

38 Years MIAMI TODAY

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TWIN 60-STORY TOWERS ON EDGEWATER BAYFRONT WIN MIAMI BOARD'S OK, PG. 3



OVER THE TOP: Are prices of residences spiraling out of control at the top end? A report this week by Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices/EWM Realty puts it in perspective: while a total of five single-family homes in Miami-Dade County sold above \$10 million in the second quarter of 2019 and the same number in the second quarter of 2020, in the second quarter of this year “there were 51 sales, a 920% increase over the same period in 2019 and

2020.” In the second quarter of 2019 three condos sold at \$10 million and up, then four in the second quarter last year – and 28 this year, up 833% from 2019 and 600% from 2020. Buyers of those ultra-high-end residences? “We have seen individuals in the financial sector from the Northeast as a chief consumer of these opulent estates and penthouse residences, along with celebrities and other high-net-worth individuals.”

HOSPITALITY CONSTRAINTS: Greater Miami had 116,000 workers in hospitality in June, compared to 144,100 in June 2019, before the pandemic, representing a loss of 19.5% of the workforce. However, compared with June 2020, with 96,600 hospitality workers, the county showed a 19.7% increase. Although employment numbers might have risen over the course of one year, that still leaves a gap of at least 28,000 jobs in the industry. On the other side of the coin, the national STR report from the first week of June shows Miami had the largest increase in occupancy in the nation, reaching 77.1% while the US averaged 61.9%. Occupancy levels continued to rise in July and for the week ending July 17, one in every five hotels in the US filled more than 90% of available rooms. While people continue to travel during summer, the hospitality industry may be facing difficulties as employment numbers still trail pre-pandemic levels.

UNEMPLOYMENT RISES: Unemployment rose to 7.1% of Miami-Dade’s workforce in June, up from 6.7% in May, new figures from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics reveal. The number of unemployed persons in the county rose from 88,800 in May to 93,200 in June, while the total civilian labor force declined by 2,000 persons in the period. For Florida as a whole, unemployment inched up from 4.9% to 5% in the one-month span. The largest job decline by percentage in Miami-Dade in June was in construction, which lost 900 jobs in the county during the month, a 6.3% decline. The biggest job gain percentage by far was in leisure and hospitality, which added 2,300 jobs in the month, a 19.7% gain, as the sector continued to recover from the covid plunge.

GAS PRICE DIPS: Miami gas prices fell eight-tenths of a cent per gallon last week to average \$2.98, according to GasBuddy’s price tracking.

THE ACHIEVER



Photo by Marlene Quaroni

Liliam López
President of South Florida Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
The profile is on Page 4

State’s own expressway team stalled

BY GABRIELA HENRIQUEZ STOIKOW

Almost four months have passed since the first meeting of the Greater Miami Expressway Authority (GMX) took place April 9 and the public officials don’t have a second meeting in sight. Florida Department of Transportation spokeswoman Tish Burgher told Miami Today that “there are no meetings scheduled at this time.”

The authority was created in mid-2019 when Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill that dissolved the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority (MDX) and gave control of the five roads it controls to GMX. MDX then sued the state. The case remains in court and a resolution to the conflict is yet to be found.

The roads in dispute are Gratigny Parkway (924) and the Airport (112), Dolphin (836), Don Shula (874) and Snapper Creek expressways, which function in Miami-Dade County alone. They are currently operated by MDX as the case comes to an end.

At its first meeting, GMX board members were introduced and sworn in at the auditorium of the department’s District Six headquarters. The seats taken at that time included three appointees from the governor: real estate and corporate attorney Marili Cancio, investment banker Rodolfo Pages and Koch Industries lobbyist Fatima Perez.

It is unknown if the authority has all its seats filled. The remaining members of the nine-seat GMX board are county-appointed, two by the Miami-Dade County Commission and three by the Miami-Dade Transportation Planning Organization. On May 4 Miami-Dade commissioners voted to invoke the county’s home rule rights and “abolish” the state-created GMX, giving its back to MDX.

The Miami-Dade expressway authority continues to run the tollways although its ability to operate has been compromised. At a recent board meeting, MDX’s Deputy Director and Chief Financial Officer Marie T. Schafer said the agency had \$170 million in lost opportunities due to its inability to refinance bonds.

A legal resolution is still pending and, in the meantime, both GMX and MDX have their existence at stake.

Embattled expressway authority sells properties

BY GABRIELA HENRIQUEZ STOIKOW

Eighteen surplus parcels of land near State Road 112 acquired for a now-dead highways project are to be sold by the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority (MDX) as the organization fights against the state for its own life in court.

The authority’s board of directors, which met last week, OK’d the transaction and expects revenues of over \$14.3 million from the sale.

The parcels were purchased in support of the State Road 836/State Road 112 Interconnector Project incorporated into the authority’s 2002-2006 MDX work program. “At this time, the Interconnector Project is no longer viable and the project was ultimately removed from the board approved FY 2017-2021 MDX Work Program,” reads the agenda item report dealing with the land sale plans.

The document also explains that the parcels are no longer needed in connection with the construction, operation or maintenance of the MDX system. Thus, the authority is proceeding with the sale of the land. The sale would eliminate the burden on MDX of managing and maintaining the properties, which implies

■ **Authority asks for state toll rebate, pg. 9**
■ **68,267 qualify for tolling refunds, pg. 10**

“unnecessary associated maintenance costs,” the documents state.

The sale approved would be “As Is” and Florida statutes require public notice and competitive bidding. Under these conditions, the “As Is” bidding would require purchasers “at their sole expense, to perform and pay for all real estate brokerage costs, legal fees, and all due diligence activities.” Among them are property inspections (building, site and environmental), financial feasibility analysis, surveying, titling and zoning.

The funds obtained from the sale of the 18 parcels would have been used as required by the MDX Trust Indenture. This document states that the proceeds of any land sale “shall be applied to the replacement of the property” sold and any property “acquired as such replacement shall become a part of the System... or such proceeds shall be deposited to the credit of the Revenue Fund.”

Although MDX is battling in court to maintain its own existence after Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill dissolving and supplanting MDX

with the Greater Miami Expressway Agency (GMX) in 2019, a Dec. 16, 2020, court order states that until a governing body finally is in place, to ensure the safety of Miami-Dade County and the traveling public that uses the expressways system, and to be in compliance with the authority’s bond obligations, MDX “will be allowed to operate subject to and consistent with MDX policies in effect on June 30, 2019.”

Also, the court document authorized MDX personnel to continue with those actions necessary to operate, maintain and ensure safety of the system, which includes “procurement of goods and services through agreements and extensions of agreements related to safety projects specifically enumerated in the Work Program.”

Authority Treasurer Luz Weinberg said at the meeting that “all of these parts [parcels] were purchased after the transfer agreement with the Department of Transportation. So, these are all 100% MDX.” In 1996 the agency received from the Florida Department of Transportation the rights to obtain operational and financial control of its five expressways. The parcels for sale were not part of that transaction.

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Liliam Lopez heads the South Florida Hispanic Chamber...

Liliam Lopez's first inclination after college was to pursue a law degree. After all, she'd already attained certification in paralegal studies. But a friend convinced her to apply for a top role with a Miami nonprofit.

The rest is history.

As an early 20-something, Ms. Lopez became executive director of the Spanish American League Against Discrimination, a nonprofit that since 1974 has fought for equal treatment of Hispanics in housing, employment, education and immigration in South Florida.

She learned from Dr. Osvaldo Soto, the organization's founding chairman and father of Chief Judge Berlita Soto. Under his guidance and that of Dr. Eduardo Padrón, president emeritus of Miami Dade College, she honed the skills she'd later use as co-founder, president and CEO of the South Florida Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (SFLHCC).

"Imagine me with this energy, working for those two extraordinary men who empowered and taught me everything I had to learn," she said. "Later, it was easy to start an organization from scratch."

The confidence they instilled in her, which she reinforced through her work, was crucial. Discrimination against immigrants and minorities was prevalent at the time. It was even more so against women. That remains the case in many ways today, she said.

In 1994, after quitting the Spanish American League to take care of her mother, who had fallen ill, she founded the SFLHCC. Friends and associates called for its creation, she said, and she answered the call.

"I never thought in my wildest dreams it was going to grow and become what it is today," she said. "That's how life is."

Today, the chamber has a \$650,000 annual budget. Ms. Lopez said it serves about 1,600 individual members, some 75 companies and regularly reaches tens of thousands of people through social media and its programming, including "A Business Minute with Liliam Lopez," which is something of a spiritual successor to her prior TV work on WLRN and is one of several programs the chamber launched to help the community during the pandemic.

Guests include companies and politicians both local and national, including a former Florida governor and current senator, Rick Scott.

"It helped us generate revenue in the almost three months we were closed," she said. "It's become so popular now that we have a waiting list of people wanting to sponsor it."

Ms. Lopez spoke by phone with Miami Today reporter Jesse Scheckner.

Q: You spoke in another interview about living through a time when Hispanics weren't as respected as they are today. What has it been like seeing that change here in Miami?

A: Much more needs to happen, particularly for Hispanic women. Back then, my own city of Miami Beach didn't have any administrators, no elected officials, of Hispanic descent. The first was Assistant City Manager Joe Piñon, and it was because Dr. Soto pushed so much for that and so many different things.

We've seen things evolve. There are



Photo by Marlene Quaroni

Liliam Lopez was fast in bringing live events back to the South Florida Hispanic Chamber.

The Achiever

Liliam López

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Personal Philosophy: "Always persevere,
never take no for an answer and just be
yourself. Be authentic."

Hispanic presidents of organizations today. Twenty-five years ago, that was not the case. But it's been harder for Hispanic women.

I don't see a Hispanic woman president of a bank, CPA firm or huge law firm. There may be partners, but I don't see Hispanic women being on corporate boards at levels they should be locally and nationally.

I don't see Hispanics included in selection committees as they should for organizations important to our community. And when you see people that are appointed, you should still have more Hispanic representation to reflect the numbers here — 70% Hispanic.

There is still a need to improve. It's been difficult for many years to be taken seriously because I'm a woman. How many of our chambers are run by women?

It's harder to be taken seriously as a woman, especially when you're happy, sweet and nice. That doesn't mean you're not firm, capable or qualified. But there's a perception you have to be extremely tough to be taken seriously.

I'm not that way. I'm tough when I have to be, but the woman I am is the person who came from Cuba at 3 years old who's caring, loves the community and likes to do free events for people.

Q: Aside from membership fees, what is the chamber's largest source of funding?

A: The sponsorship of events we have. We have a big following. Our events are educational, but they're really fun because we're Hispanic.

People come to our events and have a great time. The networking is usually 45 minutes to an hour. It's very much Hispanic time.

We'll let people network 12 to 12:45 p.m. By the time they sit down for their meal and for the program and speakers, it's around 1 p.m. But we get everyone out by 2 p.m.

We have a lot of sponsors with the "Business Minute" show and advertising on our website. We have grants here and there, but nothing significant.

A lot of people support the chamber, both big and small businesses. Our dues for small businesses are only \$250. You can't tell me a tiny mom-and-pop can pay more than that.

We have a lot of trustees and corporate partners. We have membership categories up to \$20,000. That will include membership and sponsorship of several events.

By having different membership categories, you can serve businesses that are not represented because they can't afford it otherwise or can't leave their shop to go to an event.

They want to be part of an organization and be involved in a Zoom call or by coming to networking receptions we do that are free for members. They need access, and we provide that by charging a reasonable membership fee.

As a chamber of commerce, you're supposed to represent small businesses. My mission is to help those people who are the backbone of the community.

Q: A trend I've seen in talks with other chamber heads is that getting younger members to join, millennials and now Gen Z, has been tough. Is that the case with your chamber as well?

A: Yes. We do have a Young Leaders Network. It's only 25, 30 people for now. We started that before the pandemic and were growing it. Then the pandemic hit, so now we're doing reception for them.

It's been easier now after the pandemic. It was harder before to recruit. Now many are coming to me, asking to meet. I've seen

a change. It's becoming easier. Maybe they realized after this that being active as a young professional provides a lot of opportunities.

At the same time, you have to learn from those who have lived already. I've seen how difficult it is to make it. Sometimes the younger generation hasn't gone through the struggles many of us did.

They're sometimes sons and daughters of affluent people, so it's been easier for them. But it's interesting to see such a change these last four months. That's why we're doing a reception.

Sometimes the younger people think they know it all, like when I worked with Drs. Soto and Padrón. They explained things to me. I loved it so much, and these young people need that too.

We're trying to do a program where our older members mentor the younger ones. They do mentoring because they're already retired, but they've held tough positions and some have had quite interesting lives that I know the younger generation will like.

We want to do more storytelling luncheons, which was an idea of Felipe Basulto. We did it before the pandemic, brought a young man from Minnesota who was called the Donut Guy. It was a storytelling about how he became a young entrepreneur. That lunch had close to 200 people. The pandemic started after that. We want to do more of those.

My goal now is to bring people who are professionally established, have made it, may have already sold their business or retired and contributed to our community, and have them talk.

Q: How did the chamber respond to the challenges of the pandemic in terms of new programming and events?

A: We definitely pivoted to Zoom and did it successfully. Every two or three weeks we had a conference. We had [US Rep.] Carlos Giménez. Sen. Marco Rubio talked about PPP. We partnered with Univision, which is a great supporter of the chamber.

We worked on PPP with the SBA. We are dealing with the schools and what the future of the classroom will be like with Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, whom I admire very much.

Our Hispanic Heritage celebration, Viva Miami, which we've been doing for 15 years, we did via Zoom, and it came out pretty nice. But then we started seeing people beginning to not like Zoom. You got Zoom fatigue.

I told the board we needed to do a live event. So, in October we did our annual Breast Cancer Awareness Month signature lunch, which is always presented by our women's committee, the Hispanic Women's Society Network.

It's a nice lunch. We call it Passionately Pink. We dress in pink and the men wear pink ties or whatever. We bring a panel of doctors. Dr. Joseph Lamelas was the keynote speaker. Different hospitals participate.

There were lots of precautions. I think we were the only chamber up until now to do live events. We did them in October November and December, when we had our holiday toy drive.

February, we did heart disease awareness. In April, we did the Hispanic

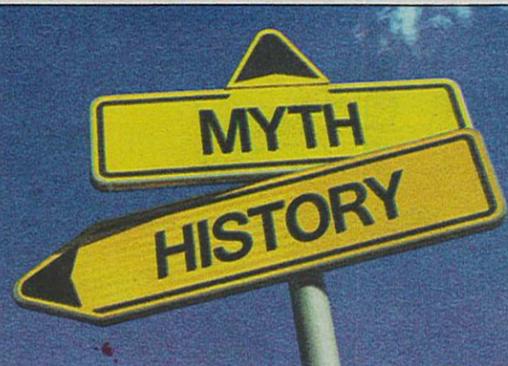
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MIAMI TODAY



...targeting more representation of Hispanics in leadership

Leadership Awards, which is usually in November. We had 150 people. We usually have 450, but 150 wasn't bad.

We honored Adrienne Arsh, who came from Washington, DC, to accept the award. We had Mayor Daniella Levine Cava and Mayor Francis Suarez.

So, we pivoted. We did the "Business Minute with Liliam Lopez," a virtual show that has been very successful. We're still doing that. It's going to be part of our weekly programming.

Q: Can you tell me about the recently announced Elevate Together grant program the SFLHCC is involved with?

A: We're fortunate that Office Depot selected five Hispanic chambers in the US, and we were one of them. That speaks highly of what we do and how our name is recognized nationally.

They came to us. We recommend from our pool of small businesses a company that has to have less than five employees. They, with us, do a selection committee, and they interview with us the people who are finalists.

They choose with us who wins \$10,000. At the last event on April 30, we and Office Depot gave it to two small businesses, \$20,000 altogether. And soon, this other quarter, we'll announce two also very small businesses that will get \$5,000 each—then something similar next quarter.

It's extremely important, what they're doing. There's a lot of need. Hispanic small businesses have suffered, more so Hispanic women-owned businesses.

By the time this article comes out, two Hispanic women-owned small businesses will receive grants. Also, in October, we gave 10 grants of \$1,450 to small businesses.

Q: In April, a poll your chamber sponsored found most Floridians don't want limits on what social media can censor online and revealed broad distrust in companies like Amazon, Google, Twitter and Facebook. You pointed to small businesses as being especially hurt by social media censorship. Can you expand on that?

A: We have members that, when they

push things on social media—when they write or publish something that social media doesn't like—they're de-platformed.

There was a member of the chamber who posted something politically related, nothing major. He was just putting some type of speech by a Republican candidate or elected official. They blocked him for two weeks.

This was a nice guy with a small company. He does shows, talks about Cuba and the suffering of people still under the Castro dictatorship. And he was de-platformed.

Another member put something up about science. That happened to me too. I recently spoke to Gilead, a company that deals with science.

When I posted it on Facebook with a message saying I was happy to be a keynote speaker for the Hispanic employees of that company and copied from their website what they do, that they had developed remdesivir, Facebook immediately placed a disclaimer up saying remdesivir is not FDA-approved or something like that.

Vaccines are not FDA-approved either. So, I don't like that. You could see that in the poll. Even with people who were not members, the response was, "We don't like censorship." It's controlling.

Of course, social media companies are private, and you can say they can do what they want, but at the same time there is some sort of responsibility to not be biased.

It concerns me tremendously as a Cuban American, seeing what happened in Cuba. That type of censorship is bad. If you allow people like the guy from Iran to say, "Death to America," and even Nicolás Maduro from Venezuela, why would you de-platform someone with a small business for a couple weeks for posting something that deals with Cuba?

I believe in freedom of speech. I believe in our First Amendment right to freedom of speech, but it seems to be whatever the narrative is. If some social media likes what you say, it's OK. But if what you're saying is something they don't like, tough luck.

Q: Your chamber does a lot for high school students. Can you tell me about that?

A: My mom, grandmother and grandfather were all teachers. I said that while I'm not going to be a teacher, I want to contribute to education. So, I started a foundation to do that.

We started small in 1996, gave \$500 a year to six students in the hospitality industry. We started to grow and were able to, with a grant from United Healthcare, also give scholarships toward the healthcare industry.

Those were more significant, six scholarships at \$5,000 each. We did that for four years, but they changed their criteria and decided to just grant national organizations. That's wrong, I say to any company, "Don't do that. It doesn't trickle down."

So, we didn't do any more health-related careers, which is important for Hispanics. Hispanics are behind in STEM programs, health and all types of engineering careers. But that's another story.

We continued with our hospitality scholarships. Then we started a unique program with Southwest Airlines 15 years ago, the Education Enrichment Program.

We select 10 students to travel. The foundation pays for hotels and meals, and Southwest gives us tickets. These are very financially disadvantaged students in the hospitality industry.

My board and I find a partner, like Coca-Cola, who will do one full day of activities. We'll have speakers talk about leadership and different things. I always ask that they bring me members of minority groups so that the students, who are Hispanic and African American, can see themselves reflected in these people.

The students have to be in a paid lunch program. That's a criterion I brought. I saw students trying to participate, Googled their address and could see that they're not financially disadvantaged.

We've been to Dallas, Seattle, San Francisco. I've taken students to Congress, the White House, New York. Macy's headquarters hosted us for their parade. Philadelphia Comcast hosted us. Facebook, Microsoft, Boeing and of course Southwest have hosted us.

Steve Goldberg, who's probably the

second-most important person at Southwest besides the president, took his time to be with us. It was a fully day of activities. We even used flight simulators. Can you imagine that experience for students?

I'm very proud of the foundation. As president, I don't receive any compensation. My staff doesn't either. We work for free. That is our donation to education, and we're happy to do it.

We also have paid internships. One former intern now works [in tourism] for [Collier] County. One is now national sales director for Diesel watches. There are a lot of success stories.

I want to do a get-together with them all and do a video so people can see how impactful it can be. There was one girl who lived in affordable housing, worked with me for four years and today has a very nice job. There are so many others like her.

We weren't able to do the trip this year, so we did a leadership contest and gave scholarship money toward students' college. We did a virtual competition.

Now I think we'll be able to take the students to Chicago in October.

Q: Legislative advocacy is also a big part of what the chamber does, and the chamber's chairman, Roland Sanchez-Medina, told Miami Today in December that there were plans to increase that activity. Has that happened yet?

A: Yes. We do a lot with the state legislature and work closely with a communications company that is a member of the chamber. We support legislation—and it goes through our board, of course—that we think is important.

We supported two or three pieces of legislation this year. Now we're scheduling a debrief with the delegation so members can ask questions and find out what's happening.

Q: What do you consider to be your greatest achievement?

A: Having my daughter and being able to be a mom. My daughter is 20. She's on a scholarship to study engineering at UM.

I was told when I was young that I wasn't able to have children. Then out of the blue I could.

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Health update August 19

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