

COCONUT GROVE

## Miami anti-blight agency wants to expand beyond Omni. Can it preserve the West Grove?

BY JOEY FLECHAS

JUNE 13, 2019 08:30 PM



Plans for new Metrorail station in Coconut Grove show a solar-powered transportation hub with affordable housing. Developer David Martin of Terra



**AUG 30 – SEPT 2**

(Labor Day Weekend)

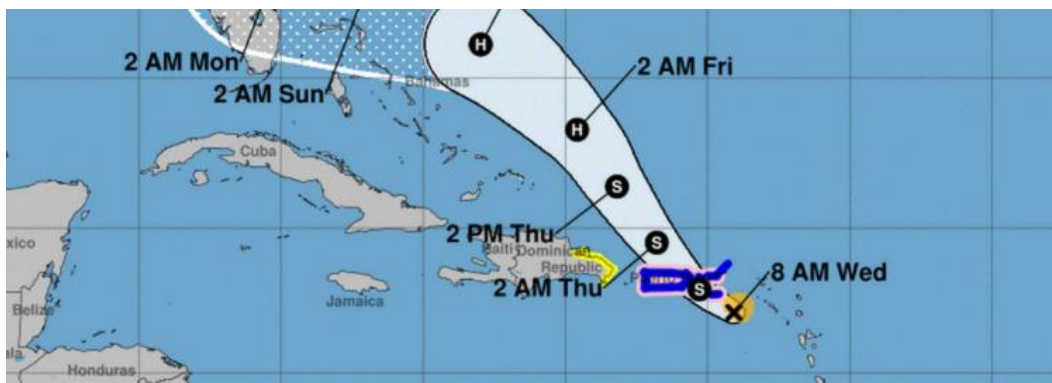
Mana Wynwood Conventic

Miami commissioners moved to expand a redevelopment agency's taxing power in a play to preserve one of the city's oldest and most endangered neighborhoods.

Historically black West Coconut Grove could become part of the Omni community redevelopment agency (CRA), a semi-autonomous government organization that can restrict property taxes within its boundaries in a zone north of downtown Miami. Commissioner Ken Russell, whose district includes the West Grove, has long pushed to spark redevelopment and build affordable housing with tax dollars.

To make that happen, Russell proposed to expand the existing Omni CRA to West Grove, a neighborhood settled by Bahamians who helped found Miami. The neighborhood has faced increasing gentrification pressure from speculators who are redeveloping properties and land banking.

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The measure would combine two swaths of land about seven miles apart under the purview of one anti-blight agency. On Thursday, Miami commissioners approved the expansion, along with extending the life of the CRA to 2047. The change still requires approval from Miami-Dade County commissioners.

The 4-1 vote, with Commission Manolo Reyes opposing, puts the city one step closer to committing property tax dollars in two pockets of Miami to stay within those neighborhoods' boundaries for the next 28 years. Chaired by Russell and led by paid administrators, the agency would be able to buy and develop real estate into affordable housing, help homeowners invest in their properties and spur the growth of small businesses.

"We'll be buying land, we'll be incentivizing development. We'll be investing in single-family home renovations," Russell told reporters. "There's discussion of potential land trusts involving the community. I'm very excited to see what could happen. This CRA could be the *deus ex machina* [unexpected solution to complex situation] of this community."

Russell, who is running for reelection this year, was backed by several Grove residents who expressed faith that the agency he leads would keep his promises.

“We won’t make the same mistakes other CRAs have made,” said businessman J.S. Rashid. “This is our best option.”



**JS Rashid**  
@jsrashid\_ceo

The city commission is left with only one option following years and years of neglect, ineptitude and disregard. It has brought us to this 11th hour. Not to include the historic African-American Bahamian Enclave into the CRA is a hostile act against that historic community

2 12:09 PM - Jun 13, 2019

[See JS Rashid's other Tweets](#)

Others were skeptical, citing longstanding criticisms of CRAs. The agencies siphon tax dollars away from public funds that pay for city services such as police, sidewalk repairs and road improvements.

Such agencies have a bad track record in Miami. A 2016 grand jury report [found the taxing districts were hubs of waste and mismanagement](#) that spent supposed anti-poverty funds on subsidizing museums, concert halls and a production studio. The Omni CRA also figured into the multi-government, widely derided deal to finance Marlins Park. The grand jury found it “unfathomable” that the agency funded such projects instead of affordable housing.

Reyes echoed these concerns before casting his lone no vote. He said many other parts of Miami are plagued by slum and blight that could use new investment.

“This is a piñata,” Reyes said. “And I’m not part of this piñata.”

“Sir, this is a piñata for the people,” responded Commissioner Wifredo “Willy” Gort.

The vote also appeared to settle a longstanding disagreement between Russell and Commissioner Joe Carollo. Under the deal that financed Marlins Park, the Omni CRA was [supposed to pay \\$2 million a year for 15 years to the city for improvements to Maurice A. Ferre Park](#). A separate trust chaired by Carollo manages the park. To date, the CRA has only paid \$2 million.

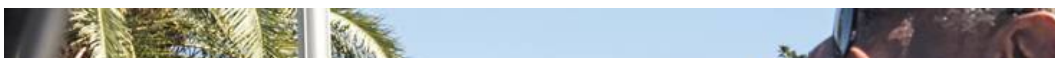
Russell and Carollo have sparred over the issue several times over the last year. On Thursday, Russell agreed to pay the \$28 million balance once the CRA expands and to support efforts to redevelop the FEC slip next to AmericanAirlines Arena. The agency would send another \$250,000 a year to the Miami Bayside Foundation to fund job training and entrepreneurial services for small business owners within the CRA’s boundaries.

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Residents from Coconut Grove spoke in support of preserving the scale and character of their West Grove neighborhood outside Miami City Hall in February. MARIA ALEJANDRA CARDONA *THE MIAMI HERALD*



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Joey Flechas covers government and public affairs in the city of Miami for the Herald, ranging from votes at City Hall to neighborhood news. He won a Sunshine State award for revealing a Miami Beach political candidate's ties to an illegal campaign donation. He attended the University of Florida.

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