Virginia Key Beach is sacred ground. It is true that there is no square inch of earth that is NOT sacred, but today, in 1999, on the barrier island called Virginia Key, the entire parcel of land known as the Old County Park site demands special attention as a sacred site in its own right.

It is sacred because it is a part of that precious patrimony of property that is owned by all of the citizens of the city of Miami, rather than by any individual or group, for the benefit of all its citizens. It has been inherited from past generations and is entrusted to our care and stewardship for the benefit of those who will come after us.

Even more significantly, Virginia Key Beach is a PARK, one of those extremely valuable open spaces that are so vital to urban environments for recreation and for reconnections with both nature and the community at large. And of these precious publicly owned green spaces available to residents and visitors alike in the City of Miami lands available within the City of Miami, Virginia Key Beach offers a rare, almost pristine natural environment, more than any neighborhood park could possibly provide. And perhaps most significant is the realtor's mantra of "location, location, location": This is the only park in the city that is actually located on the ocean, the region's primary attraction for both residents and visitors alike.

In addition to its unique natural character and special location, Virginia Key, and especially the Old County Park, is a site made sacred by its history. Much of this history is lost or hidden, waiting to be rediscovered and told, but much of it is vibrantly alive and very revealing of who we are as a community and indeed as a nation. The history of the African presence in the Americas is a saga of tragedy and triumph, of horror and beauty, of pain and joy, that many find more convenient to ignore or deny than to celebrate and remember. To deny it is to hear a great Beethoven symphony, for example, without the F-sharps; to celebrate it is not only to enjoy its every note and nuance, but to make its enjoyment available to the widest possible audience.

The history of Virginia Key is inseparable from the history of the African American population in Miami and South Florida. It is significant that the oldest standing structures in Miami began life as slave quarters in the 1840s, and that a third of the signers of the original charter establishing the City of Miami were Black men, whose labor, skills, and enterprise were vital to the making of this city. It is therefore not surprising that Black history would become very much a part of Miami's beaches as well, which would become focused on Virginia Key, South Florida's best known beach "for the exclusive use of Negroes" during the days of segregation.

The history of Virginia Key's historic "Black Beach" goes back well before its establishment as a Dade County Park in 1945. In fact Black people had been frequenting "Bear's Cut," as it was known, as a treasured recreation spot as early s the 1930's, as some of Miami's older residents recall today. This was in spite of the dangerously swift current and sharp dropoffs that characterized the beach. Even before this time a map of a survey of Virginia Key's abandoned military base, dated 1918, contains a notation pointing to a "Negro Dancing Pavilion" at the same location

as the later County Park.

When, out of the miles of shoreline available, Dade County established Virginia Beach as the only place where Black people could legally swim (in response to a courageous protest demonstration), the island was still only accessible by boat, but still the site enjoyed immense popularity. Even as the same island that contained the Negro Beach was selected as the site for a sewage treatment plant and for a dump (decisions that might arguably have been unthinkable for other swimming locations), even in spite of the indignities of the racial restrictions, Virginia Key Beach was made into a "paradise" by Black beachgoers.

To the credit of the County planners, facilities were provided that were comparable to those at Crandon Park, including picnic shelters, a bath house, cabanas, and a merry-go-round. In addition there was a mini-train ride, a boat ramp, and "cottages," actually a three-unit wooden structure that served as a pleasant temporary residence for honeymooners and for visiting celebrities who were excluded from Miami Beach hotels (even if they performed there). But more than just the physical amenities gave this park its unique character as a place filled with pleasant memories; it was the life and spirit that infused the Virginia Key experience that makes it resonate so vibrantly today.
This was a meeting place for people from throughout South Florida as well as visitors.

It was a place of deeply religious significance, where baptisms and sunrise services were held, along with numerous church socials and picnics. It was also a venue for national fraternity and sorority gatherings. It was a place of romantic prom nights and honeymoons. The park's refreshment stand was as much of a legend for its good food as the famed "dance floor" with its outdoor jukebox was for its parties. Above all, it was simply a place for families and groups to gather in the shade of luxuriant palm trees by the side of the ocean.

It is this living history that makes Virginia Key Beach an even more sacred site, the hallowed ground that embodies the struggles, the aspirations, and the successes of past generations. It is this history that provides us today with the opportunity to honor our shared past, to re-create a measure of this paradise, and to share it with the world, regardless of "race" – the very dream of the Civil Rights movement.

The first order of business in fulfilling this dream for ourselves, our visitors, and our future generations is to re-open this park to the public, providing our citizens with a service to which we are all entitled. Secondly, we must ensure that this sacred site, inherited from those who preceded us will be preserved in its entirety for those who will follow: to reduce the amount of precious, citizen-owned park land available to the public, by making any portion of it exclusively accessible to only a few, is simply unacceptable. Finally, a process must be implemented that will maximize productive citizen input into the enhancement and preservation of the City of Miami's only oceanfront park as a sacred historic site.