

Miami Herald

EDITORIAL: DON'T RUIN A GOOD THING

Herald Staff

June 7, 1994

The residents of Naranja Lakes and environs -- living in a square mile of South Dade in not much better shape than the day after Hurricane Andrew -- often feel like the storm's forgotten victims. Their self-interests -- some legitimate -- now threaten careful plans to house temporarily other oft-ignored residents: migrant farmworker families.

In January the Metro Commission approved a \$4 million purchase of the Royal Colonial Mobile Home Park, a 42-acre property in Leisure City flattened by Andrew. The park would house about 300 families for three years while 575 permanent rental units for migrant workers are built in deep South Dade next to the Dade Correctional Center.

When Andrew decimated the migrants' camps and seasonal housing stock, the U.S. Department of Agriculture agreed to put up \$40 million to build a housing complex that will include a health center, child care facility, community building, and police substation. An extraordinary amount of intergovernmental hard work and goodwill has been expended on this project. It will be built by the nonprofit Everglades Community Association.

All was going according to plan until mid-April. Then Metro Commissioner Larry Hawkins, whose district contains Royal Colonial Park, changed his mind and tried to derail the process after a town hall meeting in Naranja Lakes, also called the "Dead Zone." Residents fear that migrant families will make life worse. They worry about crime and that Metro will convert the site to public housing later.

There is also resentment: It appears that migrants have gotten more government attention since Andrew than have Naranja taxpayers. It's not that simple. A main cause of Naranja Lakes's woes are the legal holdups relating to insurance policies carried by the area's condominium associations. Until they're resolved, no large scale demolition and reconstruction can occur. However, this area needs more attention from all Metro departments -- notably Police, Public Works, and Solid Waste. Adding 300 wage-earning families -- and only job-holders are eligible for this migrant program -- could aid the area's struggling businesses. The ECA's lease with Metro promises extra security, to provide social services and recreation to cut crime among juveniles, and additional landscaping. Searching for an alternate site now would hike costs.

The Metro Commission must give this vital project the go-ahead today. More delays in beginning construction of the permanent housing site could jeopardize \$20 million of the USDA's \$40 million grant. Given this project's exceptional quality, that would be an unforgivable government error.