

American Dream Miami mega mall's huge traffic impact detailed

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One of the chief concerns about building North America's largest mall in northwest Miami-Dade County - traffic - was addressed as the developer of American Dream Miami submitted a traffic report to county officials.

The bottom line: most roads could handle the traffic from the mega mall and a neighboring mixed-use project if they are expanded as planned, but some roads would need additional improvements to avoid getting jammed. Most of the traffic problems were forecast on Miami Gardens Drive on the approach to Interstate 75.

The creation of the massive mall and all its amenities, including an indoor ski slope, theme park, ice rink, submarine lake and water park, would create thousands of jobs. Yet, residents of nearby cities and highway commuters are concerned it will snarl traffic.

"As a homeowner in Miami Lakes, I am extremely concerned about all of the potential new traffic coming our way," Michael Mut said. "I fear that an already over-saturated area will become even more unbearable. If right now, in 2016, there are times when traffic is already at a standstill, how much worse will it be when this proposed project comes to light?"

Triple Five Group plans to build American Dream Miami at the southwest corner of Interstate 75 and Florida's Turnpike. The 194.5-acre site would have 6.2 million square feet of retail, restaurant, entertainment and supporting space plus 2,000 hotel rooms. The traffic study assumes it would be completed in 2020.

Contained in the same traffic study, the Graham Cos. wants to build a mixed-used employment center on the 309-acre site directly south of American Dream Miami. The traffic study assumes that by 2020 it'll have 150,000 square feet of retail, a 250,000-square-foot business park and 500 residential units. By 2040, the Graham project would be built out with 1 million square feet of retail, a 3-million-square-foot business park, and 2,000 residential units.

Both American Dream Miami and the Graham project are engaged in the county's comprehensive development plan process. After a series of public hearings, they'll go to a county commission vote in May, which would be followed by state review and another

county commission vote.

According to the traffic study by Leftwich Consulting, by 2020 American Dream Miami would generate 61,862 trips on an average day, with 4,690 trips during the afternoon rush hour. That works out to 22.6 million trips a year - certainly a major attraction for the region. It would actually be busier on the weekends, with 93,560 new trips.

The majority of the traffic to American Dream Miami would occur outside of rush hour, which is good news for commuters who take Interstate 75 and Florida's Turnpike for workday trips.

However, there was some disagreement between Triple Five Group and county traffic officials over the methodology used to estimate the project's traffic. The developer said the only comparable property to American Dream Miami is the Mall of America in Minnesota, which is also owned by Triple Five Group. A traffic count was done at the Mall of America and the same trips per gross leasable square foot was applied to American Dream Miami. The malls have 2.58 million and 3.5 million square feet of gross leasable square feet, respectively.

The Mall of America website says it attracts 40 million visitors a year. But the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World is the most visited theme park in the country with about 19 million visitors a year.

The ratio of traffic at Mall of America was applied to American Dream Miami, increased by 10.8 percent because there's no rail transit in Miami like in Minnesota, and then reduced by 10 percent because the developer assumed that some existing commuters will divert from their trips to visit American Dream Miami.

Traffic engineers with both the county and the South Florida Regional Planning Council questioned why Triple Five Group considered only the leasable space at the mall for traffic impact and not the 1.5 million square feet of entertainment space and the 2,000 hotel rooms. They suggested that the developer compare traffic counts at theme parks in Central Florida. The Mall of America has a theme park and ice rink, but it doesn't have a water park, an indoor ski slope and many other entertainment elements proposed in Miami.

Triple Five Group maintained that the Mall of America is the best comparison because it has a similar ratio of entertainment space to leasable space as American Dream Miami. The hotel rooms would actually reduce traffic because the guests would stay on the property, the developer said.

Officials with Triple Five Group declined comment.

The argument over the methodology for the traffic study could play out during public meetings as county staff pressures the developer to do more to mitigate traffic impacts, said attorney **David Sacks**, a partner in the land use and zoning practice at **Pathman Lewis**. The developer has a good argument about not counting the hotel rooms but the county counter argument over measuring the entertaining space is reasonable, he said. Ultimately, it comes down to how much the developer should pay for roadway

improvements, **Sacks** said.

Then there's the neighboring project.

For its first phase in 2020, the Graham project would generate 10,460 external trips on the average day, with 966 during afternoon rush hour. So that's a combined 72,322 trips a day for both projects in 2020.

The traffic study shows that most roads get a passing grade from the 2020 impacts so they could handle the additional traffic. But Miami Gardens Drive from Interstate 75 to Northwest 87th Avenue got a failing grade for too much traffic.

By 2040 at build out, the Graham project would generate 61,857 daily trips, with 5,819 during afternoon rush hour. Both projects would combine for 123,719 daily trips with 10,509 during afternoon rush hour.

The 2040 traffic impacts would spread the failing grades to Miami Gardens Drive from the interstate to Northwest 67th Avenue, on Florida's Turnpike from Northwest 106th Street to U.S. 27, and on Interstate 75 from Miramar Parkway to Miami Gardens Drive.

Sacks said the failing grades for certain roadways doesn't mean the project can't go forward, after all many towers have been built in downtown Miami despite jammed roads. It means the developer must take action to mitigate the anticipated traffic. It's up to county officials and the Florida Department of Transportation to make a deal with Triple Five Group on the best way to do that - and who should pay.

There are already changes planned for the roads in the area, many of them in the works with FDOT long before the mega mall was dreamed up. The interchange of Florida's Turnpike and Interstate 75 is being improved so traffic can exit in all directions. Both highways are scheduled to be widened, and managed express lanes are under construction on I-75.

Among the traffic proposals by the developers:

- The exit from Interstate 75 on Miami Gardens Drive to the west would include a loop that goes directly to the mall and avoids through traffic on the street.
- A new exit on Florida's Turnpike at Northwest 170th Street would lead to the Graham project and then to the mall. It's not determined whether it would cross west of I-75 to Miami Lakes.
- Northwest 97th Avenue would be extended north from Hialeah to connect with the mall.
- Northwest 178th Street would be created as an internal road that divides the mall from the Graham project and circulates traffic.
- To mitigate the traffic on Miami Gardens Drive, it would be expanded to six lanes and the left turn lanes from Northwest 87th Avenue to I-75 would be replaced with

loops, which prevent cars from crossing lanes.

Anyone who drives from Broward County to west Miami-Dade knows that highway traffic in the area is already busy. Here's how the busiest stretches of road would be impacted by the projects in 2020:

- The Florida Turnpike from Northwest 106th Street to US 27 already sees 102,000 trips a day. It would get another 6,804 trips from American Dream and another 994 from the Graham project.
- Interstate 75 from Miramar Parkway to the Florida Turnpike already sees 164,700 trips a day. It would get another 15,899 trips from American Dream and another 2,123 from the Graham project.
- Interstate 75 from the Florida Turnpike to Miami Gardens Drive already sees 168,700 trips a day. It would get another 13,671 trips from American Dream and another 2,907 from the Graham project.
- Miami Gardens Drive from Interstate 75 to Northwest 87th Avenue already sees 41,400 trips a day. It would get another 9,774 trips from American Dream and another 1,851 from the Graham project.

Keep in mind that the traffic study doesn't measure the impact of a project just south of the Graham property within Hialeah. Dacar Management has a pending application with the city to build 1,082 homes on the south side of Northwest 170th Street.

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