

Virginia Key Park

CIVIL RIGHTS
TASK FORCE

P.O. Box 330011, Miami, FL 33233-0011

M. Athalie Range, Chairperson
Telephone: 305-691-4343
FAX: 305-691-6805

THE CITY OF MIAMI, FLORIDA

Gene Tinnie, Vice-Chairperson
Telephone/FAX: 305-751-9791
e-mail: walltinnie@aol.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 9, 2000

Contacts: Gene Tinnie, 305-751-9791
M. Athalie Range, 305-691-4343

MORE THAN BLACK HISTORY AT STAKE IN VIRGINIA KEY COMMISSION VOTE

When the Miami City Commission meets on Thursday, December 12, they will vote on an issue as crucial to the future of Miami as the outcome of the presidential election is to the nation and the world. The Commissioners will decide the fate of historic Virginia Key Beach, once Dade County's only official "Colored Beach" during segregation, as they determine exactly how much of the site will be turned over to a degree of community control.

The 77-acre "Old County Park" property is one of several parcels of land that were transferred from County to City ownership in 1982. Since then it has remained mostly closed and neglected, due to the high operating costs cited by City officials. Recent pressure to reopen the park and to restore it to its former glory as a prime recreational site led to the creation of a City-appointed Task Force which met for eighteen months and formulated recommendations and plans for revitalizing the area, including environmental and historic restoration. The Task Force, headed by former City commissioner Mrs. M. Athalie Range, has won consistent praise from the Commission for its efforts but expires at the end of the year. A proposed permanent Virginia Key Beach Park Trust, which would replace the present committee and continue its work (the next phase of detailed planning, study, grant writing, etc.), has gained preliminary approval from the City Commission, but the ordinance must pass a Second and final Reading at Thursday's meeting, where it is likely to be discussed early in the afternoon.

A new wrinkle, however, has been added to the issue since the First Reading by the City Manager's Office, under new Manager Carlos A. Gimenez who replaced Donald Warshaw in the wake of the Elián González controversy. Mr. Gimenez inherited the process that had been put in place for the future planning of Virginia Key, which involved the leadership of the community-based Task Force. In reviewing the possibility of this group becoming a permanent entity, he became concerned, based on other past experiences, that "the interest of the City" may not be served if a semi-autonomous group controlled such a significant piece of City property. He therefore prepared an alternative, or amended, ordinance, that would limit the scope of the new Trust's authority only to the historic Beach portion of the 77-acre site, retaining City control of the rest. *(more)*

MEMBERS

The Hon. Dr. Barbara Carey-Shuler • Dr. Dorothy Jenkins Fields • Mr. Miguel Germain • Mr. Clyde Judson
Mrs. Maude Newbold • Mrs. Enid Pinkney • Mrs. M. Athalie Range • Mr. Garth C. Reeves • The Hon. Beryl Roberts
Ms. Bernice Sawyer • Mrs. Eugenia Thomas • Mr. Gene Tinnie • Mr. Richard Townsend • Mr. Mark Walters

VIRGINIA KEY, 12/9/00 (cont.) Page 2 of 2

Although these concerns appear to be reasonable, those closest to the issue find the proposal misguided, unacceptable and even insulting, as it ignores both the historical significance of the entire site and the eighteen months of work that community volunteers have done as a Task Force. Critics point out that in the ordinance creating the new Trust there is no giveaway of land or authority by the City. The Park remains City-owned and operated. The Trust's membership, activities and all of its proposals will be subject to approval by the City Commission. The role of the Trust will be to coordinate those activities that the City is less well equipped to do: history gathering, museum planning and design, historic and environmental restoration, appropriate park programs, project fund raising, etc.

Many observers see in the Manager's proposal nothing more than an attempt to go back to business as usual, and to revive the controversial private development scheme for the site that was the at the very heart of the debate which brought about the need for a Task Force in the first place.

(At the root of the issue are two opposing ways of viewing public parks. For a number of years Miami City government has viewed public parks as costly liabilities that "don't bring in money" and are expensive to operate. In their view, these lands could be made into valuable assets, generate revenue for the city, and ease the tax burden on residents, by leasing these prime properties to private developers. To most of the public, however, the closing of parks is a reduction in the services for which we pay taxes, and the benefits of luxury private development projects benefit few if any of the citizens at large).

While the rich African American heritage of the historic Virginia Key Beach site is the most striking issue, it is by no means the only one. What is at stake is the quality of life for Miami's citizens, especially as the population grows and the need for parks, in a city that is notoriously lacking in open green space, increases. Virginia Key is one of the city's most valuable assets not because it is the only City-owned oceanfront property, but also because its barrier island ecology makes it a rare environmental jewel, in spite of the great damage that has been suffered from pollution, invasions of harmful non-native vegetation, and disasters like hurricane Andrew. The environment is in need of restoration to health, and, through the Task Force, Congresswoman Carrie P. Meek has successfully brought in services of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for this purpose and for restoring the shoreline as well.

The new Trust that will replace the Task Force, if approved on Thursday, will not only address these issues but will also represent a degree of community involvement and citizen cooperation with City officials in the management of Parks and other such valuable assets. A strong showing of citizen support is urged at the City Commission meeting on Thursday, to ensure a favorable vote not only on behalf of creating the Trust, but also for the inclusion of all 77 acres in the area that is to be managed by the new body. A failure to include the entire site will seriously reduce the chances of making the park the historic landmark and recreational facility that it deserves to be, while leaving open the possibility of future misguided uses of land that was won in the struggle for equality.