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WEEK OF THURSDAY, JULY 31, 2025

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WITHOUT ENGINEERING A RESCUE, TRI-RAIL FACES A 2027 SHUTDOWN, PG. 13



FOUR CHARTER VOTES: Miami voters will weigh in on four major charter changes this November. In their July 24 meeting, city commissioners put forth two new amendments, one to ease restrictions on the sale or lease of non-waterfront city-owned land and another to create a recurring charter review commission to convene after each US census. Two other charter amendments are also approved to appear on the Nov. 4 ballot: one to ban gerrymandering by establishing a citizens' redistricting committee to draw future commission maps and another to impose lifetime term limits, capping service at two terms as mayor and two as commissioner, retroactive to prior terms.

NEW INSPECTOR GENERAL: The City of Miami has appointed **Antonio G. Diaz** to serve as inspector general. A retired major with the Miami Police Department, Mr. Diaz was unanimously recommended by a five-member selection committee and will serve a four-year term leading the new Office of the Inspector General, a watchdog agency created by voters in 2024 to investigate fraud, waste and misconduct in city government.

RAISING UNIVERSITY FEES: Florida International University is considering increasing out-of-state tuition fees, Florida State University's **Kyle Clark**, senior vice president for finance and administration, said last week as FSU joined the University of Florida in approving plans to increase costs for out-of-state students during the upcoming academic year. The FSU Board of Trustees approved 10% increases in fees charged to out-of-state students on top of the tuition charged to all students. The University of Florida Board of Trustees approved a similar proposal the day before. The increases won't affect Florida residents. FSU officials said such fees and tuition have not been increased in more than a decade, while the costs of operating the university have risen. The FSU and UF decisions came after the state university system's Board of Governors last month approved allowing universities to increase out-of-state student fees.

FUNDING METRORAIL BATHROOMS: The Citizens' Independent Transportation Trust has approved use of transportation surtax receipts to rehabilitate three Metrorail bathrooms more than three decades old, which far exceeds the typical 20-year lifespan of transit restrooms. The county says the UHealthJackson, Palmetto and Tri-Rail stations are the only ones that haven't been renovated. Delka Innovo Group would remove and replace interior finishes and fixtures; upgrade plumbing, electric and mechanical systems; install new walls, floors and ceilings; and add public-address speakers and hands-free telephones for \$576,000.

THE ACHIEVER



Eve Samples

Leading Friends of the Everglades in detention center fight
The profile is on Page 4

Promenade losing drive in safety bid

BY JANETSSY LUGO

Wheels are turning in a drive to prohibit motorized transportation on the Miami Beach Promenade, which is now shared by multiple categories of users.

The promenade, which was formerly known as Miami Beach Drive, said Miami Beach Mayor Steven Meiner in last week's commission meeting, is a "shared use pathway parallel to and west of the Beachwalk, basically from 24th to 29th streets. This would prohibit motorized vehicles similar to the Beachwalk."

The ordinance, which Mayor Meiner sponsored, passed unanimously on a preliminary vote and is set to face a final vote in September.

A commission memo accompanying the legislation says the promenade is currently used by pedestrians, bicyclists and different types of motorized and non-motorized transportation vehicles. Additionally, it says, pedestrians, "including families with young children, seniors, and individuals with mobility challenges, utilize Miami Beach Promenade."

The city administration, says the memo, determined that using "motorized means of transportation" on the promenade produces potential safety hazards for pedestrians due to the motorized transportation's speed, size and "maneuvering requirements."

Commissioner Alex Fernandez supported the legislation, saying he goes to the promenade every morning. He cited a dangerous environment created due to various factors.

"In this half a mile stretch," he said, "you have a lot of buildings that their back entrance opens right into the promenade, and that promenade is right between the back entrance of the building and usually the pool of the building. What ends up happening is that you have children that run out of the back door of those buildings, running to the pool. You have people with their dogs running from the back door of their building, running to the east side where the pool is. Mixed with that, you have north-south traffic that crosses there."

Smart Plan's first transit line to roll, but others lag

The first vehicle to carry passengers on one of the six new rapid transit corridors envisioned in Miami-Dade's Smart Plan is soon to be rolling nine years after the county adopted the plan, with the other five corridors trailing far behind.

The first corridor will not be the rail line that commissioners anticipated when they adopted the plan in 2016 but a rapid transit electric bus rolling along the 20-mile rebuilt South Dade Transitway from Dadeland to Florida City.

"In terms of the date for the launch of service..." Citizens' Independent Transportation Trust Executive Director Javier Betancourt began telling trust members last week with the hope of stating the specific date before he was detoured by the county's transit head, the timing is "late summer."

Since the start date had been delayed several times before, trust members were heartened that it had not been further shoved back.

Funding for all six corridors is to include monies collected from the half-percent transportation sales tax created in 2002 whose uses the trust oversees. That plan figures in the trust's strategic objectives for the year ahead that were unanimously adopted last week. Those objectives

include the future of the six corridors in the now-rebranded Smart Program.

Those objectives show the Northeast Corridor commuter rail project anticipated to be operating in 2032 as the second corridor to start service. The county's Department of Transportation and Public Works is working on railroad agreements for that corridor, the strategic objectives show. The recently completed state budget omitted \$200 million previously approved that was a linchpin in that corridor, which could alter the 2032 date.

The only other of the six corridors to have a completion date attached is the North Corridor elevated fixed guideway transit, still targeted to run in 2037. After a public-private partnership process for the corridor was derailed in 2022, planning, design and engineering for the corridor resumed in 2024.

Plans for the Beach Corridor met opposition from the City of Miami Beach, and more traffic analysis is underway for that corridor, which is now targeted for Metromover or a similar system. Meanwhile, the project is being viewed as three components: a trunkline from downtown Miami to Miami Beach, a Beach-run bus line to the Miami Beach Convention

Center, and a Metromover from downtown Miami to the Design District. Advertisement for a consultant is being developed for the Design District component.

The fifth corridor in the Smart Program is to be a Kendall Corridor, which is awaiting results of a bus demonstration project along Flagler Street to see if that might be the answer to the riddle of how to handle Kendall traffic congestion.

The sixth leg, the East-West Corridor from near downtown Miami to Florida International University to the west, had been envisioned as using part of the SR 836 highway right-of-way but has been reevaluated to include commuter rail. However, a study of rail instead of bus rapid transit for the corridor was sidetracked by lack of contract funds and is only now on track to begin.

The Department of Transportation and Public Works is soon to ask for transit tax funds to do the east-west study agreed upon a year ago, the trust was told last month. Until that study is done, the county has no route length or cost estimate for the east-west route, which had been planned as rapid transit buses along a 13.5-mile corridor.

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Eve Samples steers Friends of the Everglades in midst of...

When Eve Samples became executive director of Friends of the Everglades in early 2020, she wasn't new to the fight. For years, she had reported on Florida's environmental struggles from the newsroom, tracking the politics, pollution and policy decisions that put the state's water and wildlife at risk. Taking the helm at the nonprofit founded by Marjory Stoneman Douglas felt like a natural next step, a chance to move from chronicling the battles to leading them.

Ms. Samples grew up in North Miami, where South Florida's natural beauty left a lasting impression. Her curiosity and writing talent led her to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and eventually into a journalism career that spanned nearly two decades. She began at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette before returning to Florida, where she worked as an opinion editor for the USA TODAY Network-Florida, a columnist and editor for TCPalm and Treasure Coast Newspapers, and a reporter for The Palm Beach Post.

Ms. Samples cites her work as an opinion writer as the point when her focus increasingly turned to environmental issues, especially toxic discharges from Lake Okeechobee and the urgent need to restore the Everglades. So, when the Friends of the Everglades leadership role opened up in 2020, it felt like a full-circle moment. The nonprofit had been founded more than 50 years earlier by Ms. Stoneman Douglas, a fellow journalist-turned-activist whose legacy helped define the modern environmental movement in Florida.

Since then, the organization has tripled in staffing and expanded its reach across the state. In addition to translating complex environmental policies into public education campaigns and pushing lawmakers to support sound Everglades restoration, Ms. Samples and her team are now tackling high-stakes legal challenges. Among them is a lawsuit to halt construction of a federal immigration detention center in the Everglades that she says threatens to further destabilize the already fragile ecosystem.

Whether rallying supporters or pressing agencies to follow the law, Ms. Samples brings a journalist's tenacity and a conservationist's urgency to the work. Her goal: to uphold the organization's grassroots tradition with advocacy rooted in science, aimed at protecting and restoring the vast Everglades ecosystem and its interconnected web of wetlands essential to Florida's wildlife, water and future.

Ms. Samples spoke with Miami Today reporter Genevieve Bowen.

Q: How did your early path take shape?

A: I grew up in the North Miami area, went to North Dade Middle School and then North Miami Senior High School. I really appreciated the diversity of the community and the proximity to the natural beauty of Florida.

After high school, I went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. My parents had been journalists, too. My dad worked for the Miami News back when there was an afternoon paper in Miami and then worked for the Miami Herald as a copywriter. That's where he spent the rest of his career. My mom had been a journalist too before switching careers to be a social



Eve Samples retraces footsteps of Marjory Stoneman Douglas in fight for Everglades.

The Achiever

Eve Samples

Executive Director
Friends of the Everglades
eve.samples@everglades.org
Born: Miami
Education: Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and Mass Communication, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Personal Philosophy: "Be a nuisance where it counts. Do your part to inform and stimulate the public to join your action. Be depressed, discouraged, and disappointed at failure and the disheartening effects of ignorance, greed, corruption, and bad politics – but never give up."
– Marjory Stoneman Douglas.

worker. My stepmom also still works as a journalist, just doing some freelance work.

So, you could say it's a bit of a family tradition and that's what started my interest. When I went to UNC, I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a journalist. I dabbled in different areas like psychology, art history.

Then, in my junior year, I studied abroad in London. When I was over there, I wrote a piece about being an American student abroad and got paid for writing it. It was then that I caught the bug and realized that following your curiosity, expressing your feelings and thoughts and getting paid to do it was a pretty incredible way to make a living.

I returned to UNC, worked for the student newspaper there, graduated with a degree in journalism. After that, I went to Pittsburgh for the first couple of years of my career where I worked for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette before eventually returning to Florida around 2002.

Q: After you returned to Florida, how did your journalism career unfold and what sparked your interest in environmental issues like Everglades restoration?

A: I worked for 20 years in daily newspapers, doing a little bit of everything. Initially, I covered breaking news. I also

covered business and local government. During the last 10 years, I was an opinion writer and I wrote local news columns for Treasure Coast newspapers and the Gannett newspapers in Florida before going on to become an opinion editor.

When I left, I was the statewide opinion editor for the USA Today network in Florida. That time as an opinion writer was really what influenced me in terms of environmental advocacy.

One of the biggest issues in the community that I was covering was Lake Okeechobee discharges, toxic algae and that all relates to issues connected to the Everglades and the need to restore the Everglades.

So, when the opportunity arose in early 2020 to work on the front lines of Everglades advocacy, it felt very meaningful. And the more I learned about Marjory Stoneman Douglas, who founded Friends of the Everglades, who also was a former journalist, the more I became enchanted with her. It truly felt like coming full circle in my career, and the first 20 years were a lot of training for the work I'm doing now.

Q: Seeing that Marjory Stoneman Douglas was also a journalist-turned-activist, do you feel a personal connection to that parallel?

A: Anyone who's grown up in Florida at least knows of Marjory Stoneman Douglas in name, and I knew a little bit about her from growing up here. But it really wasn't until I contemplated taking this job in early 2020 that I dug into the life and times of Marjory Stoneman Douglas, and she was absolutely fascinating.

She was a pioneer in so many ways. She was a journalist back in the early 1900s and she wasn't willing to just be relegated to like the society pages the way women were during that time. She wanted to dig into media topics, and she did, and that's part of what brought her to the Everglades and environmental issues in Florida.

One of my favorite stories about Marjory is how she was assigned to write about the first woman from Florida to enlist in World War I. When she got to the recruitment office, she was told no such woman existed, so she enlisted herself and stepped up and did it. That is just so Marjory. If something

wasn't being done, she did it.

It's also why she founded Friends of the Everglades in 1969. By then, she was 79 years old and she wasn't content to just ride out her golden years passively. She was a force her entire life, and it was a long life as she lived to be 108.

Q: How did you make that shift from the newsroom to nonprofit work with Friends of the Everglades?

A: In late 2019, I became very interested in the idea of working on the front lines of environmental advocacy and was thinking about what might be a good fit for me. It felt like a stroke of fate when the executive director position at Friends of the Everglades opened up.

After I saw the opening, I discovered that I happened to know one of the board members, Blair Wickstrom, whose later father Karl Wickstrom, was also a journalist at the Miami Herald. Karl eventually went on to found Florida Sportsman Magazine, but he had schooled me on a lot of environmental issues as a journalist.

So, connecting with Blair, who's still on our board of directors, felt very meaningful. When I joined, it was at a moment when Friends of the Everglades was kind of reinventing itself. We were founded in 1969 and we had been around for 50 years by the time I came on the scene, but it still had that startup energy. It had a small but passionate staff and a lot of freedom to try things out and push the limits.

Our team has such a great North Star in Marjory. Whenever I grapple with a decision, a policy or otherwise, I think to myself, "What would Marjory do?" And the answer is always sound guidance. So, it became clear that this role was a great fit for me, and starting here has allowed for some exciting growth over the past five years.

Q: How has your role as executive director evolved and what does a typical workday look like?

A: When I started, we only had three employees, and since we've grown to nine. Our support and our fundraising have grown as well. Our digital footprint and audience have grown a lot too.

It's hard to say what a typical day for me is. Right now, we're in the midst of a legal battle against the Everglades detention center in the middle of Big Cypress National Preserve. My day to day involves a lot of speaking to our attorneys, piecing together what the impacts on the ground are through aerial images and input from scientists.

It also involves communications. We have a great, nimble, small communications team that works in the spirit of Marjory, helping people across Florida and beyond understand some of these dense Everglades policy issues. We help break the issues down for people like Marjory did in her book River of Grass in 1947, but we're doing it today on Instagram and Facebook, our email list and elsewhere.

In all, my days involve policy analysis, communication, working with our great team here at Friends of the Everglades, and also interacting with our supporters.

Q: Can you explain the organization's mission and why the Everglades are so crucial to Florida's ecosystem?

A: Our mission is to preserve, protect and

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...a legal battle over impact of immigration detention center

restore the only Everglades in the world. That mission statement is an allusion to the first line of Marjory's book, *River of Grass*. As she says, there are no other Everglades in the world. It really is a unique ecosystem.

Interestingly, people think about the Everglades as Everglades National Park, but the greater Everglades starts north of Lake Okeechobee and the Kissimmee River Valley near Orlando, reaches down to Lake Okeechobee, east and west to the Stuart area and Fort Myers and then south of the lake all the way down to the Florida Keys.

This vast ecosystem has incredible value in Florida, not just because of the remarkable species like the Florida panther and ghost orchid, but also because of its connection to our water supply in South Florida. The Everglades is our water supply, and it replenishes the aquifer.

Restoring the plumbing of the Everglades, the flow of clean water south from Lake Okeechobee is critical to protecting us in the future so that as saltwater intrusion accelerates and sea level rise accelerates, that we have a protected water supply.

The Everglades are also integral to our economy in Florida. Clean water is fundamental to our tourism-driven economy and other industries like real estate. We know it has an immense impact. Even if you don't venture out into the Everglades a whole lot, it's connected to all of our lives in South Florida and beyond into the whole state.

Q: How do you balance the variety, from grassroots outreach and media to policy work and legal advocacy?

A: It's a constant challenge. Being an executive director, you do a little bit of everything, and making sure that I'm prioritizing accurately is important. We have a strategic plan that helps guide me. We have a wonderful board of directors with various backgrounds who give me guidance as well.

When we think about our tiers of priorities, clean water is among the top. It's not just about getting water to the right place in the Everglades, the reservoirs and other mechanisms. It's also about making sure

that that water is cleaned to really stringent standards.

Decades ago, Friends of the Everglades was involved in Clean Water Act litigation that forced the state to comply with a very strict phosphorus standard for water in the Everglades, so anything clean water related in the Everglades is very close to our heart.

Then, with regard to the battle we're fighting right now with the detention center, that's reminiscent of our origin story. I mentioned Marjory was 79 when she founded Friends of the Everglades.

The reason she created a group at that age was because the jetport site was vulnerable. Back then, it was proposed for what would have been the world's largest airport, and she founded a group to stop it and plugged into a lot of good advocacy that was happening then. There was great science in forming that advocacy, and that's something else that we feel strongly about. We have to let science lead the way. Science has to be our North Star.

Q: *What's Friends of the Everglades' response to the recently opened immigration detention facility in the Everglades? What environmental concerns do you have and have you seen harmful effects so far?*

A: Friends of the Everglades and Center for Biological Diversity, our co-plaintiffs, filed a federal lawsuit June 27. The law we're suing under is the National Environmental Policy Act, which is a commonsense law that requires the government to look before it leaps when there's a federal action, and this is very clearly the state and federal government working together. No environmental analysis occurred and we're asking for an injunction to halt activities so that that can occur.

In the meantime, we have seen a number of concerning impacts out there. We have documented at least 11 acres of fresh pavement, asphalt, laid on the site. Again, no environmental impact analysis to know the impacts on surrounding Everglades wetlands. The property is more than 96% wetlands and the Everglades is a great interconnected system of wetlands, so it's

important to know what the effects are.

Another big impact we've seen since the facility started operating is lighting. There is a massive industrial light installation where you once had some of the most incredible dark skies in the southeastern United States. Now it looks like a stadium in the distance. That's another big concern.

We're also concerned about traffic impacts, noise, pesticide application and a whole host of activities out there, which is why we need the analysis.

I'll just add that, in addition to the June 27 lawsuit, on July 11 we filed a notice of intent to sue under the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, and what's called the National Parks Organic Act, which requires our government to take care of our national parks and preserves. With those laws, you have to give a 60-day notice. We have been eagerly awaiting a decision.

On July 16, the judge we were assigned to recused himself, [US District] Judge [Jose] Martinez. We have been reassigned to [US District] Judge [Kathleen] Williams, and there is a hearing on July 21. [Judge Williams at that hearing denied issuing an immediate order pending an Aug. 6 hearing.]

Q: What would you urge lawmakers and federal agencies to consider when proposing or approving major infrastructure projects in such an ecologically sensitive area?

A: There's been an immense state and federal investment into Everglades restoration. Billions of dollars have been spent trying to restore this vital ecosystem that mankind damaged decades ago, generations ago, so we need to make sure that we're not undercutting that massive investment by launching damaging projects without a complete analysis of the impacts.

That's true at the detention center. That's also true farther north, at a rock mine we've been fighting on 8,600 acres in the Everglades agricultural area. We're also concerned about the impacts there.

It's also true elsewhere across the ecosystem. We've seen development encroaching

on our last remaining green spaces in the greater Everglades. We've seen a disregard for some of these environmental laws that we hold sacrosanct.

After the original jetport fight in 1969, then we saw the first Earth Day, the Endangered Species Act was implemented and the Clean Water Act. There's this whole host of environmental protections that came to be in the early 1970s after that fight. That fight was just one reason that those came to be.

Now, there's this moment of perhaps environmental unraveling, and the question is, will that fabric hold that we stitched together as a country back then? That's very much on my mind right now.

Q: Given these current challenges, how can we continue Marjory Stoneman Douglas's mission with hope and determination for the future?

A: A lot of people are asking, is it too late to stop this since the detention center is already up and running? We can find hope in that previous battle with the jetport. That fight was won after a massive, 10,000-foot runway was built.

Imagine if we had given up after that initial pavement was laid. The whole rest of the airport would have been built. It would have been a total disaster for the Everglades that we probably couldn't have come back from. It's not too late to reverse course on the detention center. Every passing day brings more impacts. We can still halt this, examine the impacts, look at alternatives and make a better decision.

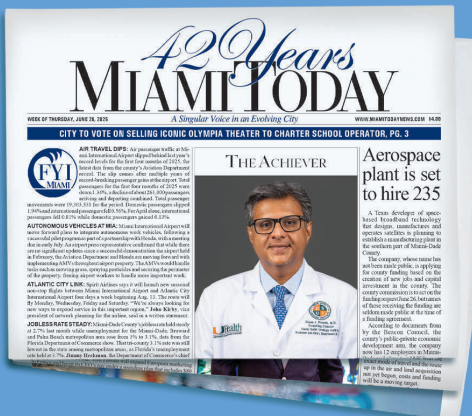
Q: For you, what does success look like for Friends of the Everglades over the next 5 to 10 years?

A: Continuing our history of advocacy through grassroots advocacy, litigation, and all of it led by science so that we can protect and restore what remains of this incredible ecosystem.

More than half of the Everglades has been drained and developed over the decades, and success will look like protecting what remains and implementing meaningful restoration with clean water and protected green spaces that so many of us cherish.

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WEEK OF THURSDAY, JANUARY 14, 2016

CITY TO VOTE ON SELLING CANAL OLYMPIA THEATER TO CHARTER SCHOOL OPERATOR Pg. 3

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