

Climate mitigation volunteers commit to spending accountability for bond measure



Several days into August last year, a torrential downpour from an unnamed storm flooded Brickell with the kind of surge that turns main roadways into canals. Those unlucky enough to be traveling at the time -- many, it turns out, as the worst of the rains struck during rush hour -- found that it suddenly took several hours to navigate just three or four blocks through the thigh-deep waters.

The multimillion-dollar pump system installed by the City of Miami less than a year before was of no help as the king tide, which can cause tidal flooding of coastal Miami neighborhoods even on sunny days, overwhelmed the system. Rainwater had nowhere to go but online, in the pictures distressed residents posted on their Facebook feeds.

Those campaigning on behalf of a \$400 million bond issue, including former Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado and the editorial board of the *Miami Herald*, immediately took up the issue of flooding to argue that it showed how vital spending on sea level rise mitigation had become for Miami.

Residents, especially those in Brickell, responded enthusiastically to that message. Homeowner association presidents organized forums to inform residents in waterfront towers about the upcoming vote. A local political club mostly dedicated to hosting speeches by candidates for state office had members walk door to door inside Brickell high-rises, registering voters and making sure they were aware of the ballot item.

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A few weeks later, when an indirect hit by Hurricane Irma turned Brickell Avenue into a raging river, residents were primed to see the immediate connection to a need. Brickell voters would end up backing the proposal decisively, even as neighborhoods like Little Havana, Allapattah, and Flagami were skittish about taxing themselves more to pay for the capital investments needed to handle rising sea levels and create a more resilient city.

Seven out of ten ballots cast in Brickell were in favor of the bond measure, and these, along with strong support from downtown Miami, Edgewater, Morningside, and Overtown, more than counteracted the skepticism elsewhere in Miami.

Almost immediately after the vote, however, cynicism set in. Some residents, naysayers, and those who'd campaigned against the measure began saying that supporters would take their eye off the ball now that the money had been approved. Miami politicians, who've notoriously misspent bond issues in the past -- including the half-penny levy meant to bolster the county's public transportation system -- would again squander the pot of cash.

Maggie Fernandez, chairwoman of the Miami Climate Alliance's steering committee, knows that cynicism well. Having been one of the volunteers who joined up to persuade residents in those Brickell high-rises, including some of her friends, to vote for the bond issue, she found herself making a personal long-term commitment last year.

"I asked them to trust me and that I was going to make sure this bond was implemented in a way that was accountable," Fernandez said last month as she stood inside Miami City Hall to do just that.

Formed by dozens of volunteer activists from Brickell, downtown, and every other corner of Miami, the Miami Climate Alliance is on a mission to ensure that the momentum sparking the ballot initiative to pass last November is kept alive. This time, they plan to ensure that citizens are leading the conversation as to how the proceeds from that bond issue are spent. (Full disclosure: this writer is a member of the group.)

"We know the districts well. We know the roads, the potholes, how and how not to get by in

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rush-hour traffic,” says Gustavo Perez, who has been working with the group, speaking to Miami commissioners at their regular meeting last month.

It’s just one of the many things the Climate Alliance has been doing, as the three-year-old group has gained visibility by marshaling resources and organizing efforts to the cause of resiliency and adaptation to sea level rise.

From successfully advocating for the creation of a resilience office inside the county government structure, taking advocacy to the street with colorful marches, and pushing for key environmental wins in various municipalities, the group has increasingly become the umbrella organization for all things related to resiliency and sea level rise action in Miami.

Last month dozens of group volunteers found themselves flexing their civic muscle to make sure the key accomplishment achieved in getting the bond expenditures approved was further solidified. It was a culmination of several months’ work by the organization, which had already met with Miami Mayor Francis Suarez and three city commissioners, held dozens of conference calls and open meetings to understand how best to promote community engagement, and circulated a letter to city staff with recommendations on how to do just that.

Among top priorities: making sure the oversight board created to make recommendations on expenditures wasn’t packed exclusively with real estate interests and cronies, as has occurred with other municipal oversight boards in the past.

“The voices of community members really have to be elevated in this board,” says Camilo Mejía, another volunteer working with the Alliance, arguing against the practice of demanding that people nominated to those seats be limited to those with professional expertise in real estate or construction-related fields.

Instead, Mejia argues, residents in low-income Miami communities “are the people who are experts in living in food deserts, places that don’t have very efficient transit systems, places that don’t have the ability to bounce back from a storm. This is the kind of expertise that is needed.”

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The activists' work is yielding results. Following their comments before officials, city commissioners widened the size of the board, amended the requirements for its composition to include people with roots in community organizing and outreach, and limited membership to city residents. A long conversation made it clear that the message of community engagement, even pride in the future of the projects the city would undertake, was in sync with the interests of the elected officials.

It was a huge victory for a small group of engaged citizens, who among other things, are also fighting to make sure dealings with FPL are used as leverage points to make that utility giant behave responsibly toward the environment, advocating for polluters to pay for the costs of bucking up resilience infrastructure, mobilizing against efforts to promote fracking or offshore drilling in Florida, and being a voice in the ongoing debate regarding the county's urban development boundary.

The need to make sure communities are resilient to the impacts of natural disasters like hurricanes is also likely to be part of the central endeavor.

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