

Under Siege, Little Haiti Responds

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer
May 2018

Developers swoop in for the residential pickings

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While developers plan to submit a proposal that will allow them to build towers as tall as 28 stories in Miami's Little Haiti, activists and clergy are planning a series of meetings and protests demanding jobs, affordable housing, and an end to gentrification.

Ric Katz, a publicist and lobbyist, confirms that his clients are aiming to bring their Eastside Ridge project proposal to the City of Miami's Planning Zoning and Adjustments Board in June. The Podolsky family in New York City has presented plans to build at least 2600 residential units, around 390,000 square feet of retail, about 400 hotel rooms, and a passenger train station on the 22-acre site at NE 54th Street and NE 2nd Avenue. This is where the two-story, 400-unit Design Place apartment complex now stands.

Most of Eastside Ridge's buildings are currently planned to be between 5 and 28 stories tall. Under the city's Miami 21 zoning plan, a building with 5 floors can be up to 81 feet tall, while a 28-floor building can be 403 feet tall.

Katz says these plans may change in the future. Katz also says that he and other members of the Eastside Ridge team are talking to various members of the surrounding community.

"There are ongoing dialogues as we explain what we want to accomplish," he says, later adding, "Many of the people who are shouting at us are also talking to us."

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Eastside Ridge isn't the only large project being proposed in that part of Little Haiti. Last year the city approved plans to add another one million square feet of new development just west of Design Place at the Miami Jewish Health complex, a nursing home and hospital for the elderly. The additional development includes a 140-room hotel, a five-story conference center, and a 140,000-square-foot memory care center.



Meanwhile, the shuttered Archbishop Curley-Notre Dame High School, located directly south of Design Place, is also for sale. A developer could build 2300 residential units in buildings up to 28-stories tall there if they can obtain the sort of zoning that Eastside Ridge's team is after, according to a September 2017 story posted to *The Real Deal* news website.

The 16-acre school property, owned by the Archdiocese of Miami, is now reportedly under contract to a developer, according to sources who didn't wish to be identified. Michael Fay, a principal of the real estate brokerage Avison Young and one of the agents listing the property, declined to comment.

It's the Eastside Ridge project that has generated the most controversy so far. In September 2017, at least 200 people from Little Haiti, Buena Vista, and the Upper Eastside stated their outright opposition to the project during a community meeting held at the Little Haiti Cultural Complex. They maintained that if the developers insist on replacing the 400 units at Design Place with a new project, they should build in accordance to *current* zoning guidelines, which allow only 1691 residential units and around 380,000 square feet of commercial space in buildings no taller than five stories.

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Concerns raised at the time included traffic congestion and a dramatic change to Little Haiti's character, which is predominately single-family homes and low-rise apartments. (See "[Little Haiti's Big No](#)," October 2017.)

Frustrations over the project were expressed again this past April 9 during a meeting at the One God in Three Persons Baptist Church, located on the bottom floor of an old apartment building at 473 NW 77th St. Attended by several dozen people, most of them Haitian, the gathering was organized by Pastor Erick Jules, the service workers union UNITE HERE Local 355, and Fanm Ayisyen Nan Miyami (also known as Haitian Women of Miami).

"We're gearing up," says FANM's executive director, Marleine Bastien. Discussion at the meeting included stories of the Podolsky family's past controversial actions in New York, which involved felony convictions. Two Podolsky brothers, along with their father Zenek Podolsky (who died in 2015), pleaded guilty to 37 felonies in 1984 in connection with a scheme to hire "professional vacators" to intimidate rent-control tenants from three buildings they owned in New York City.



But the fight isn't just about Eastside Ridge. There were also stories of how developers and real

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estate investors are swooping into the Little Haiti area and forcing out small businesses and churches. In addition, speakers talked about real estate agents continuously contacting Haitian homeowners in the area, encouraging them to sell their homes. Bastien called it a plot to remove Haitian people from Little Haiti.

“You can’t sell your house. If you sell your house, we are going to lose Little Haiti!” Bastien shouted as the audience applauded. “You need to keep your house!”

Actually, the plot has more to do with making money than simply forcing out Haitians. In July 2016, RealtyTrac rang the dinner bell for house flippers when the real estate news service rated the 33150 ZIP code (which includes Little Haiti) 14th in its national listing of the “35 Best Down-and-Out Neighborhoods to Buy a Home.” According to RealtyTrac, 32.1 percent of homes in that area were financially underwater, while investors stand to make an estimated 111 percent profit after buying, renovating, and selling the homes to someone else.

Pastor Jules says he, too, is a victim of gentrification. Jules notes that his One God in Three Persons Church used to occupy a warehouse space in the Little River area. But then the building was purchased by a new landowner who wanted to more than quadruple the monthly rent.

Jules says he left, even though he had spent some \$70,000 renovating the space. Now developers are making offers to buy the apartment building where his church relocated.

“We’re not okay with the way investors and developers, the way they work, the way they fight with us,” Jules says.

Evan Philius, One God in Three Person’s youth director, says they’re also organizing with other churches in the area. But Philius says they don’t necessarily want to stop the project outright. They want concessions that will benefit working-class people, particularly Haitians, who live in the surrounding area.

“Right now, there’s nothing to help the community, and the things that will help the community

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are better housing and better jobs,” says Philius, who is also affiliated with UNITE HERE. “Small businesses are being displaced, and there’s nothing to help them.”



To obtain their desired zoning, Eastside Ridge’s developers are going through a process to evaluate a special area plan, or SAP. As part of that process, developers must demonstrate community benefits. Three activists at the April 9 meeting told the *BT* that they’d like an arrangement similar to the one that Miami Worldcenter’s developers had to follow in Park West three years ago. In exchange for receiving up to \$108 million in tax rebates, the developers agreed to hire at least 30 percent of its workforce from within the Southeast Overtown Park West Community Redevelopment Area at salaries starting at \$11.58 an hour for unskilled labor.

The arrangement was negotiated largely by City of Miami Commission Chairman Keon Hardemon, whose district includes Park West, Overtown, and Little Haiti. Hardemon’s office didn’t return phone calls for comment.

Katz referred questions on Eastside Ridge’s lobbying of city officials to Genaro “Chip” Iglesias, a former deputy mayor of Miami-Dade County who is now managing partner of the Ballard Partners Inc., a government relations firm. Iglesias didn’t return a phone call for comment.

Katz says they’re striving to build a project that is acceptable for the community. As for jobs, he’s certain that the area’s Haitian residents will be hired as employees, especially at its future hotels.

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