

To Be, or Not To Be: That Is Cityhood?

Written by Erik Bojnansky -- BT Senior Writer
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This is the question facing residents living west of Aventura, and they may soon get a chance to vote on it



Northwest Miami-Dade civic activists are back at it, asking the question: Should we band together and create a new city?

Known collectively as a Municipal Advisory Committee, the volunteers hope to meet this month to discuss a much more detailed plan -- including a proposed \$9.9 million budget -- for incorporating an area of subdivisions, condominiums, apartments, and at least one trailer park, forming themselves into a municipality.

The next step for committee members: decide whether to push for a referendum on cityhood for the 3.3-square-mile region of some 18,000 people, wedged between I-95 on the west, Aventura on the east, North Miami Beach to the south, and Broward County to the north. If they decide to hold a vote, and the Miami-Dade County Commission gives its blessing, a special election would be scheduled for all eligible people living in Highland Lakes, Highland Gardens, Coventry, Enchanted Lake, Sparling Lake, Greyknoll Lake, Oak Forest, Ojus, most of Sky Lake, and

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several private, gated communities.

Or the committee could, once again, invite Aventura to annex them.

Or committee members could simply allow Miami-Dade County to continue providing services.

Or the county could halt the incorporation altogether.

Or, as some cityhood advocates fear, North Miami Beach could seize the moment and annex prime commercial areas, rich with coveted tax revenue.

Despite area residents debating this issue for a decade, few things are certain today -- even a name for the nascent city. Back in 2005, an earlier incarnation of the Municipal Advisory Committee (MAC) was close to scheduling a referendum, but county leaders stalled the process. A formal countywide moratorium on creating new cities was established in 2007. Then the moratorium was lifted in November 2012. One month later, a revived northeast Miami-Dade MAC held its first meeting in nearly eight years.



At issue are taxes and services. Advocates of incorporation believe the area has the tax base to

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provide enhanced services like police and code enforcement. Status-quo advocates fear cityhood will mean higher property taxes and fees.

The least popular option: being annexed by North Miami Beach. That city charges property owners \$7.64 per \$1000 of assessed value for services and debt on bonds. Property owners in unincorporated Miami-Dade pay just \$1.93 per \$1000 for services.

The most popular option: being annexed by Aventura. Renowned for its excellent services, Aventura has the lowest tax rate in Miami-Dade County -- just \$1.73 per \$1000 of assessed value.

So far Aventura has rejected the notion of annexing any of the communities to its west. Ken Friedman, chairman of the Northeast Miami-Dade Municipal Advisory Committee and a strong advocate of cityhood, thinks Aventura's attitude will change when new officials are elected there. "But do we want to sit around for two years waiting?" asks Friedman, a Highland Gardens resident. "If we incorporated now, we would be open to *unincorporating* and merging with Aventura later. I'd be totally open-minded to that concept."

But Skylake resident Alicia Rook questions the motivation of Friedman and other cityhood supporters. "It's unnecessary," Rook says flatly. "We have all of our services, especially the Miami-Dade Police Department, which is one of the best in the country. Dade does the garbage pickup. So why another level of government?"

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