

Miami schools face wave of opposition from neighbors

Eric Kalis

Floridians have long fought to keep landfills, high-tension electric lines and other objectionable infrastructure away from their neighborhoods. Now, the not-in-my-backyard list is increasingly including schools — mainly because of what residents fear they'll see from their front yards: streets clogged with traffic.

Although Miami-Dade County has a pressing need for more schools, traffic congestion is the focus of two attempts to overturn the city approval of the proposed Brickell Preparatory Academy, a publicly funded charter school. Two developers and residents who live near the project site within The Roads neighborhood have been fighting over the proposed school that would serve as many as 1,700 students.

Miami commissioners on Dec. 16 delayed voting on appeals of the initial zoning board approval that would allow the school to be built in the largely residential area. The commissioners told attorneys for Miami-based Academica, which wants to build the school, and school opponents to come to a deal concerning the size of the school by next month.

But the sides are way off on how many students the school, which would be located next to Interstate 95 on a dead-end street, should serve. One foe, Miami Roads Neighborhood Civic Association, wants Academica to limit the enrollment to 400 students.

Other opponents, developer 701 Brickell Condominium and Peacock Development, would agree to an enrollment of 600 students with the possibility of expanding the student body to 900 if certain "traffic mitigation benchmarks" are met over a four-year span, according to Miami attorney Amy Huber, who along with attorney John Shubin represents the developers.

Negotiations with both groups are continuing, according to Miami attorney Antonio Roca, president of the board of Directors at Mater Academy. Mater is a Hialeah Gardens-based nonprofit that runs charter schools serving about 7,000 students in Miami-Dade County. It would run Brickell Preparatory on behalf of Academica.

Roca said Mater and Academica have proposed several ideas to cut the traffic impact by more than half without necessarily reducing enrollment. Possible measures include a shuttle service to pick up and drop off students, staggered arrival and dismissal times for different grade levels and a phased opening of the school over a four-year span, adding a grade to the high school each year.

"We are committed to having constructive discussions with the neighbors to address their concerns while meeting both Mater's fiscal requirements, the state's [curriculum] requirements and the neighbors' desires," Roca said. "It's not 1,700 students or nothing."

The conflict over Brickell Preparatory underscores the challenge of building or expanding schools without angering nearby residents, said attorney Stanley Price, a partner and land-use attorney at Bilzin Sumberg Baena Price & Axelrod in Miami.

"There is no more vexing land-use issue than the placement of schools," Price said. "The issue that touches a nerve [with residents] is traffic. There's a recognition that for a 15- to 20-minute period of time each day there will be congestion."

Price is not involved in the Brickell Preparatory Academy appeals but represents Palmer Trinity Private School in a zoning dispute with Palmetto Bay over a proposed expansion of that school.

Palmer sought site-plan approval for a 1,150-student school on 33 acres zoned for residential use next to its existing 22-acre campus. The Palmetto Bay Village Council approved the school's application but reduced the student enrollment to 900, saying the school's studies failed to show that traffic would not be hurt by the larger enrollment. The school

appealed, claiming the council's decision to cut the enrollment size was arbitrary. The case is pending in Miami-Dade Circuit Court's Appellate Division.

Surge In Residents

Academica president Fernando Zulueta and his wife, Maggie Fresen, conceived Brickell Preparatory Academy as a response to the surge of new residents in Miami's downtown and Brickell areas. Initial plans called for a 78-classroom, seven-story building on Southwest Second Avenue between 17th Road and Interstate 95 in The Roads. A 146-space parking garage across the street would include a rooftop gymnasium.

While every Miami commissioner has expressed support for construction of Brickell Preparatory, a 1,700-student school on three parcels totaling 0.31-acre is like to "trying to put a size-14 foot inside a size-7 shoe," said City Commissioner Marc Sarnoff.

"There is a need for a school," Sarnoff said during an interview. "But it can't be at the expense of the people [who live nearby]. Having almost 2,000 students in this location does not seem like a workable solution."

A phased opening, with an initial enrollment of about 400 students, might be the most viable solution, said Commissioner Frank Carrollo, whose district includes The Roads.

"If I had to vote right now, I would grant the appeals; 1,700 students is way too much," Carrollo said.

Even if the school gets the green light at 1,700 students, the facility won't likely be enough to keep up with the influx of new residents in the central business district.

Baby Carriages

Alternative ideas for additional schools in or near the district must be considered, according to Alyce Robertson, executive director of the Miami Downtown Development Authority. The only charter school in that area is Downtown Miami Charter School at 305 NW Third Ave. It mainly serves the Overtown community.

"I see a lot of baby carriages around [the district], and eventually those babies will need schools to go to," Robertson said.

With a scarcity of developable land, "we have to acknowledge future schools will be vertical more than horizontal to meet the needs of the population."

One of Price's longtime clients, developer Tibor Hollo, suggested during the real estate boom of the last decade that schools could be incorporated into high-rise residential buildings in the central business district.

"It has been done in many urban areas," Price said. "Building a school into an apartment building is one way of lessening traffic and providing walkability to many residents."

Sarnoff said he is brainstorming potential partnerships with Miami Dade College and Florida International University to incorporate lower schools into their downtown campuses. They could be patterned after the New World School of the Arts on Northeast Second Street in Miami's downtown. The high school operates in a midrise, 141,000-square-foot building on a 0.46-acre site. Unlike Brickell Preparatory or Palmer Trinity, most of its students use public transportation to travel to and from school.

A Miami Dade College spokeswoman was unavailable for comment. Messages left with a Florida International University spokeswoman were not returned.

"We shouldn't turn a blind eye" to having a college, high school and grammar school in the same vicinity," Sarnoff said. "I'm looking for a collaborative effort to find out if there can be some synergy."