

VILLAGE HALL
500 NE 87TH ST
EL PORTAL, FL 33138
CHRISTIA E. ALOU
VILLAGE MANAGER



MAYOR OMARR C. NICKERSON
VICE MAYOR ANDERS URBOM
COUNCILPERSON LUIS PIRELA

MEMORANDUM FROM VILLAGE MANAGER CHRISTIA E. ALOU, ESQ.

FEBRUARY 18, 2021

RE: Village of El Portal Parks Renovation Project

The Village of El Portal will be renovating, refreshing and renewing its parks and historic site over the next few months. As part of this endeavor, the Village is also interested in naming, renaming or dedicating some of the parks in the Village of El Portal. The parks and historic landmark are small, no more than .1 acre each, with limited to no parking access. The Village is a recognized Bird Sanctuary and is home to many species including a hearty community of peacocks. The Village is also a Tree City USA and home to lush canopy-lined streets. In 2013, El Portal conducted a Charette and the report that came from it outlines some of the ways the residents want to see the Village and its green spaces. The charette report, Comprehensive Plan, Miami Dade Parks Master Plan were all consulted throughout our analysis and review of the park properties for the renovation project.

Presently, the VILLAGE OF EL PORTAL Parks Inventory includes –

The Tot Lot
The Tequesta Indian Mound Historic Landmark
Sherwood Forest Park
El Portal Nature Trail
River Estate Park (aka Soar's River Estate Park)

In June 2020 the Village of El Portal and Miami Dade County Parks and Recreation and Open Spaces Department/Neat Streets Miami staff Gabriela Lopez, Michael Houle and Miguel Claro for a site-visit and walk-through of all Village of El Portal parks and the Tequesta Indian Mound.

The Village of El Portal adopted the Miami Dade County Parks Master Plan some time ago, so we included the County in our effort as they have the knowledge, resources and staff to identify ways to make our parks thrive and resilient as we advance this project. This aligns with the County's guidance in developing and creating resilient parks using diverse, stable and predictable funding strategies to maximize our resources. This visit lasted approximately two hours, as we walked from the Village Tot Lot, to the Tequesta Indian Mound and then Sherwood Forest Park. From there we walked NE 87 Street back to the Village Hall where we got into our respective vehicles to go to the parks on the west side of the Village of El Portal, the Nature Trail and River Estates Park. The County recommends, and the Village agrees, that the Village's sidewalks play a part in the walkability of the green spaces in El Portal where possible.

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The Village of El Portal's parks renewal plan aligns with the Miami Dade County Parks Master Plan through its guiding principles of:

Seamlessness – connecting open spaces regardless of jurisdiction through access to all residents and non-residents of the Village, and with the improvement of the Soars River Estate Park, providing seamlessness of use for those utilizing the C7 Little River Canal blue ways.

Beauty – it is our intention to improve the parks with natural complimentary trees and landscaping that will support the butterfly garden in Sherwood Forest Park, the peacocks and other birds that live in the Village of El Portal, and maintain the Village's natural character.

Access – a safe and welcoming path to all residents and visitors including ADA-accessibility.

Equity – all residents and visitors have an opportunity to enjoy our quality parks and services.

Sustainability – The renovation and ultimate upgrading of the parks will contribute to the economic, social and environmental prosperity of the Village of El Portal, its residents and Miami Dade County.

Multiple Benefits – every improvement and utilization of these spaces generates public benefits from health and fitness (at the El Portal Nature Trail and the Tot Lot) to quiet enjoyment of natural vistas such as those at Sherwood Forest Park and Soars River Estates Park.

Below are my notes and County recommendations from the June 2020 parks site-visit.

Tot Lot (with Little Library Reading Cove)

The Tot Lot (.1 acre) is an active playground located at the side and back of the El Portal City Hall at 500 NE 87 Street with a "Little Library" reading cove and bike rack at its entrance.

The Miami Dade County team thought that the Tot Lot was in very good condition.

Landscaping and Trees – the suggestion is to plant 6-8 12-foot Crape Myrtle trees, which will add colorful flowers to the existing landscaping and around the perimeter of the park. Silver Buttonwood trees were also suggested. They should be planted 10 feet apart. A hedge of 5-7 gallon Podocarpus or Cocoplum should be planted along the south property line fence to provide privacy to the resident to the south of the park and to add a pleasant vista away from chain link fencing. There should be greenery planted around the gazebo, around the trees, shrubbery to outline the walk path will make things nicer as well.

Equipment – the Miami Dade County team thought that the playground equipment was in good condition, and that the PIP (Poured in Place) rubberized ground covering around the playgroup equipment is in good condition. The suggestion is to have the manufacturer of the equipment come in to give an opinion and proposal for changing the playground equipment in a way that will not disturb the PIP. Our Public Works and Maintenance Staffer will be doing that this coming week. The PIP is expensive to remove and replace, and the suggestion of using the same manufacturer to bring equipment that can fit where the current equipment stands is good. Also, suggested if this is not possible, is to pressure wash the equipment to add new life to it.

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ADA – the concrete slab in which the park benches are anchored need to be extended to the PIP so that there is no gap in access for ADA to utilize the park benches. Or we may extend the PIP in that area so that it meets the concrete slab.

The Village will have a Free Circulator Shuttle service to and from the Brightline Downtown Miami station starting in March 2021, with two pick-up and drop-off locations in the Village. One will be at the Tot Lot/Little Library.

Tequesta Indian Mound (Historic Landmark)

The Tequesta Indian Mound is a Historic Landmark located at NE 86 Street in Sherwood Forest neighborhood of El Portal and is a passive destination in the Village of El Portal.

Miami Dade Historical Preservation staff will be contacted and hopefully will engage with us to determine policy and process to maintain the mound. There is to never be any disturbance of the earth at the Indian Mound. No additional trees are to be planted. The grass may be upgraded. A low chain and post barrier, antiqued look, was suggested to encircle the Indian Mound and to match the marker sign, if approved by the Historic Preservation staff. A small newer looking tree that is falling should be removed and not re-planted. Again, the earth of the mound must never be agitated or moved for planting, constructing platforms, no benches are to be added. We need County assistance with this location since renovation will be more regulated there.

Sherwood Forest Park

Sherwood Forest Park(.1 acre) located in the Sherwood Forest neighborhood of El Portal, between NE 86 and NE 85 Streets and NE 3 Avenue is a passive park with a lush canopy and a little butterfly garden that is maintained by neighbors of the park.

The Miami Dade County team thought that the park was well planned, but must have some replanting, re-graveling of the walk paths.

Landscaping – refresh the Boston Ferns throughout the park by planting a bit more to 1-3 gallon sizes to fill-in some open spots of the current fern beds. A bit more 1-3 gallon Coontie plants and Milkweed plants should be planted throughout the beds between the ferns to attract butterflies and supplement the plants Ms. Janet Carabelli planted last year as a butterfly garden. These should be planted in with 1-3 gallon Green Island Ficus and other beds since they grow straight up and need something to anchor them. The new Florida Slash Pines planted by Robert Ruano and Angel Hernandez need to be removed and placed in a dryer space. The soil in Sherwood Forest is too damp and subject to high saturation in times of rain. The Florida Pines thrive in dryer soil. There are volunteer palms (those that are newer and come as a result of bird droppings) must be removed. There are two small ones next to the Jacaranda Tree in the park. Also, to avoid the pooling of water and the increased breeding of mosquitos/ Zika virus issues, the Bromeliads must be removed. There are two to three located at the base of some tree beds in the park. Some of the larger beds around trees should be filled in with grass or other plantings. There are two that are larger than necessary as beds of dirt around trees.

If we are going to increase the Village of El Portal Public Works Department, we should also consider partnering with the Fairchild Botanical Gardens that is currently running the Million Orchids Project where they will cultivate orchids for the Village of El Portal's Parks, at \$10 to \$15/per orchid plant, and then assist the Village in planting them in our parks' trees. The Village of El Portal's landscapers will have to then maintain them thereafter. It can be beautiful, but without a Department, this is not realistic for the Village to take on.

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El Portal Nature Trail

The Nature Trail is a Miami Dade County Department of Transportation and Public Works Right-of-Way. It was never developed for transportation purposes, and has been utilized as a Play Street. I have met with various departments within the County to get the authorization to renovate this “park” and will be doing a formal request with Village Mayor Omarr Nickerson to obtain this authority to renovate or possibly obtain ownership for the Village of El Portal.

The Miami Dade County team thought that the entrance/exit gates were lovely, and that they should remain with some refreshing. We agree, but we should revisit the problem of the recurring gate vandalism of taking it off the tracks or breaking the gate wheels, etc. One option to consider is consulting with a metal fabricator to get suggestions on vandal-resistant gate hardware.

Landscaping – the team recommends that we plant a shrub all the way down the south fence property line of the Nature Trail to allow privacy and to make the park look neat and manicured. 7 to 10 gallon spaced 3 feet apart The team suggests Cocoplum shrub along the fence and 12-foot Crape Myrtle installed in sunny areas (to be identifiers for the Village park properties) be planted uniformly all the way down the south side of the park, and that all vines be removed from the north chain link fencing along the north property line of the entire Nature Trail. The removal of the vines and opening of the line of sight is necessary for safety, and for openness of the narrow park. The team recommends that we remove the invasive trees intertwined in the Ficus tree trunk that is located near the NW 3 Avenue gates, as well as a removal of the large roots just within the opening of the gate because it causes a tripping liability and is an ADA hinderance for park visitors. While we were assessing the park, Ms. Richardson of 8650 NW 2nd Avenue came out to talk to us about her fear of the Ficus tree falling onto her house during storms. She asked that it be removed or pruned extensively. The County team did not speak to the resident, but did speak to me and Councilperson Pirela, saying that Ficus trees are known to come down during storms because their roots are superficial, so the tree should be evaluated by a Certified Arborist to determine the best course of action as it relates to safety.

Equipment – There should be outdoor exercise equipment installed in the park, per funding provided to the Village in 2015. Greenfield’s Outdoor Fitness and LSI are companies from which we may ask for proposals after they assess the area. Councilperson Pirela recommended that the exercise equipment be put directly in the middle of the Nature Trail in a shaded area north of the actual trail in order to not abut the homeowner to the south, and to utilize the maximum amount of shade. We may use a concrete slab for the exercise equipment or rubberized PIP such as that at the Tot Lot. More equipment such as picnic tables (one or two or three) and benches should be added. Presently there is but one park bench in the entire Nature Trail. Its concrete slab does not extend to the trail, making it out of compliance with ADA. We will need to extend the slab.

Lighting – The lighting in the park was on during our visit. The lighting should be on a timer, turned off during the daylight hours. The team suggests photocell lights with motion sensor cameras to assist in the enforcement of park hours and vandalism and destruction.

Asphalt/Paving – the actual foot path must be repaved. It is a health and safety hazard due to the gaps and buckling throughout. The County team recommends a ¾ inch overlay of asphalt and patch repair if we cannot afford to repave the entire trail. There are too many tripping hazards for it to remain as it is. And the lone bench and the entry on NW 3 Avenue must be made ADA compliant.

The Village will have a Free Circulator Shuttle service to and from the Brightline Downtown Miami station starting in March 2021, with two pick-up and drop-off locations in the Village. One will be at the Nature Trail.

River Estate Park

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Soars River Estate Park (designated from Soar family in 1946) located at NW 86th Street and NW 2nd Avenue at the C7 Little River Canal Pedestrian Bridge is a passive park that also serves as a public entry to the C7 Little River Canal just under the pedestrian bridge.

Through my efforts to find authority to renovate this park, as with the Nature Trail, I worked extensively with Miami Dade County Department of Transportation and Public Works departments. It was discovered that in a 1946 reversionary clause, that the parcel of land located at the foot of the pedestrian bridge over the C7 Little River Canal was conveyed to the County for the purpose of providing trees and shrubbery planting for the public. The property has maintained that purpose, but we want to go a step farther. I will be working with Mayor Nickerson to obtain the property or the authority to renovate the property according to the recommendations listed here.

As an entrance to the park, the team suggests an arch with walk through that looks like the gates (in the same color) at the Nature Trail. The “arch” would serve as the park entrance, with landscaping such as Cocoplum and Song of India Shrubs at the “white wall” with the El Portal signage. The team says that the landscaping around the white wall will discourage the graffiti and sign destruction plaguing the white wall. The landscaping should be on both sides of the white wall.

Landscaping – the team recommends 5-gallon Cocoplum or Song of India shrubs for the entrance wall, and for the perimeter to the east and west of the park. They also suggest flowering trees such as 12-foot Crape Myrtle in the grassed area to shade the walkway. Where there are utility hole covers, its recommended that the landscaper hand dig for the tree planting to ensure no damage to the utility. The team al so recommends that the chain link fence on the ramp leading to the footbridge be softened with some low shrubs. Also, removal of some of the chain link fence and replacing it with an appealing railing on the ramp may be nice.

Equipment – the team suggests that we do one or two picnic tables, and maybe one more bench in the park. The heavy “riffraff” bags at the water’s edge need to be replaced, and a railing leading to the canoe launch platform must be added. Also recommended is to make the launch platform a bit nicer and to paint a community mural on the cinderblock wall, and under and on the sides of the bridge where there is presently graffiti. The team also recommends doing a dual-use trash receptacle in all the parks for recycling and trash. We may contact Global (our current receptable manufacturer) or Dumor for the new receptacles. The same lighting and motion sensor cameras were recommended for this area, as in the Nature Trail recommendations.

Blueway at Little River Canal /River Estate Park – the River Estate Park would be a welcomed addition to the “blueways” vision the County is promoting. The development and renovation of the “park” would make it a destination. There is a boat launch or a small walled-in plaza that steps down to the water, making this park accessible to different types of water transportation, thus connecting the other points of interest on the canal. And this renovation and beautification can make River Estates Park a destination that can be added to the **Parks305 app**. The Village’s Sustainability and Resiliency Taskforce, the Little River Conservancy and the Miami Dade County Resiliency Office, the Village of El Portal Mayor, Omarr Nickerson and the Village Administration are advocating for the improvement of the Little River Canal.

Village Center and Greenway Development

According to our Comprehensive Plan and our El Portal Charette Report (November 2013), the Village wants to develop and improve our “Main Street” which is NE 2nd Avenue between NE 86 and NE 90 Streets to present a cohesive, planned and sustainable Village Center. There are three areas that we will address and in which we need assistance.

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1. Traffic calming and lowering the Speed Limit on NE 2nd Avenue and other feeders streets in the Village of El Portal (Miami Dade County Department Transportation and Public Works)
2. Installation of Sidewalks along El Portal streets to promote connectivity, walkability.
3. Septic to Sewer conversion and stormwater improvements to improve the quality of, decrease the flooding and road erosion of the Village and to draw business to our “Main Street”

Other parks and green space development projects that are currently underway in the Village of El Portal:

Both the Nature Trail and River Estate Park are on NW 2nd Avenue, all just a block away from Horace Mann Middle School. The Village of El Portal has been working with Horace Mann Middle’s principal and the Miami Dade County School Board to beautify, to make the streets safer, and to make the area more sustainable with the following projects:

1. Green Route to School, Phase 2, matching grant for \$9,970 to plant a canopy along NW 2nd Avenue for a tree lined walk to school for area students. This tree planting will also aid in stormwater and flooding problems in the area.
2. Septic to Sewer Conversion project for 99 homes in the area of Horace Mann Middle. Through great efforts the Village received an easement from the Miami Dade Public School Board to obtain a parcel of land at the farthest corner of the Horace Mann Middle fields to install a sewer pump/lift station. The Village of El Portal collaborated with the School Board to expand the Nature Trail into the Horace Mann Middle School field which would encompass the area that was granted through the easement for the septic to sewer conversion pump station.
3. Traffic calming and speed reduction in the areas around Horace Mann Middle School. The Village of EL Portal continues to make traffic calming in this area a legislative priority when making funding requests of the State of Florida. We have been awarded funding for this project in the House and Senate, but due to COVID-19, those funds were vetoed by Governor DeSantis in a need to use them for pandemic recovery. We made a request for this funding in the 2021 Legislative Session and are awaiting a positive outcome.
4. The Annexed Area of the Village of El Portal, at NE 83 and Biscayne Boulevard, will be opening more commercial destinations, such as Skatebird Miami, and bringing hundreds of residents in large rental and condominium developments that are being planned by owners of those properties. The new skateboard park is scheduled to open in late Spring/early Summer 2021. As a part of its requirements for canopy replacement, Skatebird Miami may be adding tree canopy to the Village to supplement our existing greenway plantings. And through a developer’s agreement on a separate property in the Annexed Area called The Kavista Project, the Village was able to obtain developer’s fees that will be used to fund the parks renovations and have a fund for a future green space purchase in the Village of El Portal.
5. Just two weeks ago, the Village of El Portal became the new home of a rehabilitated Hawk from the Pelican Harbor Seabird Station. A release event took place at the Nature Trail park, where area residents and children attended and learned about the newest bird to call El Portal home. This partnership continues to contribute to the “biotic corridor” of bird sanctuary that El Portal has created.

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6. In August 2020, the Village of El Portal applied for a Florida Department of Agriculture 2020 Urban and Community Forestry grant to fund a tree study in the Village. In normal times, we also engage the students for a Saturday Village-wide Clean-Up for students to get volunteer hours, but to walk the Village with the students to see the natural assets of this bird sanctuary and Tree City USA.

The El Portal Parks Renovation Project will allow the Village of El Portal to develop our EcoZone, like that of Miami Dade County. Our parks and green spaces will be developed and protected and become contributors to the connection of greenways, blueways, biotic corridors. They will also provide our community the experience, education and foster stewardship of our children and residents. The environmental activities we envision would be a renewal or continuation of the walking tours of El Portal, birdwatching and our arbor day celebrations. It would also support the Village's Community Organizations such as the Little River Nature Conservancy, the El Portal Women's Club, the Tree Board, and the El Portal Sustainability and Resiliency Task Force. With the Village of El Portal Council and Administration, all of these organizations are active and dedicated to improving the quality of our natural resources in the Village, the county and beyond.