Allapattah Residents Fight For A Seat At The Table As City Makes Development Decisions

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Allapattah is a primarily Latino, working-class neighborhood in Miami, with one section called Little Santo Domingo for its influx of residents from the Dominican Republic. In the past few years, as land prices in trendier neighborhoods like Wynwood and Brickell shot up, Miami developers have turned their attention there.


Given the boom, in 2019, the city of Miami engaged CBRE (https://therealdeal.com/miami/2019/07/23/make-mean-offer-i-cant-refuse-city-of-miami-seeks-proposals-for-allapattah-site/) to gather letters of interest from developers about possible best uses for an 18.75-acre site it owns in Allapattah (https://www.bisnow.com/tags/allapattah) at Northwest 20th Street and 14th Avenue, out of which several government agencies now operate.

But community organizers are hoping that this time, the development process won’t be led just by developers, lobbyists and lawyers. They are organizing for a greater voice in the process. Along the way, they are challenging city leaders to bake more justice into city ordinances and comprehensive plans, hoping to spark more change nationwide.
Mileyka Burgos-Flores is executive director of the nonprofit Allapattah Collaborative Community Development Corp., which works to prevent displacement of longtime residents and support minority-owned businesses. When she saw an article about the city possibly selling the land, she said she thought, “Why would the city offer this parcel of land to a developer when there’s so many public actions that can be taken with this asset?”

“If they put a Walmart there, all those small businesses are going to go out of business. If they put chain stores, all those little restaurants may perish,” Burgos-Flores told Bisnow in a call. “[It] is definitely going to have an effect on [our] taxes. It’s going to have an effect on rents in [the] neighborhood. It is going to have an effect on everything.”

In 2019, Burgos-Flores had gone to an event where the University of Miami (https://www.bisnow.com/tags/university-of-miami)’s Office of Civic and Community Engagement was unveiling a tool (http://land.ccs.miami.edu/explore/parcels) to identify 500M SF of publicly owned vacant or underused land throughout Miami-Dade County (https://www.bisnow.com/tags/miami-dade-county) that could potentially be used for affordable housing or community projects. There, Burgos-Flores connected with other leaders and formed a coalition called Public Land for Public Good (https://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article234232662.html). Its members developed a manifesto of core values for utilizing vacant public land (https://nhssf.org/public-land-for-public-good/).

The community development leaders had seen how other Miami neighborhoods gentrified and especially hurt people of color. Using data from Redfin (https://www.bisnow.com/tags/redfin), the Miami Herald reported (https://www.miamiherald.com/news/business/real-estate-news/article243906647.html#storylink=cp) last year that between 2012 and 2018, homeownership rates shrunk by 4% for Black people, from 49% to 45%; by 5.2% for Latinos, from 56.8% to 51.6%; and by 2.1% for White people, from 75.6% to 73.5%.

The coalition reached out to city leaders to ask that they have input in the development process for the nearly 19-acre Allapattah parcel.

"We have an opportunity to turn the tide on our affordability crisis by activating the half-billion square feet of vacant or underutilized public land, including the Allapattah lot," said Annie Lord, who leads Miami Homes for All, a member of Public Land for Public Good Miami.
The community coalition found that the city had gotten 12 letters of interest in response to its call, and the next step in the coronavirus-stalled process would be to issue a more formal request for proposals. Opportunities for community input would typically come later, but Burgos-Flores and her allies asked to be involved and allowed to set parameters before the RFP even goes out rather than after proposals rolled in.

“That's our hope — that we have this groundbreaking relationship between the city of Miami and a community where we have a truly meaningful engagement process, rather than a process that includes the community in two or three meetings or several meetings, even, but at the end of the process,” Burgos-Flores said.

For now, the group is asking Allapattah residents to take an online survey and will be holding a community meeting via Zoom at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday. An in-person meeting will follow June 29. That input will be relayed to the city in a report.

Coalition members have leaned on best practices from around the country, such as the Main Street Approach, a concept developed in 1980 to revitalize historic commercial corridors. They drafted a template for a community benefits agreement, language that communities can use to draft binding and enforceable agreements for their neighborhoods.

But even better would be equitable development, Burgos-Flores said. Equitable development is an emerging concept for urban planning that encourages lower-income citizens and people of color to be deeply involved in the development of their communities, resulting in changes that are healthy for those communities.

Equitable development points, like requiring that new developments include certain transit infrastructure or below-market-rate rents, could be weaved into Miami 21, the code of ordinances that guides development in the city. With such measures, nonprofits wouldn’t have to fight or plead for consideration on projects on a case-by-case basis.
“We don’t have policies to prevent the displacement,” Burgos-Flores said. “We have seen what happened in Seattle, in Austin, in San Francisco, in New York, and we still have not taken a chance to look at those things that could have been a best practice and then implement it locally.”

A 2019 report (https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/media/imp/Harvard_JCHS_Ingre) the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies (https://www.bisnow.com/tags/harvard-joint-center-for-housing-studies) analyzed equitable development campaigns in Washington, D.C., Detroit and Phoenix, and found that it is “important to win over at least one funder that can provide the seed capital that will nurture the equitable development effort in its infancy” but that “a record of tangible achievements stimulates further funding.”

Burgos-Flores recalled how preservationists fought to save art deco landmarks in the 1980s when the style had fallen out of fashion and developers wanted to demolish them. Now, they are a tourist draw and integral to the city fabric.


If city leaders partner with communities of color to preserve the integrity of these neighborhoods for the long term, they would be seen as leaders nationally, she suggested.

The city has already kicked in $25K for a program that would help train fellows in community development. The fellows discovered that the city of Miami last fall terminated a contract it had with Miami-Dade County's library system since the 1970s to operate a library rent-free on a city parcel.

The city now wants to lease the land to an affordable housing developer, Saint James Community Development Corp., to build at least 150 apartments. But doing so would require the county-operated Allapattah Branch Library to move or close. The Rev. Jimmie Williams, head of the Saint James development group, didn't respond to a request for comment from Bisnow.
This alarmed the young fellows, since the library is an important public space for teens who attend Miami Jackson Senior High School and need it for studying and completing school projects. The only other nearby possible hangout for them is a Checkers fast-food restaurant, Burgos-Flores said.

The fellows organized a petition drive and invited media coverage, and last week, city commissioners reversed course. They apologized and said they would require the housing project to have a library on its first floor.

Burgos-Flores said a new generation is learning firsthand the importance of preserving public space.

Contact Deirdra Funcheon at deirdra.funcheon@bisnow.com

See Also: Related Group, Starwood Team Up With Baccarat-Branded Condo Project In Miami

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