

Miami Herald

MARIACHIS HELP OPEN NEW PARK

ELYSA BATISTA

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Miami-Dade Parks kicked off the opening of its newest addition Saturday with mariachis, Mexican food and a hot-air balloon - all while fighting off rain and mosquitoes. But the dreary day did not stop residents from enjoying the celebration. "We came to see the opening," said Vanessa Godinez, 12, who went with her family.

Cinco de Mayo Park, named after the Mexican holiday, is located at 19350 SW 384th St. in Florida City, just three miles from the entrance to Everglades National Park. And it is a far cry from what used to dot the landscape. "The site was originally an emergency mobile home park for area agricultural migrant workers right after Hurricane Andrew," said Steve Kirk, the Everglades Community Association's executive director.

After Andrew in 1992, more than 900 mobile homes housed those hardest hit by the storm. Now they are down to the last 65 motor homes. While the park was being developed, the Everglades Village community was going up around the park, providing more than 443 new apartments. The park is expected to provide recreational activities for Everglades Village residents, who are predominantly migrant and seasonal farm workers of Mexican-American descent.

"The community is very excited about this new park," said Miami-Dade Parks Director Vivian Donnell Rodriguez. "It represents a place where area families can come together for relaxing strolls, picnics, Little League games and countless special events." And the residents of Everglades Village agree. "It's really good for the children and for us," said Ana Quiroz, 31, who brought along her kids for the opening festivities. "They now have a place to play."

According to Kirk, the village has more than 800 children ranging in age from infants to 18-years-olds. "It's a dream," said Juanita de la Cruz, a representative of Miami-Dade County Public Schools who attended the ceremony. The park, a joint effort of Miami-Dade Parks, the United States Department of Agriculture and the Everglades Community Association, was funded with \$239,000 from the Safe Neighborhood Park Bond, \$100,000 from the National Football League charities and local corporations, along with \$250,000 from the We Will Rebuild Foundation and the United States Department of Agriculture.

Spanning 10 acres, the park not only boasts the typical installations such as picnic tables and benches but also a football and soccer field and a baseball diamond. In addition, the park also features two sand volleyball courts and a basketball court. Plans for the park include renovating an existing building and constructing a new outdoor stage. "The park building was once a laundromat for the community," Kirk said. "This will be remodeled to create office space for staff and a place where children can gather for indoor activities," Kirk said. "The outdoor stage will showcase everything from Halloween costume contests to Easter egg hunts to Cinco de Mayo celebrations."

Vanessa said although she will be enjoying the events and playing basketball and soccer at the park, she is still hoping it will someday offer a place to cool off in the summer. "I'd like a pool," she said.