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VIZCAYA PAVES WAY TO RESTORE HISTORIC FARM VILLAGE IN COCONUT GROVE, PG. 11



TRANSIT MONTHLY GAIN: Miami-Dade transit ridership in October gained 12.9% on October 2020 boardings, the newest data from the transit department shows, though transit use for the month was down a full 39% from passengers in October 2019, before the onset of the pandemic. Bus ridership for October was up 9.8% from 12 months earlier, Metrorail ridership was up 9.7% for the period and use of the free Metromover was up 55.6%.

Total October traffic was 4,429,727 passengers, far from recovering to the 7,144,116 October total in 2019.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING: Miami-Dade's Office of the Commission Auditor found in a special report of affordable housing for the 2020 report – presented in December 2021 – that available county land near mass transit corridors creates a more favorable avenue for twin homes by maximizing the footprint efficiency and low impact on traffic density. Nonetheless, the research also found that although twin homes are one option to combat the county's housing crisis, the challenges associated with building costs did not give twin homes a comparative advantage as an effective solution.

STATUS OF WOMEN: Men's overall median earnings in Miami-Dade County are 19% higher than women's and 11.3% higher for full-time workers, the 2020 report on the Status of Women in the county says. The earnings gap for full-time workers decreased from the 14.2% reported in the previous report. From 2017 to 2018, there was a 3% increase in women's labor force participation and a 3.9% increase in the percentage of women working full-time in Miami-Dade. Earnings gaps in management, business, and financial occupations remain 19.4%, sales and related occupations have a 25.1% gap, and in healthcare practitioners and technical occupations there is a 22.2% gap. "While women's earnings have increased in almost every category over the past year, large gender pay gaps still exist in Miami-Dade," the report says.

HIDING CRASH REPORTS: Citing the need to protect personal information, a House member filed a proposal Monday that would prevent the release of traffic-crash reports. Chuck Brannan's bill would create a public-records exemption for crash reports, though law-enforcement agencies would be able to provide summaries about crashes to news media. "Crash reports reveal significant personal information, not only about drivers involved in a crash but also about motor vehicle owners, motor vehicle passengers, and other witnesses and about owners of non-vehicle property damaged in a crash," the bill says.

THE ACHIEVER



Photo by Marlene Quaroni

Roy Coley

Directs multi-billion-dollar water and sewer improvements

The profile is on Page 4

Home cost 25% jump third in US

Miami and Tampa had some of the nation's largest home price increases over a year-long period that ended in October, trailing only Phoenix, according to the latest S&P CoreLogic Case-Shiller U.S. National Home Price NSA Index.

The Miami area had a 25.7% increase and Tampa 28.1% from October 2020 to October 2021. Phoenix prices jumped 32.3%. The national rise was 19.1%.

Miami's sales numbers continued boiling through November, as Miami Today reported last week, already setting annual records in most home sales, most condo sales and most single-family home sales.

Existing condo median sale prices in Miami rose 28.1% in November year over year, from \$270,000 to \$346,000, while single-family Miami median prices increased 11.7% year over year, from \$450,000 to \$502,750, the Miami Association of Realtors reported.

Nationally in November the median existing home prices for housing of all kinds rose 13.9% to \$353,900 from \$310,800 in November 2020, while the Florida Realtors Research Department said the statewide median sale price for single-family homes rose 19.6% and for condos 19.9%.

Craig J. Lazzara, managing director at S&P Dow Jones Indices, said in a prepared statement that prices in the report released last week were "strongest in the South and Southeast" but that metro areas in every region had double-digit increases.

"We have previously suggested that the strength in the US housing market is being driven in part by a change in locational preferences as households react to the covid pandemic," he said. "More data will be required to understand whether this demand surge represents an acceleration of purchases that would have occurred over the next several years or reflects a more permanent secular change."

The data reflect a hot real-estate market in Florida. While that has been good for sellers, it also has fueled concerns about affordable housing.

Expressway authority gains in fight with state

BY GABRIELA HENRIQUEZ STOIKOW

■ State GMX has week to respond in case, pg. 3

The Miami-Dade Expressway Authority (MDX) just won two court rulings in its dispute over operations and control of five tolled expressways within the county against the state-created Greater Miami Expressway Agency (GMX).

Judge William Thomas of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida denied a motion to dismiss the claim that MDX made against GMX that it has ownership, control, and title to the \$4 billion in assets it operates. He also recognized Miami-Dade County as a necessary party in the litigation.

But the judge denied the authority's motion for preliminary injunction that would keep the status quo while courts make a final decision in the case. A 20-minute hearing is still scheduled Jan. 18.

Jason Gonzalez of Shutts & Bowen LLP, representing GMX and its board members, argued in previous hearings and documents that MDX should either bring the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) to the case or drop it, as FDOT "is an indispensable party."

Nonetheless, Judge Thomas found that FDOT is not an indispensable party and has no remaining interests in the rights it conveyed to MDX. Also, he wrote that the agreement in which the

department transferred the rights to MDX to maintain and operate the expressways within the county has no right of reversion that would give a basis to recognize FDOT as a party.

Mr. Gonzalez also argued that MDX lacked standing under the public official standing doctrine. But Judge Thomas found that MDX's claims against GMX do not involve a constitutional challenge to the validity of a state statute; instead, the authority is looking for a court decision that would indicate MDX owns the expressways.

GMX's defense argues that MDX lacks legal capacity to maintain a lawsuit because it was dissolved July 3, 2019. But Judge Thomas noted that a Home Rule Amendment prohibits the Legislature from enacting bills that apply only to Miami-Dade County, and that the county can declare a bill to be unconstitutional and invalid, as it did in a May 2021 ordinance.

"The Miami-Dade County ordinance has not been challenged in any court," Judge Thomas wrote.

The judge also recognized Miami-Dade as a necessary party in the case, as he referred to

the Florida Statutes, marking the second win for MDX.

MDX sought a temporary injunction to preserve the status quo and prevent GMX from taking further actions in "derogation" of MDX's rights, but Judge Thomas denied the motion, finding MDX didn't meet two requirements.

MDX "cannot demonstrate an irreparable harm in the absence of an injunction," he wrote, noting that MDX's injury is financial and can be remedied by a monetary judgment. "It is the finding of this court that MDX is essentially seeking an injunction to stop the redirection of toll revenue to GMX," the judge wrote.

The judge said MDX has an adequate remedy as, if it succeeds in establishing entitlement to operation and control of the expressways, it would be entitled to monetary damages and thus "has an adequate remedy at law".

But Judge Thomas did find that MDX met two other requirements. "It is the opinion of this court that MDX has a substantial likelihood of success on the merits in the instant action," Judge Thomas wrote. He also wrote that it is in the public interest that the expressways be operated and maintained in an undisrupted and safe manner.

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Roy Coley to fill 300 water and wastewater vacancies...

With over 20 years in public works and water resources, Roy Coley has been leading the Miami-Dade Water and Sewer Department since May 2021. He oversees 450 projects now underway, reviews solicitations for improvements, responds to requests from elected officials, supervises the quality of drinking and wastewater, and runs a department that serves more than 2.3 million residents.

His career in Florida started in 2005 with 10 years at the Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority overseeing water and wastewater. "Most of my work revolved around building wastewater treatment plants throughout the Keys and areas that were not served by public wastewater services, and then also building and operating water treatment plants," he said.

In the Keys, he developed a drinking water quality management technique that he presented to the American Water Works Association and that resulted in water quality experts from around the nation visiting and imitating the procedure, and in the association including the technique in its manual for water quality and distribution systems.

"Miami-Dade County already does some of those techniques, and I'm working with our water quality engineers now to look at implementing more of that to see if we can do it even better here," he said.

In 2015 Miami Beach hired Mr. Coley for its Public Works Department, where he was tasked with responding to historic king tides, ran a program that resulted in staff obtaining state licenses and certifications, and represented the department in a group from the region that traveled to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to develop mitigation efforts for mosquito-transmitted disease.

Mr. Coley now aims to complete a conversion from septic to sewer systems across the county with the funding challenges it involves, hire new staff among a general shortage of employees in the county, train the people to get a high-qualified pool of employees, and complete a multi-billion capital improvement program.

Roy Coley spoke with Miami Today reporter Gabriela Henriquez Stoikow.

Q: What priorities have you set forth since you arrived in this position and for 2022?

A: The first thing was get our organizational architecture the way we wanted it, and we've done a little bit of reorganization where our former deputy director over capital improvements has taken on a new role as director of One Water Strategy for our entire county, and then we were lucky enough to have a wonderful engineer that already was on our staff that we promoted to the new position. They vacated her old position so she's getting all her people in place.

When I joined the department, we had about 300 vacancies. One of my highest priorities is filling those key positions. Some are essential to operate, and we are having to use a lot of overtime and a lot of contracted services to help overcome those shortages. So, one of my key ini-



Photo by Marlene Quaroni

Roy Coley is overseeing 450 projects underway at county water and sewer department.

The Achiever

Roy Coley

Director
Miami Dade Water and Sewer Department
3071 SW 38th Ave., Miami 33146
(305) 665-7477
roy.coley@miamidadegov
Age: 55
Born: Decatur, AL.
Education: Bachelor of Arts, St. Thomas University; MBA, Saint Leo University.
Personal philosophy: "Train people well enough so they can leave and treat them well enough that they will not" -Richard Branson.

tiatives is to get those positions in place to where we're more self-sufficient and we don't have to ask people to work so much overtime.

We also have a couple of key positions that are set for retirement this year, and we are putting together recruitments and finding replacements. So getting all that organizational structure in place is a high priority.

We've also begun developing a strategic plan. Our department didn't have a strategic plan that set its goals to clearly align with county goals and with our elected officials' expectations of expanding and improving services. That's going to take a number of months. There are 2,700 of us, so it's a large number of people and we want to have that strategic plan in place so everyone knows what our goals are and what's expected.

And of course, we have a multi-billion-dollar capital improvement plan underway for our wastewater systems to comply with an existing federal consent order, and also to comply with new implementing state laws for outfalls. So, we have a multi-billion-dollar program on the wastewater side, and we are developing a very large program that we're going to be proposing to our elected officials this year for the water treatment plants.

We have amazing water treatment plants but some are very old, and we want to start long-term planning for those plants to revitalize them, to upgrade technology there. That's an initiative we want to roll out later this year.

Q: Have you been able to close that gap of 300 vacancies?

A: We have not closed it much. The hiring market is very competitive and we have such a tenured workforce that we have about as many retirements as we've been hiring. But we are developing our plan to aggressively pursue and recruit new employees, for example, heavy equipment operators.

There's so much construction going on around the county that every contractor is hiring those operators. Every city, every county government in the region needs heavy equipment operators and truck drivers. We're competing against everything from the other public sector jobs of bus drivers and train operators that are hiring and they're short-staffed, to every trucking company needing professional drivers.

We're very short-handed in some of those specialty jobs. Some of our highest qualified design engineering positions today are open and we're looking to fill those. They're not easy to fill because the private sector is offering more than we're paying, so we're having to take a close look at what our pay scales are for certain jobs that may not be in line with the private sector.

Our mayor has been extremely supportive in recognizing that if we've got a job that's not being paid competitively to get the best people, she wants us to look at making necessary adjustments because if we're going to have the best utility, it takes the best people at all levels of the organization. And we certainly are not going to have the best people if we don't have competitive pay.

Q: Can you share some of the details from the strategic plan you are currently developing?

A: Our mayor is engaged in this process and her highest priority that she wanted to add to our strategic plan was to make sure we offer job opportunities and that our organization serves with

equity to our community. She wanted that to be one of our key measurables in our strategic plan, so that's one thing that is going to be at the top of our priorities.

Reliability is going to be one of our goals, making sure that if we go through whether it's a shock of a hurricane or something that takes out some of our assets or our power supply, we've got the ability to continue serving.

Whether it is additional impacts from the climate, whether it is rising sea levels, or heat island effects, or all the things that can impact our ability to serve, we want to take all of those into consideration in our planning, and make sure we're reliable both in production of drinking water and managing wastewater. All of those things will be at the forefront of our planning, and you can't have any of those without a first-class workforce.

Workforce development and training are going to be key initiatives as to how do we recruit folks, train them, continually reinvest in our existing professionals to where everybody's skills remain honed and prepared for anything.

Q: What has been done from the Capital Improvement Program and what's left to do?

A: In the past years, the program has been focused on our wastewater treatment plants and our wastewater collection system, because since the mid-'90s the county has been under a consent order with the federal government where they literally came in and said that the county was violating the Clean Water Act and the county could either agree to do these things or the federal government was going to sue the county and get judicial orders.

The county agreed that it needed doing, so these plans were set in place. We hope that we are able to bring all of those requirements to completion in three or four years. We've got to accelerate the work. We need to complete \$600 million or \$700 million a year in capital improvements in that wastewater space so that we can achieve compliance.

That's going to be a high priority in the budget, as well as ocean outfall legislation where the state legislature mandated that all utilities in the state cease or drastically reduce using ocean outfalls for its wastewater effluent. Miami-Dade, just like many other counties, their treatment plan of fluid went to the ocean. Now we're building an inland infrastructure where we can take that effluent and we don't send it to the ocean.

That is also a very expensive proposition, it's highly prioritized, and all of our electives understand that it's something we have to do.

In addition, I will be proposing this year a very comprehensive rebuild, remodel retooling of some of our components at the water treatment plants that currently aren't planned, so that's where our multibillion-dollar program is going.

Q: Septic to sewer conversion is also a high priority. What has been done since you have been in office, and what can we expect in 2022?

A: What the department had done prior to me arriving is an outstanding

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...as he directs multi-billion-dollar capital improvements

job identifying the need. We have about 120,000 septic tanks that if you were to say today you want to connect all of them to sanitary sewer services, it's about a \$4 billion expense. So they have done an analysis to determine how many are truly vulnerable right now to rising water or will be vulnerable in the next few years.

That has been pared down into two categories: the immediately vulnerable, which are about 9,000 tanks, and the expected vulnerable in the short term, which is a total of about 12,000.

Since I've joined the organization, we're designing a group that we will be converting to public wastewater services. We look to break ground in January in the Little River area, where we were fortunate to get state grants and general obligation bond funds to pay for it. That will start moving people from septic tanks to public sewer service in a very low-lying area, and some of that area is very low income.

The money is a bit more complicated than is often realized because we are prohibited from using our existing customers' revenue stream to pay for expanding services for new customers. So all of the money that the Miami-Dade Water and Sewer Department has comes from existing customer fees, what they pay us for water and sewer service. That is all of our revenue. We don't receive tax money.

That revenue cannot be spent, by state rules, on new customers. We have to spend that money on our existing customers to keep their system operating, their operation and maintenance, and keep their costs limited to their service.

If a new group of customers wants infrastructure extended to them, it has to be paid either by them or another source of revenue. And that's where we're trying to get some help out of the infrastructure bill that was recently passed.

I joined the mayor, we went to Washington, and we met with the deputy director of the Environmental Protection Agency. We also met with the new senior advisor to President Biden whose key responsibility is overseeing the infrastructure rebuilding in this country and

we tried to help them understand that we need that money to convert septic tanks to sewer. I feel very confident we're going to get some of that money.

I'm also very confident that our county commission leadership is committed to this conversion. Every year we will be able to find a way to budget some money to move some, but if we want to make a big impact, we need a sudden infusion of money. We need \$500 million to manage those most vulnerable septic tanks that we don't currently have. So that's what we're really targeting.

Q: Your department is currently tracking the omicron variant in the water. What have you found?

A: That is one of our favorite accomplishments. We feel like we've really done something for our community. What the department began doing back in 2020 is taking samples of our wastewater from each wastewater plant. Every single week there's a sample taken and sent to a laboratory called Biobot. That is a laboratory that was a spin-off from MIT and they are able to extract the RNA from the wastewater sample and determine the concentration of covid and then based on that concentration extrapolate that out into a projected number of covid new cases.

We do this every week. We spend about \$10,000 a month on laboratory services to get this information. The results come to us a few days to a week after we send the sample and then we share that information with the medical experts at University of Miami.

We also share that information with our own county emergency management and then they're able to use that information to inform their decisions when they can see the increase or decrease in covid in wastewater and correlate that with what's going on in our community.

The experts at the University of Miami School of Medicine feel like it's an essential piece of data for them to help interpret what they're seeing in other data points.

I can't tell you everything it means. What I can tell you is we're committed to gathering the data and supplying it to

all those that need it. The actual variant, today as we speak, they're unable to distinguish between the variant and the original Covid-19.

The measurement that we get as a total includes all of the covid and its variants. They are working on a genetic sequence to be able to extrapolate how much of it is the variant and how much of it is the original, but that is not perfected. They're hoping they can pull that off very soon. It's a top priority of the laboratory.

Q: You have extensive experience developing programs to help employees gain skills and certifications. As you continue to get more people to work in the department, is that something that you'll be implementing?

A: That is probably the single thing I am the most personally proud of in my experience as a professional. That is a program that we developed in Miami Beach, and we have a very similar situation here.

Hiring water and wastewater operators is not easy. There aren't any really good places for people to get the proper training and education, and you just find yourselves competing with other utilities for the same people. Of course, there's an enormous amount of our talent in this industry that are nearing retirement age, and replacing those folks is difficult.

So in Miami Beach, we developed the idea that if you would join us and you bring to the table just basic skills that a typical high school graduate or GED has, just basic skills of reading, writing, comprehension and mathematics skills, we would teach you everything else if you came with the desire to do something that mattered and the desire to have a real career path.

We would hire you and then we would supply all of the training and schooling and a career path to where you get state licensed. In the time that we implemented that until the time I came to Miami-Dade County, it had resulted in about 140 licenses issued to folks there.

We are very much working toward something similar in Miami-Dade, where we recognize that there are really good people in our county that would like to

have a career path but they've never been trained.

We have real experts here. We can leverage our own expertise with our existing operators and engineers to formally train trainees and then allow them the opportunity to become state-licensed and begin their professional careers in this industry. We're very much in the planning phases of that right now.

Q: What do you consider your biggest achievement?

A: The training program that we did in Miami Beach is such a story for individuals. To see the number of people that joined us with no formal training whatsoever and in a matter of a year or two they were holding professional licenses, they were trained individuals, they were committed, they were engaged. Two of those that we hired at Miami Beach are now supervisors. They flew through the ranks, got all the credentials, and when a supervisory opportunity presented itself they were the logical choice.

I take tremendous pride that most of those that came in that program were minority women who traditionally have been underrepresented in the utility industry.

The industry was much like the construction industry, it was male-dominated, and when we offered jobs to people, if they just came with the desire, we teach them, we had a disproportionate amount of applicants that were minority females and we hired them and they have just performed in such a manner that we know we did the right thing.

I still regularly get text messages from some of those women, and we exchanged thoughts back and forth and they thanked me for giving them the opportunity. Nothing feels better than to know that what we did made a difference in people's lives and the community is better off because we have better employees, better people providing services and their life is better off.

If there's ever been a win-win in a place I've been, that's it.

I just want to duplicate that at Miami-Dade County. We have so many openings, so the opportunity is perfect here.

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