

MIAMI TODAY

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY NEARS PRE-PANDEMIC APPLICATIONS LEVEL, pg. 8



MELREESE DEVELOPMENT: "It is potentially 99 years of opportunities for District 5," said Miami City Commissioner **Christine King** about the Miami Freedom Park project seeking a 99-year lease with the City of Miami at the Melreese golf course next to Miami International Airport. In an interview with Miami Today on Tuesday, she hinted she was still unsure about her vote and said she was in favor of soccer coming to Miami but it "has to make sense for my community." Later that day, the decision on the project in which she is likely to be the swing vote was delayed from this week until April 28. The project includes a 25,000-seat stadium, hotel rooms, office buildings, retail space, soccer fields over a parking structure, and a 58-acre public park. "I recognize soccer is the most popular sport in the world and we are trying to brand Miami as an international city but it has to make sense for the residents of District 5 as well," she said. Commissioner King noted the project would affect the entire city of Miami, thus, "I have to make sure that the residents of District 5 also benefit and prosper if this development moves forward."

ISRAEL CONNECTION: Mayor **Daniella Levine Cava** signed on Tuesday a renewed Sister Seaport Agreement between PortMiami and the Port of Haifa Eshel Armony in Israel. The agreement aims to fortify the ports' commitment to collaborate in initiatives to increase cargo and cruise activity. "Miami-Dade and Haifa both rely on a healthy shipping industry. As a result of this accord, both ports will collaborate to strengthen the commercial relationship and share best practices," the mayor said in a press statement. In 2017 Miami-Dade County established a non-binding International Sister Seaports Agreement between both ports. Since then, PortMiami has seen an increase of 136% in trade from Israel, a growth 1,171 TEUs. In February, PortMiami broke another record with the movement of 100,800 container units.

ADDED COLOMBIA CONNECTION: Officials from Avianca Airlines and Miami International Airport on Monday marked the re-launch of the airline's daily Miami-Cartagena roundtrips. The resumption positions Avianca to serve close to 800,000 passengers a year. Colombia is the most active international passenger market for Miami-Dade County. Avianca joined American Airlines in providing Cartagena-Miami service.

GAS PRICE DIPS: Average gasoline prices in Miami fell 5.9 cents per gallon last week to \$4.21, according to GasBuddy's survey. Prices in Miami are 66.2 cents per gallon higher than a month ago and \$1.31 higher than a year ago. The national average price is unchanged at \$4.23, up 62.4 cents from a month ago and \$1.38 from a year ago.

THE ACHIEVER



Alejandro Gonzalez
Heads expanding Idea Center for Miami Dade College
The profile is on Page 4

Second best as local jobs roaring back

Second best doesn't usually make headlines, but in Miami-Dade's economy it's huge.

Miami in February had its lowest unemployment, its most persons employed, its largest labor force and the most jobs in its crucial leisure and hospitality sector, all since February 2020.

The economy's spurt back over exactly two years since the onset of the covid pandemic has been a constant upward march.

The county's unemployment percentage was 2.8% in February, according to the latest report from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unemployment here had been at an incredible record low of 1.3% in February 2020, just before the pandemic hit. While 37,660 persons were jobless last month, the unemployed totaled 189,100 in July 2020, up from fewer than 19,000 just five months earlier.

As unemployment has tumbled, the number of persons holding jobs has risen correspondingly to 1,318,676 in February, rebuilding the vast majority of the 1,382,008 jobs held in February 2020.

This came as the total labor force grew, hitting 1,356,336 in February, again the most since 1,400,437 exactly 24 months earlier.

In the crucial leisure & hospitality industry, which pandemic shutdowns hit hardest of all, the gain has been most spectacular. The best employment in that category in Miami history was 149,700 persons, again in February 2020. But jobs were more than halved by April 2020, down to 70,000. By last month, however, employment in the sector had rebounded to 138,400 as hotels set records while still lacking much of the international and meeting business that had bolstered the industry just two years earlier.

While leisure and hospitality came back, the county's jobs in financial activities have surged to 86,600 in February, 4,000 more than in February 2020. And professional and business services workers rose to 195,700, nearing the December 2021 all-time high of 199,000.

Florida as a whole has also made gains. Unemployment has fallen from 5.6% in February 2021 to 3.3% in February this year. The national unemployment rate in February was 3.8%.

Tri-Rail chief stays on job as new leader sought

By GABRIELA HENRIQUEZ STOIKOV

- **Tri-Rail trains due downtown Nov. 1, pg. 13**
- **Schedules set to recruit Tri-Rail head, pg. 13**

The South Florida Regional Transportation Authority board has voted to keep Executive Director Steven Abrams, under scrutiny over construction defects in the connection of Tri-Rail to Miami Central Station, in the job until it finds a new leader, appoints an interim, or gives unilateral notice to terminate his contract.

The only "no" vote Friday came from Miami-Dade Commissioner Raquel Regalado.

Mr. Abrams retains the benefits of his existing contracts, which include a pro-rata compensation at \$231,750 a year until his final employment date, a 5% monthly raise (around \$965) to keep up with living costs, and a severance of \$123,000.

He also gets annual leave benefits of four weeks of vacation in a lump sum at the beginning of each fiscal year and a pro-rata amount of annual leave if he remains executive director on July 1.

He gets as well \$450 monthly vehicle allowance, and he, his spouse his children retain the same or equivalent coverages and limits available under the current health insurance the authority offers to senior management, an exhibit of the agreement says.

"I just think it's too much," Ms. Regalado said before the vote. "At the end of the day, we still have a responsibility to taxpayers,

and I think that the fact that it's easier for us to keep the current executive director as we search for a new executive director is fine, but I think it's just too much."

Ms. Regalado also said the board hasn't performed Mr. Abrams' evaluation as executive director.

"You didn't lose my trust, Steve, because I know you," said board member Robert Sendler before the vote. "The people that I've been speaking to speak very, very highly of Steve in a number of ways."

Mr. Sendler said the authority needed to be fair with Mr. Abrams, and "that means that we also be fair to the agency and people that we serve. Most importantly, I think we need to be fair to the overall staff."

At their Feb. 25 meeting, board members considered keeping working with Mr. Abrams during the transition to new leadership under a consulting agreement and not as an executive director employed by the authority.

But after Mr. Abrams confirmed with the Florida Retirement System that if the authority terminated his employment and then immediately entered into a consulting agreement as a private citizen he would

place his pension at risk, the board decided to move in this direction.

There were concerns among board members over Mr. Abrams receiving any raise if he remained employed by July 1. He argued that the budget was developing and if he remained an employee by July and every other employee received an increase but he didn't, that would be "punitive" for him.

"Anything else that diminished the existing benefits would be of no advantage to me, so I would just proceed under the termination for convenience that I already have in my contract," Mr. Abrams said. By the end of the meeting, he had signed the transition agreement amended, under the advice of his attorney.

Mr. Abrams first announced he would resign in January, one month after disclosing construction defects at Brightline's Miami Central station that left Tri-Rail trains unable to use the \$70 million tax-funded station.

After engineers continued to work on solving the problem, on Feb. 16 authority staff said locomotives were now a new problem, as they might hit the new platform. "We took some dimensions and what we encounter is that we have extremely close clearance with the [previous] dimensions that we have taken," said Efrain Bernal, project engineering manager.

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