

Miami Herald

OPINION: MIGRANTS MUST STAY ON BOARD

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Four months ago, a 14-member board of deep South Dade growers, migrants, ministers and businessmen took over operation of the 400-trailer Everglades Migrant Labor Camp south of Florida City. The camp was hastily developed by Metro nine years ago to cope with a migrant housing crisis and a smallpox epidemic. Last summer, Metro commissioners voted to stop operating the migrant camp, saying it was costing taxpayers too much to subsidize.

Metro agreed to lease the camp to the Everglades Community Association for \$1 a year. The association's 14-member board is responsible for camp maintenance, security, rent collections and making quarterly payments of nearly \$59,000 on a \$2-million federal loan given Metro two years ago to purchase 200 new trailers. As reported in the March 31 Neighbors cover story, the board is doing an excellent job meeting the mortgage payments. It has a strict pay-the-rent policy. Anyone who falls two months behind gets an eviction notice. It has leased more than one-fourth of the camp's trailers directly to growers who guarantee the rents in exchange for being able to bring in their own picking crews. Unfortunately, the board has been less responsible in its maintenance responsibilities. In its zeal to save money, it cut out special Metro police patrols through the camp. At the same time, it did away with Metro's families-only policy and permitted growers to bring crews of single men into the camp.

Repeated requests for security patrols from the four migrant camp residents elected to the board went unheeded -- until a man was murdered in the camp last month. And, despite a requirement that migrants have representation upon the camp's governing board, the meetings are conducted in English with only token attempts at translation -- while the migrants speak Spanish. "This isn't Mexico, you know," is the way one English-speaking board member brushed aside the issue. Such insensitivity is absurd. Not only does it make a mockery out of electing migrants to the board; it personally insults those who were elected. Worse, it has created ill will throughout the camp, setting migrants against management, rather than making them a part of it.

And, when the migrant board members asked for an open meeting at the camp so residents could make their feelings known, other board members rejected the plan. "Some of the board members didn't want to go down there because of the negative reaction in the past," board member William Chambers told Herald Staff Writer Susan Faludi. "They feared a cross-burning type of thing." The next board meeting is at 7 p.m. Thursday in the First National Bank of Homestead. At that time, the four migrant representatives say they will resign since they have no real voice on the board. That would be unfortunate. It is time the majority of board members started building better bridges of understanding in the camp. To accept the migrants' resignations would only burn the bridges.