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Miami Herald

POLITICS

Florida Democrats' chief out after impropriety allegations

BY PATRICIA MAZZEI
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Stephen Bittel's rocky tenure as Florida Democratic Party chairman ended in disgrace Friday after he said he would resign following accusations from women that he leered at them, made suggestive comments and

created an unprofessional work environment.

"When my personal situation becomes distracting to our core mission of electing Democrats and making Florida better, it is time for me to step aside," Bittel said in a statement. "I am proud of what we have built as a Party and the wins we have had for Florida families, but I apologize

for all who have felt uncomfortable during my tenure at the Democratic Party."

Bittel will formally resign next week. Party leaders will elect his successor Dec. 9 in Orlando.

Elected in January after a contentious internal campaign, Bittel lasted less than a year on the job. His departure marks the latest case of sexual impropriety shak-

ing the state Capitol.

Bittel's position became untenable after all four major Democratic candidates for Florida governor urged his ouster following a Politico Florida report late Thursday in which six women anonymously complained about

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AMERICAS

NEW RULES FOR TRAVEL TO CUBA

Trump administration's new regulations for travel to Cuba include placing 83 Cuban hotels on a restricted list. 19A

MIAMI

Wynwood's next frontier?



A rendering shows the size and scale of a moderately priced apartment development proposed by Westdale Real Estate Development. The project would replace an existing city block of residences and shops just north of 29th Street.

Development plans for artsy neighborhood's Little San Juan raise hopes of renewal and fears of gentrification

BY ANDRES VIGLUCCI
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Even as Wynwood's old warehouse district famously went through a frenzied, hip rejuvenation over the past several years, the hard-scrabble working-class residential slice of the neighborhood to the north went virtually unnoticed and untouched.

Now that may be about to

change. A Texas developer has quietly bought up an entire block of homes, small apartment houses and shops in the lesser-known half of Wynwood that lies north of 29th Street, with plans to raze everything on it. In its place, the company plans to build some 200 new dwellings and fresh commercial spaces.

It would be the first new development in decades in the deteriorated neighborhood, historically nicknamed Little San Juan

because of its one-time majority Puerto Rican population.

But though many have welcomed Westdale Real Estate Investment Management's plan as a harbinger of long-overdue revitalization, to others it's the first incursion of unwanted gentrification into the neighborhood. And that, they worry, will bring rising rents and the displacement of dozens of poor residents.

Westdale's proposal comes amid a housing crunch that has

turned Miami into one of the country's most unaffordable cities for renters. Gentrification has become a much-debated topic as redevelopment reaches into low-income neighborhoods like Little Haiti and East Little Havana. Those areas are among the city's last remaining residential enclaves that are both affordable and centrally located.

But the dilemma in Wyn-

SEE GENTRIFICATION, 2A



TROPICAL LIFE

SOUL FOOD ON SOUTH BEACH

Beloved Jackson Soul Food restaurant has crossed the Venetian Causeway and makes its debut on Ocean Drive. 1C



LOCAL & STATE

FRANKEN CANCELS APPEARANCES

Sen. Al Franken canceled his Miami and Atlanta book fair appearances in the wake of a sexual harassment scandal. 3A

FRATERNITIES

Pledges' deaths spark crackdown on Greek life

BY ALEX HARRIS
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"The days of 'wink and nod' responses to bad behavior in Greek Life — the college system of social fraternities and sororities — are over. Universities are getting more aggressive as the list of Greek-related deaths grows.

This year alone, four young men pledging fraternities at universities around the country died after parties or initiation events.



JOSEPH REEDY AP

The Pi Kappa Phi fraternity house where a 20-year-old pledge died is seen near Florida State University in Tallahassee.

At all four schools — including Florida State University — campus presidents suspended Greek life.

Matthew Ellis, a pledge to Texas State University's Phi Kappa Psi chapter, was found dead Monday. He was 20.

Andrew Coffey, a 20-year-old pledge to FSU's Pi Kappa Phi fraternity, was found dead on Nov. 3. He went to Pompano Beach High School.

Maxwell Gruver, 18, died during a hazing ritual for Louisiana

State University's Phi Delta Theta fraternity on Sept. 14. His blood alcohol content was .496 percent.

Timothy Piazza, 19, died Feb. 4 while pledging Beta Theta Pi's Penn State chapter. Investigators found he had at least 18 drinks in less than two hours.

Alongside the death toll is a string of bad — and occasionally illegal — behaviors, including accusations of cocaine traffick-

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GENTRIFICATION

wood's Little San Juan, as in those other urban-core neighborhoods, is that the existing housing stock is also old and generally run-down, if not downright dilapidated.

In Wynwood, the critics of gentrification have an unusual ally: The city of Miami, usually seen as friendly to developers, is pushing back against a set of land-use and zoning changes Westdale has requested. City planners are opposing the application, citing the potential loss of some 50 homes and apartments that, though run-down in many cases, afford shelter to people with some of the lowest incomes in the city.

This week, the city's planning and zoning board embraced the planners' objections, voting 5-3 to recommend that the City Commission reject Westdale's application. However, the vote came with reservations. Some board members said they recognize that Little San Juan badly needs regeneration, and that Westdale's concept plan, which calls for modestly scaled, non-luxury rental apartments and townhomes, amounts to what one member, Andy Parrish, called "a fairly reasonable amount of development."

Parrish said change and displacement is likely coming to the neighborhood sandwiched between the surging Wynwood arts district to the south and the expanding Midtown Miami area to the east — no matter what. (Interstate 95 defines the neighborhood's western edge). But he voted "no," saying the extensive scope of Westdale's blueprint would only speed up the pace.

"For many years this neighborhood has been stagnant. These homes have been allowed to go to rack and ruin. But we know this area is going to change," said Parrish, an affordable-housing developer in historically black West Coconut Grove. "The question is, do we want to accelerate the change now? That will accelerate the displacement in these areas continue to be razed and redeveloped."

An attorney for Westdale, Steven Wernick, argued that his client's plan would not lead to a "domino effect" because most of the rest of the neighborhood is zoned for single-family homes. He said the proposal would replace a

hodgepodge of aging, poorly maintained properties on the block with a range of quality housing options, including a minimum of 10 "workforce housing" residences. The scale, height and architectural style of the contemplated redevelopment would be harmonious with its surroundings, Wernick said.

"This is good urban design," he said. "It's tailored to its location." He also noted that the developer held several meetings with residents and collected 18 letters of support, including one from the Puerto Rican Chamber of Commerce and another from Rev. Jose Luis Menendez, pastor of the local Catholic church, Mission San Juan Bautista.

"The neighborhood has been neglected," Wernick said. "The feedback we've gotten from the community has been that they want new, quality housing, but in a way that doesn't change the character of the neighborhood."

That neighborhood, platted nearly 100 years ago, has been one of the city's most colorful — and at times most dangerous as well. After World War II, Puerto Ricans settled in the neighborhood to work in the thriving garment industry housed in the warehouses south of 29th Street. The jobs paid well enough that many garment workers became homeowners, lending the neighborhood a stable base. Wynwood soon became identified with its thriving Puerto Rican community. In 1974, the local park was named after *boricua* baseball hall of famer Roberto Clemente following his death in a plane crash.

But as the garment industry moved out and abroad in the 1970s and 1980s, the neighborhood took a sharp dive. Crime, drug trafficking and gangs plagued the neighborhood, even as some longtime homeowners hung on. In 1988, undercover police bludgeoned a neighborhood drug dealer to death, provoking days of rioting. Most of the neighborhood's Puerto Ricans gradually left and were replaced by Cuban refugees and Central American immigrants.

The typical Wynwood resident today is among the city's poorest, city planners Efrén Nunez and Ryan Shedd told the board.



The San Juan Bautista Catholic mission church in Wynwood sits just north of the block that a Texas developer wants to redevelop.

The median household income in the neighborhood is \$19,800, and the median rent is \$672, they said. The buildings on the block that Westdale purchased, they noted, were built mostly in the 1920s and 1930s and include some that are potentially historic.

"The vast majority of the structures are still intact," Nunez said, while adding: "Yes, they need improvements."

The city's historic preservation office, meanwhile, issued a letter expressing concern about the loss of possible historic buildings and noted that Westdale's conceptual plans show buildings that are "incompatible" with the rest of the neighborhood because of scale and height.

"This is not infill development per se," Shedd told the board. "This is replacing existing housing that's

servicing the neighborhood. It continues the pressure from Midtown and Wynwood to the south."

The block includes two retail buildings on the neighborhood's main commercial street, Northwest Second Avenue, and stretches to Northwest Third Avenue between 30th and 31st streets. The Miami-Dade County property appraiser's website shows that Westdale generally paid two to three times the assessed value of properties on the block, laying out a total of roughly \$19 million for properties assessed at a total of \$7.5 million. Assessed values for tax purposes often represent less than the market value.

Wernick said many of the properties have been turned into short-term rentals occupied by transients.

At Wednesday evening's

planning and zoning hearing, several Wynwood residents and property owners asked the board to endorse Westdale's rezoning request.

"To us, it is a great improvement," said Ana Piloto, a Wynwood resident and property owner since 1974. "We've been through the rough — the drive-bys, the drugs. It's time for something new. It's time for families. It's time for the up-and-coming."

Added Wilfred Vazquez, a Wynwood resident for 50 years: "We've seen the changes around us. We need changes in Wynwood."

But others, including elderly retirees who have owned homes in Wynwood for decades, were adamantly against the Westdale application, citing fears that the development would lead to unwanted

changes and rising property taxes they could not afford.

Among them was America Medina, president of the Wynwood Homeowners Association, who complained that her group did not find out about the Westdale proposal until last week.

"We are very open to improving Wynwood, but the homeowners do not want the rezoning," she said.

To area resident Migdalia Diaz, the fear was that gentrification would end up doing to Wynwood what it did in nearby areas of the city.

"Before we know it, what happened to our neighbors in Edgewater will happen to us," she said. "They demolished all those beautiful houses and apartments to build skyscrapers, and now not even art gets to us."

FROM PAGE 1A

FRATERNITIES

ing, racist hazing of sorority women and leaked conversations at Florida International University revealing anti-Semitic jokes and references to pedophilia.

As FIU President Mark Rosenberg put it during an interview with The Miami Herald Editorial Board earlier this month, "The Greek system in this country is hanging by a thread."

'ANIMAL HOUSE'
The behavior isn't new. It was immortalized in pop culture nearly 40 years ago with the raunchy comedy "Animal House." What's different is the severity of the response, even if critics say it has been slow in coming.

"We're in a space where things that may have been around for a while just aren't acceptable anymore," said Kevin Kruger. "There's no kind of wink and nod. There's no second chances."

Kruger, the president of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, has been in academia for decades. He has watched campus presidents struggle to get a handle on the social organizations so inextricably linked with the college experience, and whose alumni historically are top donors and legislators to the schools. Supporters for the often-attacked Greek system note that it builds strong communities and better students as well as significant philanthropic donations. Despite the dilemma, Kruger said he's seen campus presidents eventually decide that an activist role is the best way forward.

An increasing number of schools aren't afraid to kick a chapter off campus. Nei-

ther are the national organizations that govern each chapter and hold the lion's share of liability when things go wrong. Pi Kappa Phi national leadership yanked FSU's charter a week after Coffey's death.

"The status quo is unacceptable," Kruger said. "On this, everyone seems to agree."

In announcing the Nov. 6 suspension — a big deal at a school where more than 20 percent of students wear Greek letters — FSU President John Thrasher called for "a new normal for Greek Life."

"There must be a new culture, and our students must be full participants in creating it," Thrasher said in a statement.

In a letter to Thrasher, Coffey's family members said they supported the president's suspension of a system they call "obviously broken," the Sun Sentinel reported.

'POWERFUL POSITION'
"We are encouraged to see that FSU is using their powerful position to open the necessary conversations and lead the way in making this change," they wrote.

Experts say that change has to come from within. Elizabeth Allen, a professor at the University of Maine and director of the National Hazing Prevention Consortium, said creating and enforcing policy goes only so far in changing the culture. Her soon-to-be published research shows that visible leadership — from administrators, student organizations and "really anyone who has the courage to stand up and step up," she said — makes a big difference.

It's not uncommon for



A series of the leaked screenshots from Florida International University's TKE fraternity group chat, where members shared nude images of women, made anti-Semitic jokes and talked about drug use.

student groups and administrators to condemn indefensible behaviors publicly. But rarely do those critiques come from inside the Greek system.

At FIU, Theta Kappa Epsilon's leaked group chat revealed non-consensually shared photos of nude women, Holocaust memes, drug sale references and jokes about rape and pedophilia. It's the second time a frat's illicit private conversations have been revealed at FIU, coming just before the frat's five-year suspension was up.

The university suspended Theta Kappa Epsilon when the messages were revealed, and an investigation into seven of the 100 members should end soon. A group of sorority leaders announced they would halt all interactions with members of the frat, calling their actions "disgusting and obscene" and chastising the university for not pursuing justice more aggressively.

"Their lack of action shows that dumb fuck is reason enough for dishonorable behavior to be excused," the women

wrote in a letter. "We now see that the brothers of TKE and the Student Code of Conduct have failed the FIU community by doing nothing."

The scathing statement is unusual, Allen said, and she hopes to see more like it in the future. Sororities have a significant amount of power in shifting the culture, she said. And sorority women argue there's a lot worth preserving in the Greek system, more than the "burn the whole system down" critics give them credit for.

CHARITY WORK
Krista Schmidt, FIU's student body president and a sister of one of the sororities behind the statement, pointed to the millions of dollars Greeks raise annually for charity and the community they create for people looking for a family when they're far from home.

She said she found lifelong friends in her sorority, women she respects and admires.

"Our sisterhood was put to the test, and we passed," she said.

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