, Village Attorney

MiamiHeraldRockPineland

Some back-up information from news media re: Rock Pineland controversy.

Feds ask developer to stop work on Walmart in rare Miami-Dade forest

By Jenny Staletovich

07/17/2014 6:43 PM

07/17/2014 6:51 PM

› ‹

An architectural drawing shows apartments planned for land near Zoo Miami containing endangered pine rocklands. Ram

- Story
- Comments

A developer building a Walmart on a tract of disappearing forest between two national parks in south Miami-Dade County should stop all work until a survey of endangered wildlife is completed, federal officials warned this week.

In a strongly worded letter sent to Ram Realty Services, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said at least eight threatened species, including the federally protected Florida bonneted bat and two endangered plants, could inhabit about 140 acres of pine rockland north of Zoo Miami off Coral Reef Drive.

Field Supervisor Craig Aubrey said Ram should first obtain a federal permit before proceeding with any work that could threaten protected species.

“We want to work with them to make sure there’s a project that balances the economic development with the needs of the species there,” Aubrey said. “It’s not just one species. There’s a lot of sensitive resources out there.”

In a statement, Ram Chairman Peter Cummings said the company, which received the letter within the last two days, was reviewing the recommendations and plans to meet with wildlife officials.

“We will take no action that disturbs the natural environment before resolving the Service’s concerns,” the statement said. “The environment will be a valuable asset for the community we plan to create.”

Walmart spokesman Bill Wertz said in a statement his company was also dedicated to preservation, having “worked for nearly a decade on conservation efforts to protect priority lands across the country.”

But the plan to construct one of the retail giant’s discount stores in a development called Coral Reef Commons has generated backlash since it was reported in a Herald story this week. Much of the outrage has been aimed at the University of Miami, which sold the 88-acre parcel to Ram for $22 million.

Tropical Audubon, which had fought to save the land for years, fired off a letter and online petitions have collected thousands of signatures.

“You can look at the response from the public,” said Laura Reynolds, executive director of Tropical Audubon. “If I was the Walmart CEO, I would pull out.”

Critics, including former UM students, have complained that the university, which pours millions into its Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science and Abess Center for Ecosystem Science & Policy, is being a poor environmental steward.

“I can’t believe...UM, which I believe teaches the importance of conservation, would partake in this horrific deal,” alumni Paul Anthony said in an email.

The university, which has declined to answer questions, said in a statement Thursday it was committed to preserving natural resources and that it had worked with the county to come up with a management plan that preserves about 40 acres of the tract, as required under a county ordinance designed to save endangered rockland.

“We went through a transparent, public process with DERM and the County including public meetings,” the statement said. “The University acted in good faith and in compliance with all rules and regulations in its handling of the South Campus property.”

Just two percent remain of about 165,000 acres of pine rocklands that once stretched from Homestead to the Miami River on an upland ridge. The rare rocklands occur in just two places in the world — Miami-Dade County and the Bahamas — and provide habitat for a host of animals, insects and plants found no place else on earth.

UM had operated a South Campus on the land, part of the old Richmond Naval Air Station, since the 1940s. It was used mainly for research projects and storage. The school left most of the land undeveloped and, county regulators say, failed to manage the forest and allowed it to degrade.

In 2004, after deciding to build an academic village, the school conducted a botanical field study to determine what pinelands remained. The study eventually got folded into the Coral Reef Commons project after Ram and UM agreed to the land sale. In addition to the 158,000-square-foot box store, the project includes space for an LAFitness, a Chik-fil-A, a Chili's and about 900 apartments.

The deal is a profitable one for UM. Federal records show the school acquired the land for free: the government gave the university two parcels as "surplus" military land: a 105-acre section in 1981 and a second 30-acre parcel in 1997, records show.

In his letter this week, Aubrey said federal wildlife officers are concerned the project will damage critical habitat outside the preserved lands. One of the animals they are particularly concerned about is the Florida bonneted bat, which roosts in the crevices of large trees and has been found in the area.

"If there are large trees on site, which there are, there's potential for bats to be there," said Paula Halupa, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist. "I'd like to work with the developer to retain the trees and check for potential roosts before the trees are felled."

The federal agency also expects to add two rare butterflies, the Bartram's hairstreak and Florida leafwing, to the endangered species list this summer. Both need plants found in pine rocklands to live.

Equally important is managing the lands with seasonal burning, Aubrey said in his letter, which warned Ram that if it violated the Endangered Species Act by illegally killing species or harming habitat it could face "fines of up to $200,000 and/or up to six months imprisonment per violation."

While the Ram project represents the largest remaining intact tract, environmentalists say there are other parcels remaining that need better protection than the county's endangered lands ordinance, which can only be enforced when development plans are submitted.

"There needs to be an overall habitat conservation plan for the pineland rather than having it bought up piece by piece because with this piece by piece (management) you end up with pieces," said attorney Dennis Olle, conservation director for Miami Blue, the local chapter of the North American Butterfly Association, and a board member at Tropical Audubon. "Maybe the

Endangered Species Act will force people to do the planning that should have been done all along."

Read more here: http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article1975937.html#storylink=cpy

U.S. adding two South Florida butterflies to the endangered list

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife announced Monday that along with the listing, it will designate critical land to protect the butterflies' habitat.

By Jenny Staletovich

08/11/2014 8:03 PM

08/11/2014 8:13 PM

Federal officials announced Monday that the Bartram's hairstreak butterfly, pictured here, and the Florida leaf wing butterfly are being added to the endangered species list.

- Story
- Comments

Two rare butterflies that have taken center stage in the fight over developing a rare forest in Miami-Dade County are being added to the endangered species list, federal wildlife managers announced Monday.

The listing of the Bartram's hairsteak and Florida leaf wing, which will become official Sept. 11, also designates thousands of acres of critical habitat. While most of that land sits in Everglades National Park and other national park territory, a large tract circles Zoo Miami and includes habitat where the county wants to build an Orlando-style amusement park and a Palm Beach County developer is in the early stages of erecting a Walmart-anchored shopping center and apartments.

The listing and habitat designation do not stop development, but they do mean the land will have to be carefully managed, federal officials said. Fires will have to be set regularly to keep the forest thinned out and mosquito-control procedures must be changed to protect the butterflies.

To avoid breaking the law, federal officials also say developers should obtain permits for construction.

“Anything that’s going to be done with these animals has to have our review,” said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Mark Salvato. “We’re not to the finish line yet, but it would be pretty bad if someone knew this was going forward and rushed to mow down butterfly habitat.”

The Palm Beach County developer, Ram, said that since receiving a letter from wildlife officials July 15, it has been drafting a plan to survey the butterflies and come up with a plan to avoid affecting them adversely.

“Ram remains committed to species protection,” the developer’s statement said.

The endangered species designation process has been going on for more than a year, and is part of a 2011 settlement struck after the Center for Biological Diversity, a national nonprofit conservation organization, sued the wildlife agency to speed up the protection of threatened species. Florida is home to more rare butterflies than any other state. Their decline can be linked in part to their disappearing habitat.

The Bartram’s, with its white-tipped gray wings, and the bright orange leaf wing, live only on pine rockland, a forest that once stretched from Homestead north to the Miami River. Pine rockland is also home to the endangered Florida bonneted bat, another protected species. Today, just 2 percent of the forest remains, with most of it in Everglades National Park.

The largest tract outside the park sits near Zoo Miami on what was once the Richmond Naval Air Station. The land, designated as surplus after the base shut down in 1945, remained largely undeveloped as the federal government divvied it up over the years.

Part of the land went to the U.S. Coast Guard, the Department of Defense, Miami-Dade County and the University of Miami. The county built the zoo on some of the land, but in 2006 won voter approval to turn the remaining land into an amusement park with a water park, attractions, restaurants and hotel rooms. UM had planned to build an academic village.

But last month, Ram announced it had purchased the land from UM and and planned to build the shopping mall, drawing fierce criticism from environmentalists who long worried the county was not doing enough to protect the land. Opponents quickly started online petitions, which gathered more than 75,000 signatures. They also contacted federal officials urging them to hurry up the endangered-species listings.

Part of the worry stems from breaking up the habitat, said attorney Dennis Olle, the conservation director of the North American Butterfly Association and a board member for the Tropical Audubon Society.

“These are relatively sedentary butterflies, so it’s not like they need thousands of acres,” he said. “Obviously, Richmond was the keystone outside Everglades National Park. You might be able to build a Walmart next to a pineland. But remember you’ve got to maintain [the pineland] , which means you’ve got to burn it — so remember that when you build your houses and apartments.”

Read more here: http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article1979421.html#storylink=cpy

As a kid, Ed MacDougall remembers running rampantly through endless acres of pine rocklands, buzzing by blimp hangars and an abandoned naval air station.

Now the mayor of Cutler Bay, MacDougall is standing up for the land and its many natural inhabitants, proposing a resolution opposing development of 88 acres of the land located along Southwest 152nd Street and Southwest 127th Avenue.

“I brought it forward,” MacDougall said. “I grew up down here. This whole area was pine rockland. There is only two percent of that type of pineland left down in South Dade. It’s just a shame that the federal government gave this to the University of Miami and they’ve turned around and sold it.”

The resolution, which passed unanimously at the Aug. 20 Town Council meeting, could be just one of many put in front of other Miami-Dade County municipalities.

“I think it was a wonderful resolution,” councilwoman Peggy Bell said. “I recommend it and we all agreed that we should send it along to every city in Miami-Dade County to get them to join in, because it’s not in our city.”

The University of Miami sold the land, northwest of Cutler Bay in unincorporated Miami-Dade, to Ram Realty Services, a Palm Beach County developer, last month for $22 million.

“It’s shameful for the University of Miami to have sold this,” MacDougall said. “I am absolutely shocked that they would do this. What they should do is cancel this contract, give the money back, and the university put it toward the use where it was intended for the people. To make a commercial gain out of this I believe is the wrong thing to do.”

Along with a Walmart, the developer is planning for an LA Fitness, Chick-fil-A and Chili’s restaurants, and 900 apartments. Ram agreed to keep 40 acres for a preserve.

“It is an important piece of property that we would hate to see cemented over and become a Walmart or any business instead of a natural piece of land that has been there for a long time,” Bell said.

On Aug. 11, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced two rare butterflies will be added to the endangered list while thousands of acres in Everglades National Park, and other land around Zoo Miami, including habitat within the Ram land, would be designated as critical habitat. But the listing and designation will not stop development.

“I think that they need to slow down,” MacDougall said. “They need to find out if there are endangered species, which they say there are. At the end of the day, we need to preserve some land that’s natural. We cannot just take everything and concrete over it.”

Read more here: http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/cutler-bay/article1982226.html#storylink=cpy

Developer defends Walmart in rare forest

By Jenny Staletovich

jstaletovich@MiamiHerald.com

09/12/2014 5:24 PM

09/18/2014 3:21 PM

An architect’s rendering shows a Walmart proposed for an area near Zoo Miami containing endangered pine rocklands. Ram Realty Services.

- Story
- Comments

The developer behind a controversial Walmart shopping center, facing angry neighbors and environmentalists for the first time in public, vowed to make the project a paragon for building on environmentally sensitive land.

Peter Cummings, chairman of Palm Beach County-based Ram Realty Services, said that four preserves planned for about a third of the 137-acre development near Zoo Miami on endangered pine rockland may even help scientists understand the disappearing habitat.

“We think we have an opportunity to create a standard for new knowledge for the balance of the Richmond pine rockland,” Cummings said late Thursday during an often heated meeting called by the Kendall Federation of Homeowners’ Associations.

Setting aside the preserves was required by Miami-Dade County, which strictly limits building in the forest that hosts a menagerie of rare animals and plants found no place else, including five species added to the federal endangered species list in the last year. The Walmart is slated for a corner of 2,200 acres around the zoo called the Richmond pine rockland, which makes up the largest remaining fragment of the rare forest outside Everglades National Park.

But environmentalists and residents argued that carving up the land will further damage the shrinking habitat and imperil wildlife, including endangered bats and butterflies that forage there. In addition to the Walmart, the Coral Reef Commons project includes an LA Fitness, a Chili’s, other restaurants and about 900 apartments. About 43 acres are split into four preserves on either side of the shopping center and apartment complex.

“If a butterfly has to cross a six-lane highway to get to another part of pine rockland, that is not good,” said Sandy Koi, an entomologist who lives in the area.

During the three-hour meeting, the developer was frequently interrupted as he defended the project. Cummings said afterward he hoped to show residents the project’s benefits, including jobs and increased tax revenue. He also took issue with it being called a strip mall.

“It’s a mixed-use development,” he said.

The audience, split among homeowners and environmentalists, found fault with nearly every aspect of the project, from traffic to Walmart’s effect on local business. Concern about environmental damage drew the harshest complaints.

“This is a treasure and we have it in our own backyard,” said Laura Reynolds, executive director of Tropical Audubon, one of the few groups that opposed plans by the University of Miami to develop the land a decade ago.

The land had been part of an old blimp station closed in the 1940s. In 1981 and 1997, after designating it surplus land, the federal government gave about 135 acres to the university. Over the years, UM used the land mostly for research but decided to build an academic village and had the land rezoned from agricultural use in 2004. When that fell through, UM began shopping around for developers and in 2011 submitted plans with Ram for the shopping center. Ram paid $22million for the land but Cummings said the company has spent much more over the last three years developing it.

Federation president Michael Rosenberg said he also invited UM officials and County Commissioner Dennis Moss, whose district covers the area, but they declined.

Cummings told residents he was unaware of the endangered bats and butterflies possibly on the land when he struck the deal. He said an environmental survey — started after U.S. Fish and

Wildlife officials notified him in August that he was in danger of breaking the law without obtaining federal permits — is about two-thirds complete.

While endangered species do not stop development, their presence means the land must be carefully managed. And with pine rockland, that could be challenging. Fires must be set every three to seven years to replicate seasonal wildfires that once whipped across the Everglades and kept the tree canopy thin to allow the small endangered plants sprouting from the rocky forest floor, said Frank Ridgley, a wildlife veterinarian and head of conservation and research at Zoo Miami.

Only 2 percent of the forest — much of it in disconnected small pieces — remains and is severely threatened by urban sprawl, climate change, invasive species and pesticides, he said. It represents a rare collection of species in a single habitat found only in South Florida and a few places in the Bahamas and Cuba.

“It’s the most biologically diverse habitat in South Florida,” said Ridgley, who has spotted rare species like the Miami tiger beetle and rim rock crowned snake on neighboring county forest. “It’s a biodiversity hotspot.”

Read more here: http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/environment/article2092364.html#storylink=cpy

Kendall Gazette, 12/29/2014:

Residents continue protesting plans to develop rock pineland

By Richard Yager

RAM developer Peter Cummings addresses KFHA meeting attendees.

Pros and cons of the controversial Coral Reef Commons project were aired for nearly three hours on Sept. 11, marked by three unusual occurrences for town meetings sponsored by the Kendall Federation of Homeowner Associations:

• Developer Peter Cummings appeared in person to answer questions and defend his project's viability as "planned to set a standard for future environmental planning."

• A panel of six specialists in preservation, officials and organizational representatives provided views ranging from protection of everything from Miami-Dade's pine rocklands to rare specifies of butterflies.

• Petition leader Leslye Jacobs led protests by a dozen nearby residents, including outspoken former television consumer reporter Al Sunshine, several saying they never received legal notice of the development.

Five zoning approvals have been held to permit 40 acres of the rock pineland tract to be developed, all properly notified to 1,615 residents in adjoining properties, countered attorney Juan Mayol speaking on behalf of Cummings who later took the microphone to describe environmental efforts planned to protect the balance of the remaining preserved areas.

While his views drew the respect, if not agreement from a predominantly opposition audience of more than 200, vocal opposition heightened due to objections to the location of a Walmart store to anchor the proposed shopping center.

Current approval also will permit 900 multi-family housing units on 137 acres of land off SW 152nd Street adjacent to Zoo Miami.

Both Walmart and the housing units are planned on property adjacent to preserve areas part of the original 80 acres that the University of Miami sold to RAM for $21 million, according to Cummings. As originally approved for rezoning in 2012, development can provide for 347,830 square feet of retail space and a residential parcel with up to 1,008 units, a clubhouse, swimming pools and similar amenities with connectivity to the shopping area.

As added advantages, Cummings pointed out the project also dedicates 18,000 square feet for a Miami- Dade County library and a 0.4-acre for potential school use once conveyed to the Miami-Dade School Board. Current planning calls for 900 apartments with 43 acres of the original rockland divided into four preserves, a cause for concern by both residents and environmental spokespersons despite Cummings assurance that RAM intended to create and maintain standards especially designed to protect those areas.

"Of all pine rockland areas, this Richmond preserve had remained as the largest of the 2 percent acreage that still exists in Miami-Dade County," said Dr. Frank Ridgely, Associate Veterinarian with Zoo Miami, noting that all county preserves act as annual "re-fueling stops" for migratory birds, as well as preservation of rare tropical plants and species.

“I’m here to protect the butterflies,” declared Sandy Koi, a biological scientist with the Tropical Research and Education Center of the University of Florida. “Here is an already-imperiled land housing endangered species. Two are butterfly types that have only recently been discovered living only in this habitat.”

Laura Reynolds, executive director of the Miami-Dade Tropical Audubon Society, urged Cummings to reconsider use of the rockland, saying that her organization had long sought the University of Miami’s cooperation to abandon sale of the tract that would “only provide another development that continues to reduce the last areas for native habitats of endangered species.”

Equally impassioned, homeowner Gerry Vizran described the adverse economic impact of the national chain in other areas, asking that residents continue to voice objections to the location of a new Walmart store.

Sunshine and a representative of the Deerwood Homeowners Coalition Board, representing the community on the north side of S W 152nd Street, were adamant in declaring they had never received legal notice of public hearings that began in 2004 to change the property’s land use and zoning designations.

Matt Schwartz of South Florida Wildlands Association noted that South Florida, with a projected population of 30 million by 2060, would become a “nightmare” if existing land is not protected by local government agencies.

At the close of the session, Jacobs and Reynolds continued gathering signatures of objectors, estimated by them to total nearly 90,000 in three separate petition drives, two by resident groups accumulating over 80,000 signers.

Reynolds’ 10,000-signature goal petition is headed “Save the Endangered Forest Lands Sold to Walmart in South Florida,” listed on the nationwide “Moveon. org” website with a notation for delivery to Florida legislators and Gov. Rick Scott.

Comments (2)

Sort by: Date Rating Last Activity

0

al sunshine · *12 weeks ago*

To be clear, I got an initial notice for an "Academic Village" by U of Miami and never a Walmart Strip Mall. None of my neighbors say they got any notices either. And even though UM is an internationally respected respected research institution with a million dollar Abess Environmental Center, both the

Developer and Commissioner Dennis Moss insist they never never told about the rare/endangered plants and animals there even though there was a Federal Register Notice detailing it all back in July of 2013 and advising it was coming under Federal Status this year. Who knew what when, and was the land intentionally rezoned and sold for a High Density Development without full disclosures? What a disgrace. I've said for months, this whole deal and how it was handled needs to go to the Dade Grand Jury.

Report

Reply

0

Sandy Koi · *12 weeks ago*

Correction, please: I said here in this already endangered pine rocklands are two newly listed federally endangered butterflies. We have known that these butterflies live in this tract of land for many years. Note that I also stated before I spoke that I was commenting as a private citizen and scientist, not as a representative of UF. Thanks for publishing information about this issue.

Report

Reply

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Related:

Miami-Dade wants land including rare forest declared blighted

By Jenny Staletovich

jstaletovich@MiamiHerald.com

12/19/2014 6:43 PM

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› ‹

This Bartram's hairstreak is one of two pine rockland butterflies that were added to the Endangered Species List in September, which also protects their pineland habitat.

- Story
- Comments

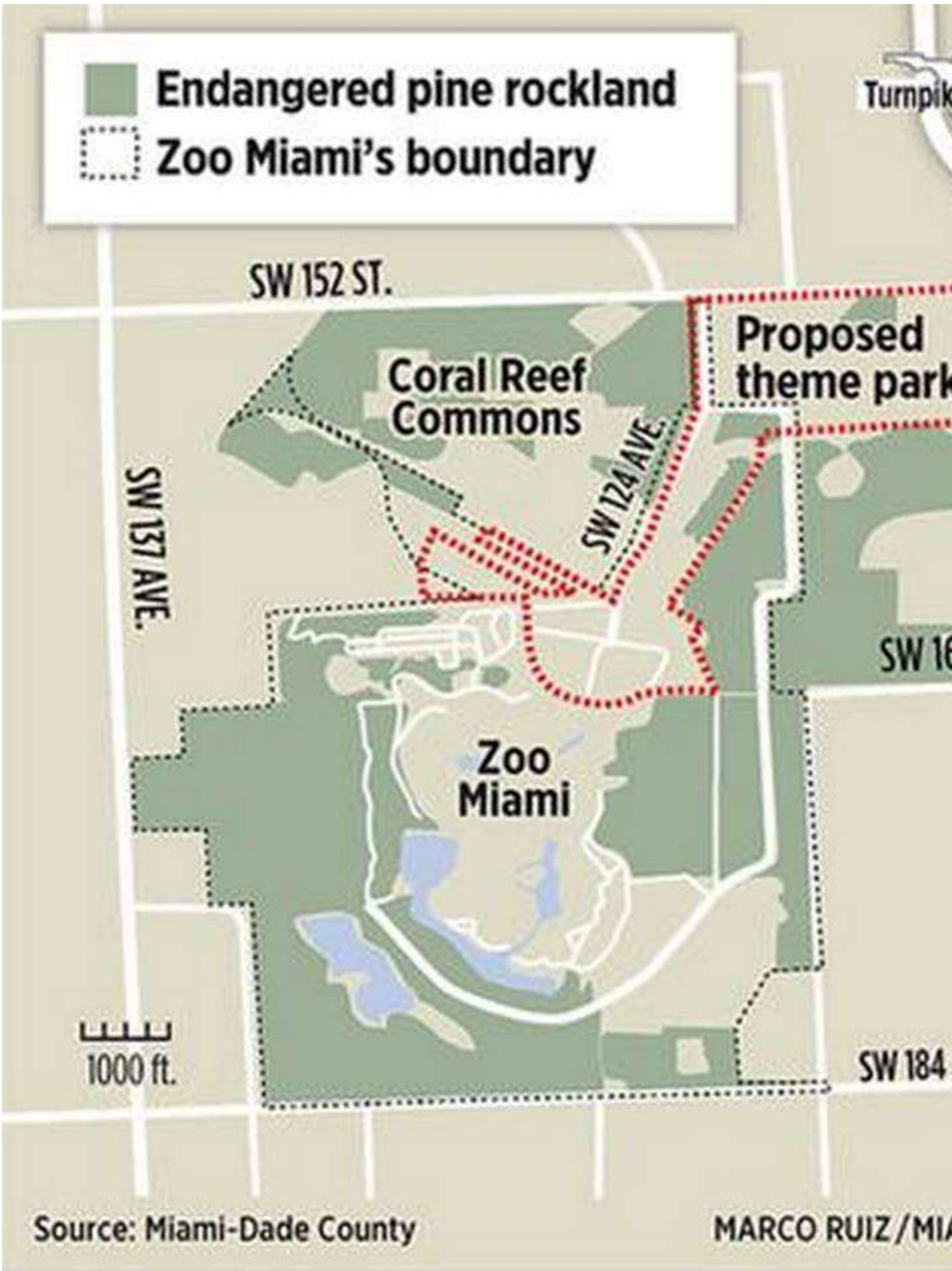
To wildlife managers, the pine rockland surrounding Zoo Miami represents what could be a last stand for the embattled forest, the biggest swath found outside the protected confines of Everglades National Park and a rare tract that has withstood the decades-long onslaught of development in South Florida.

But to a Miami-Dade County consultant, the land is a slum.

The finding, part of an updated look at the area, is the first step in establishing a special taxing district the county needs to help generate $130 million requested by a team of developers, including 20th Century Fox and Sony Music, who want to build a $930 million amusement park in the area. The consultant's report is also fueling growing criticism from environmentalists and some neighbors, who oppose the park and plans for a neighboring shopping center. They plan to rally to save the property Jan. 17 near the zoo.

"We don't think you can have proper management of this area with development," said Tropical Audubon executive director Laura Reynolds. "You can't burn pine rockland [to keep the habitat healthy] with a theme park on it."

Related


Endangered pine rockland
Zoo Miami's boundary
Turnpik
SW 152 ST.
Proposed
theme park
Coral Reef
Commons
SW 124 AVE.
SW 137 AVE.
SW 16
Zoo
Miami
1000 ft.
SW 184
Source: Miami-Dade County
MARCO RUIZ/MIA

Once the home of a U.S. Navy blimp base, land around Zoo Miami now holds the largest remaining tract of endangered pine rockland outside Everglades National Park. Over the years, the government gave away or sold much of the land, but most remained largely undeveloped. County officials now wan tot expand the zoo to build an amusement park. A Walmart-anchored shopping center has also been approved nearby. Environmentalists worry the two projects will damage the sensitive habitat.

Dinosaurs, theme park vie for land around Zoo Miami

Environmentalists seek emergency help for rare Miami-Dade beetle

Miami-Dade County warns Walmart developer to protect forest

Feds: Shopping center in rare Miami-Dade forest likely to kill endangered species

County Commissioner Dennis Moss, who has long pushed for the Miami Wilds theme park to be built in his district, argued that environmental concerns need to be balanced with other needs.

“I’m not saying go in and destroy pine rocklands,” he said. “We have an opportunity to create an economic engine and jobs for the community and that’s significant.”

The consultant concluded that poorly planned parking at the county-owned zoo, increasingly congested roads, odd-shaped parcels, multiple government owners and even restrictions tied to the endangered forest have fueled the “spread of slum” and crippled development.

County commissioners will consider declaring the area blighted at a January public hearing.

Such districts are a common strategy to help crumbling neighborhoods with failing businesses. South Beach got an early boost with a neighborhood redevelopment district. Fort Lauderdale and Delray Beach both revamped aging commercial strips with districts.

But to work, the district must encourage the very thing environmentalists say will kill the forest: development. The districts rely on pumping up property values with new development to

generate taxes. They are typically urban, which has some wondering why the pineland needs one.

“To call these pine rocklands slums and blighted areas seems absolutely absurd,” said Roger L. Hammer, a leading authority on South Florida wildflowers who helped oversee the restoration of more than 100 acres of nearby pineland when he worked as a county naturalist. “Sure, they look blighted and overgrown, but that’s only because nobody managed them.”

The plan has also caught the notice of federal officials who wrote to Mayor Carlos Gimenez earlier this month to warn that the Miami Wilds project, which includes neighboring land owned by the U.S. Coast Guard, would harm protected species and require a lengthy review from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The county is now in talks with the 20th Century Fox team that also includes Madrid-based Parques Reunidos for Miami Wilds, which would include a 70-acre amusement park, a 400-room hotel, nearly a half-million square feet of retail development and a 35,000-square-foot theater.

The redevelopment district, Moss said, has been part of the park plans for years and never caused concern until the University of Miami sold land to a Palm Beach County developer for $22 million for Coral Reef Commons, a Walmart-anchored shopping center and apartments.

“When Disney was looking to build Disney World, they came to Miami and we told Disney to take a hike and they took a hike to Central Florida. You see the economic impact they had on Central Florida. We have a chance to do that with 20th Century Fox in our community,” he said. “Nobody raised a concern for years until we had this issue with the UM project.”

UM’s deal triggered bitter complaints from environmentalists, neighbors and even alumni because the federal government had given the school the land decades earlier. Rather than sell it for a shopping center, critics said, the school should have better protected the land.

Over the years, development plans for the zoo always included land preservation alongside any additional attractions, going back to its original 1975 application. But earlier proposals were more modest: one included a Lipizzan stallion exhibit. Bringing the area under one management plan has also been complicated by multiple owners, mostly various federal agencies, and UM.

The county began buying pieces after voters approved a two-year bump in taxes in 1990 that raised $90 million. But the county had to compete with others for the land, including various federal agencies and UM.

In 1997, the former head of Tropical Audubon argued the government wasn’t doing enough to protect the land. The county’s Environmentally Endangered Lands program chief said in 2005 that “further fragmentation” was making it impossible for the county to manage the tract.

The county now manages about 480 acres of the tract through its Environmentally Endangered Lands program. But even with a 2008 pledge to protect the rockland, environmentalists are

concerned because a new four-lane entrance from Southwest 117th Avenue for the park would have to cross the land.

“They have an old plan. It needs to be updated. But do they have staff to do that?” Reynolds said.

Managing the land has been tricky and is complicated by the need to regularly burn it to keep the canopy thin. Rock pineland once grew over much of the 55-mile long rock ridge that stretches between Homestead and central Miami. It has since shrunk to just 2 percent of its original size, squeezing into its remaining boundaries a host of rare plants and animals that live nowhere else.

If the projects advance, at least one tenant in the area says the county needs to strike a balance.

“I’m a historic preservationist. I’m all for pine rocklands,” said Anthony Atwood, who is leading an effort to open the Miami Military Museum and Veterans Memorial on land nearby. “There’s a middle ground and, frankly, we’re a tourism community. And there’s nothing wrong with eco-tourism.”

Read more here: http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article4696344.html#storylink=cpy

MoveOn.org Petition:
Subject: Save the Endangered Forest Lands Sold to Walmart in South Florida

Hi,

Given my love for the State of Florida and the protection of the people and future generations of children who will grow up to inhabit this land, and my work as an educator and Executive Director of PALS AROUND THE WORLD - an organization that educates children on Environmental Awareness issues, I have started this petition for the protection of the endangered forests recently sold to Walmart by the University of Miami that appeared in today's Miami Herald.

That's why I signed a petition to The Florida State House, The Florida State Senate, and Governor Rick Scott, which says:

"Stop ANY Development of the Rare Endangered Forest lands in South Florida that was recently sold to Walmart Developers by the University of Miami."

Will you sign this petition? Click here:

http://petitions.moveon.org/sign/save-the-endangered-forest?source=s.em.cp&r_by=12228963

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