A Singular Voice in an Evolving City

By Gabriel Porele

Commissioner stymied in bid to save golf course

A billion-dollar development to replace the golf course in city-owned Melreese Park keeps charging ahead, but a zoning application for what it met opposition from a commissioner who said Miami is getting ahead of itself and not following the process.

Manolo Reyes, an established foe of the development, named Miami Freedom Park, presented an item last week that called for the city and its outside counsel to halt all zoning applications related to the project until the commission has approved all lease agreements. His legislation died on the dais, with no action taken.

“I want to know why we’re going for an SAP [Special Area Plan] or a zoning change when we don’t have a contract, we don’t have any leases, and we have not agreed on anything,” he said.

City Attorney Victoria Mendez said the city and Miami Freedom Park were originally co-applicants, but to comply with city code, the city is now the sole applicant.

City Manager Art Noriega said the city began the Special Area Plan application with the understanding that the zoning items would not go to the commission before the lease agreements.

“My concern is it hasn’t been done before, that we shouldn’t start doing it, and that’s not set precedents like that,” Mr. Reyes said.

The proposed 131-acre development at Melreese Park just east of Miami International Airport is to feature a 25,000-seat stadium for Major League Soccer team Inter Miami CF, 1 million square feet of office, retail and commercial space, and a 58-acre public park. In a referendum, 60% of voters approved the city negotiating the lease with the developer. Inter Miami announced the developer was moving ahead with the Special Area Plan, a provision in city zoning that allows more flexibility for projects larger than 9 acres.

Mr. Reyes said the city was acting as if the project already had approval. When his item died for lack of a second, he laughed and admitted he hadn’t expected anyone else to vote for it.

“I wasn’t expecting one, but my point is clear, and I wanted people to know that processes are followed when there are certain people,” he said, “but when we get people that they’re very influential and they have a lot of money to spread out and all of that, then we bend over backwards in order to accommodate them, and that’s not the way this government should be run.”

Mr. Reyes’ opposition to Miami Freedom Park is well-known. At his order, the commission held a special November meeting so it could vote on a lease between Miami Freedom Park and the city. He wanted the vote before then-commissioner and project critic Wifredo Martinez overruled him.

Earlier this year, Mr. Reyes failed to gain legislation that would strengthen the city’s policy of no net loss of park space to require that lost parkland be replaced with equal sized parkland in the city, unless overturned by unanimous vote.

During the discussion, another commissioner said the deal was not a certainty. Ken Russell said he wasn’t satisfied with the amount of green space the developer claims must be replaced in order to meet the net-loss policy.

“I can tell you right now,” Mr. Russell said, “20 acres is not enough, and that’s what’s being applied for in terms of replacing the green space that’s there right now.”

As unemployment in Miami-Dade fell slightly in May to 11.3% from 11.8% in April at the peak of the virus-induced shutdown, sunshine bathed one industry: construction jobs hit an all-time high.

Construction rose to 54,800 jobs in the county in May, the most for any month in US Bureau of Labor Statistics records, up 3,800 from April and 1,600 more workers than a year earlier.

That gain in Miami-Dade construction jobs came as the value of construction starts in South Florida overall was plunging, falling 25% in May from the level of May 2019, according to Dodge Data & Analytics, which tracks new construction. The value of nonresidential starts fell 35%, from $417.5 million to $269.8 million, and the value of residential starts fell 13%, from $749.4 million to $558.8 million.

Construction was the sole category where jobs rose year to year in May in Miami-Dade amidst overall double-digit unemployment, though financial jobs were down just two-tenths of a percent, the small information sector was down less five-tenths of a percent and the government sector was down a relatively small 1%.

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In downturn construction jobs soaring

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As she tells it, Dr. Lenore Rodicio found her calling in science. When she was a chemical engineering student at the University of Miami. The end of those activities coincided with the birth of her second child. After weighing options that would allow her to care for her newborn, she sought an adjunct professor position at Miami Dade College (MDC), the largest school in the Florida College System and the second-largest college or university in the nation. “It only took a couple weeks of teach- ing there before I fell in love with the institution, its mission and, mostly, its students—a unique population of individ- uals with incredibly varied backgrounds coming here with, in some cases, real challenges in both their personal and professional lives and in the academic needs they had,” she said. “To see the transformative experience that occurred as they went through courses and with each success they had, I realized there was something very special in the curriculum and felt drawn to it in a way I hadn’t to anything before. When a full-time faculty position became available, I applied and have been there ever since.”

Between May 2002 and now, Dr. Rodicio steadily rose through MDC’s ranks, from associate professor, chairperson of natural and social sciences, dean of academic affairs and executive director of student success and completion to vice president of student achievement, provost of academic and student affairs and, most recently, executive vice president and provost of the college at large. Dr. Rodicio, MDC’s top education of- ficial, is now a finalist for the college’s presidency and the only candidate still from within the institution. While the selection process for the position is on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic, she said, she remains committed to earn- ing the role.

Dr. Rodicio spoke by phone with reporter Jesse Scheckner.

Q: What is happening with enrollment numbers?
A: Prior to the pandemic we saw a steady decrease in enrollment. One of the unique characteristics of community colleges is that when the economy is doing poorly, our enrollment tends to go down. Individuals will either take less courses so they can work more or drop out of school altogether and pursue employment.

Our enrollment before was about 4% down compared to the year prior. We would have anticipated it to follow the same pattern. We don’t have the final numbers yet, but right now it looks like we’ve gained a bit and are around 1% to 2% down compared to last year.

It’s still too early to tell what the effects of the pandemic will be. It’ll depend a lot on whether we can resume normal operations. If so, and if the economy is still in recession, we’ll expect to see an increase. If not, we’ll see people coming to us to retort and retrain.

We launched two sets of programs over the next couple months in response to the unemployment and pandemic. One was a set of non-credit courses, our upskill programs, that are just for retosiling and retraining but don’t lead to a college credential.

Many are in areas like digital market- ing, cloud computing and other IT areas, as well as substitute training courses. Those filled immediately. Now, we’re also starting our college credit certificate programs, Kick-Start Your Career, which do lead to a college credential.

They can be completed in two semes- ters. We’re providing scholarships to cover tuition and fees, as well as a stipend to those who need to work, so students can remain enrolled full-time. Those are also in similar areas to the upskill programs and at capacity in enrollment.

Q: How does MDC’s faculty break down between full-time and part-time?
A: The fact that more students and faculty are comfortable now with this format will allow us to see if our faculty is skilled in teaching remotely.

We have faculty who are very skilled at teaching remotely. We have a few courses that are offered online but are not optimum there face-to-face. Those filled immediately. Now, we’re also starting our college credit certificate programs, Kick-Start Your Career, which do lead to a college credential.

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Dr. Lenore Rodicio is both executive vice president and provost of Miami Dade College.

As executive vice president, my role entails making sure the trains run on schedule. I oversee the consistency and quality of our academic and student service programs. Our cur- riculum is the highest quality and that it’s delivered in the most effective and efficient way possible to our students. I also help to ensure that all the services we provide to students support them and help them to complete their studies.

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A: Appreciating the proper role of technology and the role it plays in edu -

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The fact those have been so attractive, I anticipate as individuals find themselves unemployed, they’ll turn to us to help retrain in areas that continue to hire despite the pandemic.

Q: What has the shutdown of classroom education due to the virus done to the economics of the college?
A: We’re still collecting tuition and fees. The only shift for the summer, because we are completely remote, is with courses that have special fees to offset costs of support services to students, particularly for laboratories, technology and equipment they’d use on campus.

Because they do not have access to that now, we’ve waived those fees. That short-term effect probably amounts to between $1.5 million to $2 million in revenue.

Long term, because there’s an economic downturn, less tax dollars will be collected. Our legislature in Tallahassee will have to make difficult decisions about how to stretch the dollars across all entities funded by the state.

As they return for special session and finalize what that budget will look like for us and the 27 other state colleges, our budget may be impacted. We’re monitoring that and working on our advocacy from a more local to the extent possible, our budget remains intact.

Q: How has enrollment from abroad changed with the virus? Do you see those changes lingering?
A: We haven’t seen a huge shift. While we are a very large institution, and Miami is a large, international city, most students enrolled at our institution are residents and in-state students.

Maybe a couple thousand students are classified as international. As this continues and movement from other countries into the United States decreases or is at a standstill, probably in the next year is when we’ll see that impact.

Q: Which courses or degree tracks are the most popular or fastest growing?
A: The areas that are the most attractive to incoming students, as well as the ones seeing continued and steady growth, are primarily in IT and health.

They’ve always been courses with high enrollment. Others that have always been at the top of the list for enrollment are in the business areas. Those continue to increase.

Q: How does MDC deal with needs for remedial work among students who may have large gaps in their high school education?
A: We’ve been doing a lot of work and research in this area. There have been policy changes that occurred in Florida that fundamentally changed how we approach this. Some students are exempted from testing for remedial skills.

We tend to use a combination of measures of student readiness, high school grades and test scores to advise students on the type of remedial coursework they need.

Some have the choice to enroll or not enroll in developmental education courses. For those who do, we’ve significantly revamped how we teach those courses to make them more successful.

For those who choose to enroll directly into college-level courses, we’ve created additional assessments and touchpoints for faculty to determine where students have skills gaps so we can provide additional support in tutoring, corequisite courses and other opportunities to help them brush up those skills.

Over the last few years, we’ve seen significant improvements in student completing those gateway courses.

We’ve also reviewed all our academic programs to ensure that the courses we’re requiring students to take are ones they need in their academic pathways. All these things together have resulted in improvements in student success.

Q: How much of an issue is faculty burnout in an area where there are large gaps in courses and other opportunities to help students get skills they need in their academic pathways. All things together have resulted in improvements in student success.

Q: What was the last good book you read, and what book have you most given as a gift?
A: I love classical English literature, especially the works done in the 1850s. I’m very fond of Elizabeth Gaskell. One of her books, “North and South,” is probably my favorite and one I re-read often. It’s a reminder of the differences we have, but even if we come from different backgrounds there’s always a consensus to be found.

The only way you can do that – a recurrent theme throughout the book – is to listen to others, try to understand where they come from and reach a point where you can find common ground on which to resolve issues and problems.