

County will need to rescind Miami Wilds deal for water park at zoo, mayor says in memo

BY DOUGLAS HANKS

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Opponents of the Miami Wilds water park rallied Nov. 4, 2023, on county parking lots where it would be built outside Zoo Miami. On Nov. 15, 2023, Mayor Daniella Levine Cava released a memo recommending an end to the development deal. PEDRO PORTAL pportal@miamiherald.com

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Mayor Daniella Levine Cava wants to kill the agreement to build a for-profit water park outside Zoo Miami that conservation groups say will be a disaster for endangered bats living in the nearby forest.

In a memo released Wednesday, Levine Cava asked Miami-Dade commissioners to cancel a Dec. 12 vote on the agreement her administration originally negotiated with Miami Wilds to extend development deadlines the project is set to miss later this year.

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She also said Miami-Dade should take steps to cancel the Miami Wilds county lease on zoo parking lots that the commission endorsed in 2020 and again in 2022. Those votes came

before court challenges and this year's opposition campaign championed by the county zoo's own spokesperson put the project's future in doubt.

"At this time, as further detailed in this memo, it appears that the Lease will need to be rescinded to best safeguard the County's interests and our community's needs and objectives," Levine Cava wrote commissioners.



People wave their hands in support of speakers voicing opposition to Miami Wilds water park during the public comment portion of the Miami-Dade County Commission meeting on Wednesday, Sept. 6, 2023. A planned vote was delayed, and it's now slated for Dec. 12. Jose A. Iglesias jiglesias@elnuevoherald.com

The memo solidifies a gradual change in position by Levine Cava on the Miami Wilds lease extension, which she first recommended commissioners approve in late August and then said she wanted to reconsider as the agreement faced intense criticism.

Opponents now include Ron Magill, the zoo's locally famous communications director, who came out publicly against Miami Wilds in September.

Levine Cava promised commissioners a "deeper dive" this fall. In October, her office warned Miami Wilds the lease previously up for an extension was now in jeopardy over overdue payments and fallout from a lawsuit by conservation groups that froze needed federal approvals for the project.

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In a February lawsuit against the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bat Conservation International, the Tropical Audubon Society and other conservation groups succeeded in

having the National Parks Service say it erred in not conducting an environmental review before endorsing the Miami Wilds project.

The groups say the parking areas provide vital nighttime feeding grounds for bats.



The planned Miami Wilds water park project has been scaled down from a full-blown theme park over the years but it still includes water slides, a lazy river and dining options. *Miami Wilds*

While Miami-Dade owns the zoo parking lots, the land was once federal property and Interior retains some oversight of commercial construction.

The Levine Cava administration contends that without the National Parks Service approval, the original Miami Wilds lease will be void. The legal setback was also cited in her first memo recommending the lease extension, which included provisions designed to keep the deal alive while trying to secure federal approvals.

The mayor's new memo recommends commissioners take action that would kill the Miami Wilds agreement with developers Michael Diaz, Jr., Paul Lambert and Bernard Zyscovich. Levine Cava is asking to withdraw the legislation up for a vote Dec. 12 approving the lease amendment that Miami Wilds needs to avoid missing development deadlines set to expire at the end of 2023. Levine Cava also said it was time to sanction Miami Wilds for alleged violations of the existing 2022 deal.



Ron Magill (far right), the communications director at Zoo Miami, leads a group of South Florida residents during a rally to convince the Miami-Dade commission to vote against the controversial plan to build the Miami Wilds water park next to Zoo Miami, on Saturday, November 4, 2023. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

“It is recommended that the County enforce all of its rights under the Lease for Tenant’s defaults including but not limited to terminating the Lease if Tenant fails to timely cure its defaults,” Levine Cava wrote.

Miami Wilds denies violating the agreement and calls environmental opponents misguided in claiming the water park on paved parking areas would hurt the endangered Florida bonneted bat. They also said if Miami-Dade turned its back on Miami Wilds now, it would be unfairly renegeing on a deal that’s been in the works since the 1990s.

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“Miami Wilds remains in full compliance with its obligations under its lease with the county. The National Parks Service, through court filings, has already agreed to correct what it views as an error in its process for granting the release of deed restriction,” developers said in a statement released Wednesday afternoon. “On December the 12th, this item will come before the County Commission and we are hopeful that the county will allow the environmental assessment to be completed.”

Miami Wilds won the right to negotiate the development deal after a county bidding process in 2013.

Commissioners could still choose to take a vote on the Miami Wilds amended lease at their Dec. 12 meeting, or they could follow the mayor’s advice and remove the legislation from

the agenda. Commissioner Kionne McGhee, the item sponsor whose district includes the zoo site, was not immediately available for comment. McGhee had requested the mayor's memo ahead of the Dec. 12 vote.

Lauren Jonaitis, conservation director at the Tropical Audubon Society, welcomed the memo and urged commissioners to reject construction on the zoo parking lots.

"We are grateful to the Mayor for standing up for the environment," Jonaitis said in a statement. "I do hope the Commissioners follow the Mayor's lead. It would be great if we can begin to work together to permanently protect these environmentally sensitive lands."

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Doug Hanks covers Miami-Dade government for the Herald. He's worked at the paper for nearly 20 years, covering real estate, tourism and the economy before joining the Metro desk in 2014.