

**Mayor Carlos Alvarez
State of the County – 2007 Address
Carnival Center for the Performing Arts, Knight Concert Hall
1300 Biscayne Boulevard
Tuesday, February 20, 2007, 10:00AM**

OPENING

Thank you, Senator Margolis for your kind introduction and unwavering support. You truly are one of Miami-Dade County's first ladies.

I want to again recognize all of today's program participants. Let's give them a hand.

And of course I want to thank Commissioner Audrey Edmonson for graciously welcoming me and all of you to her district. I remember just a few months ago – she was on this stage being sworn into office with her beautiful family beside her. I know this place holds a special place in her heart.

I also want to thank my staff who has worked tirelessly to make this event possible. They continuously put their private lives and personal agendas aside to serve not only me, but this community.

Chairman Bruno Barreiro... Members of the Board of County Commissioners... Madam State Attorney Fernandez-Rundle... Fellow Elected Officials... members of our Consular Corps... Clerk Ruvín... Mr. Manager... County Attorney Greenberg... Superintendent Crew... Department Directors, Fellow County Employees... Miami-Dade County residents... and Yellow Shirts... Welcome. Bienvenidos. Bon jour.

It is a privilege for me to formally address you for the first time since voters made an historic decision to change the way in which our government is run. To borrow a phrase that punctuated the 1984 campaign of President Ronald Reagan... I say to you today... "It's morning again in Miami-Dade County." Because of the faith you have placed in me... we are destined to be prouder, stronger and better.

We have undergone the most fundamental change a community can experience. We have altered our very structure of government and now it is up to all of us to make it work.

Now that we have a new foundation – we are taking the next steps. We are wasting no time in getting to work. We are focusing, more than ever, on the people, places and things that make this community tick.

PEOPLE

I want to begin by talking about some of the people and relationships that already exist – and will serve our community well in the coming year – as we transition toward a new form of government – a government that is less than a month old.

One of the most important relationships was formed even before there was an election. I'm talking about my relationship with Commission Chairman Bruno Barreiro.

Before he was sworn-in as Chairman... we met. We talked. We committed ourselves to working together for the benefit of the residents of Miami-Dade County. We opened a healthy – and long overdue – dialogue between the Mayor and the Chairman. We understand our responsibilities and that our relationship is vital to ensuring government moves forward. Our respect for one another will serve this community well as we tackle tough issues... like the need for lobbying and ethics reform. I ask you to join me in recognizing our new Commission Chairman Bruno Barreiro.

I am also happy to say that my relationship with the Commission extends beyond the Chairman. In the past few weeks, I have met with several of our Commissioners one-on-one to discuss common interests and concerns. Our conversations have been positive, productive and spirited. That's exactly how it should be! I look forward to more of the same.

The dynamic between the Mayor and Department Directors is also changing. Expectations are high. Everyone is being evaluated. Everyone has an opportunity to shine.

Department Directors are identifying what can be accomplished in their departments within the year. I want specific objectives with realistic timelines which will produce tangible results.

In 2006, our Public Works Department met the challenge. More than 65 of our County's most congested intersections underwent short-term traffic fixes. Delays in some areas were reduced by 30%. We have only scratched the surface. We need to do more. Every department needs to "sign-on" to this spirit of innovation and cooperation because every Department Director will be held accountable.

We owe it to our taxpayers to show them what we are doing today and everyday... and exactly how their hard-earned money is being spent.

By my side as we conduct the people's business is our County Manager, George Burgess. George has a thorough understanding of Miami-Dade County government. His knowledge and talents are invaluable. No one can help convey my goals and vision better. George. Please stand.

As people... George and I will soon qualify to participate in my own Mayor's Initiative on Aging. It's for seniors 55 and older... and I'm one year shy of 55. George isn't far behind.

In all seriousness... for the past two years... my office has worked with the Alliance for Aging and the Health Department's Consortium for a Healthier Miami-Dade to promote wellness and safety for seniors. The second phase of this program is now beginning. For the next two years... the focus will be on repairing the deteriorating and hurricane-damaged homes of seniors.

I've said it before... seniors are people who deserve to live in an atmosphere of dignity and respect... and whatever I can do to help them... I will.

PLACES

Seaport

My focus is not just on people and relationships, my focus is also on the places that breathe life into our County. I'm talking about our airport and seaport. Combined... they generate an estimated \$365 billion dollars – and 352,000 jobs – for our local economy. We cannot live and prosper unless they are recognized as world-class facilities dedicated to excellence.

We are the undisputed cruise capital of the world. Close to four million people sail through our seaport annually. Imagine filling Dolphins Stadium 50 times over. That's how many people cruise through our Port each year.

But competition is fierce. With Port Everglades just 27 miles to our north, we have to do more to lure and keep our cruise and cargo customers. We cannot leave anything to chance.

Next month, 16 new cargo gates will open. They will help improve traffic flow. But, let's face it, we need a bigger – and longer term – solution. A tunnel connecting the Port to the mainland would provide long-term relief for everyone who drives downtown.

The state has committed to half the expense to build this necessary link. Careful financing and cooperation with our partners are the keys to making this project work. To say it is expensive would be an understatement. But, I ask you to resist the immediate urge to say “no.”

Instead, consider how American ingenuity and publicly financed projects changed our community... nation and world. The Panama Canal... the Golden Gate Bridge... and Miami-Dade's own Government Cut are monuments to our civilization. The Port Tunnel can be Miami-Dade County's work for the 21st century.

Airport

Miami International Airport is also working toward a better tomorrow. For so many years, M-I-A was a stomping ground for greed. The way in which business was conducted hurt our image in the eyes of the business and trade communities. Post 9/11 challenges further threatened our productivity.

We are rebounding. Passenger and cargo numbers soared in 2006. American Airlines – our principle carrier – had a record year. Asian markets continue to realize our boundless potential. The vigilance of our airport security has been recognized nationally.

We must capitalize on this good news... good fortune... and the international thirst for our community. We must move forward... and we are.

The South Terminal is nearly complete... and will open later this year. The new facility will allow us to house more than 20 international and domestic airlines. We're just not adding space. We are transforming the look and feel of M-I-A.

The completion of the South Terminal will allow us to pour more resources into the North Terminal project... and speed up its completion.

We must remember, our airport and seaport are the first places visitors see when they arrive and their last experience before they depart. Impressions can last a lifetime.

Housing

As we talk about places that feed our economy... we can't ignore spaces. I am talking about empty lots which mark the spots where affordable housing should be. There is no way to sugar-coat it. The facts exposed earlier this year clearly show – our Housing Agency failed. Our County failed.

But one American poet said it best, "People have the power to redeem the work of fools." I have the utmost confidence in two people who were chosen to rebuild our Housing Agency – Senior Advisor Cynthia Curry and Housing Director Kris Warren.

They are both here... and I want them to stand. You have been told – in private – and now in public – to do whatever it takes to make our Housing Agency work. You have my full backing and support.

The difficult job they have ahead is compounded by federal budget cuts... and concerns in Washington about our past practices. The past is the past. The past will not be repeated.

We are far from where we want to be... but we are making progress. Here's a snapshot:

- \$18 million dollars recaptured by the County from languishing projects
- 1,000 rental units to be online by the end of the year
- A totally new management team, including a Chief Financial Officer and Chief Operating Officer, and an incoming Chief Development Officer.

A top-to-bottom review of the table of organization and operations is ongoing... with an emphasis on customer service and asset management. I understand the strong emotions that surround the lack of affordable housing, but I think all sides want the same thing – progress. We all want places... not spaces.

Wireless

Every place in Miami-Dade County could soon be part of a low-cost wireless broadband network... making it possible for anyone in our community to surf the net wherever they are.

The primary goal is to erase the digital divide... and make the internet accessible to those who otherwise could not afford it. After 3 town hall meetings... 6 focus groups... and 4 steering committee meetings... we are ready to begin implementation. The project would be funded with low-cost subscriber fees... sponsorships... savings realized by the County because of the new technology... advertising revenues... the assistance of private internet service providers and philanthropic organizations.

Pilot projects are scheduled to go online this summer. Over the next two years, we hope to blanket all 2,000 square miles of our County with wireless technology.

Marlins

While techies are excited about the possibilities of wireless... sports fans are still reliving the thrill of the Super Bowl. The NFL can't stay away. Super Bowl 41 generated an estimated \$400 million for our economy... and in three years, we will do it all over again during Super Bowl 44. That says a lot about our community!

But football is not the only game in town. Baseball is the American pastime... and the Florida Marlins have made our community proud by winning not one, but two World Series. A stadium for our home team makes sense. We have a site in the heart of Downtown Miami next to the Government Center and the Metrorail. Combined with the American Airlines Arena... our Performing Arts Center... and the still-to-come Museum Park... we have an entertainment hub in the making that will rival even the most cosmopolitan city.

A team is at work putting this deal together. The City of Miami, Major League Baseball, and Miami-Dade County are at the plate. The signals coming from our Governor and state legislators are good. The bottom line is... we need to make this play. We need to close this deal... and make a permanent place in Miami-Dade County for the Florida Marlins.

Some have "booed" this idea. But let me make myself clear about my support of baseball in South Florida. I don't intend to "sell the farm" to keep the Marlins here.

My commitment is based on a number of factors... including a financial commitment from team owners. It is not my goal to enrich the wealthy at the expense of our taxpayers – but I do believe there is justifiable cause for a government partnership in the management and construction of a baseball facility in our community. If a deal is transparent, based on common sense, and fiscally sound, it's a "win" for everyone.

BASIC THINGS

Public Safety

As we focus on places... we must also focus on things – basic things, essential things... that all communities should provide.

First and foremost, we need to make sure our residents not only feel safe... but are safe. We're getting the job done.

Violent and non-violent crime in unincorporated Miami-Dade County is down – way down. Robberies are down... and tourism robberies are nearly non-existent. Only 7 cases were recorded in 2006. Compare that to 1992 when we had an all-time high of 645 cases. That's a decrease of 99%.

But we all know, statistics don't tell the human story about crime in Miami-Dade County. Because when you are a victim, numbers don't matter.

Like other communities around the nation, we are seeing an increase in homicides. We know the reasons why – gangs, drugs and guns. The people committing these murders must be locked up and kept off the streets.

A stepped up enforcement effort is ongoing and intensifying. And we're adding a new element in the coming weeks. For the first time ever in Miami-Dade County, we're implementing a gun bounty program. The concept is simple – turn in someone with an illegal gun – and get a reward.

It is a way to get weapons and criminals off the streets.

Prisoner Re-entry

While career criminals deserve no less than being locked up for a long time... the issue of prisoner re-entry has taken on new urgency in recent years. We must do a better job at recognizing the special challenges of those who have served their time and must re-enter society.

The approach we have been taking has not worked. On average, 40% of those released from prison are convicted of a new crime within three years. Twenty-five percent of them end up back in prison. Society is then forced to bear the financial and human cost of their crimes, as well as the cost of their apprehension, conviction and imprisonment.

I am convening a Prisoner Re-entry Council to bring together government and community leaders, businesses, foundations, human service professionals, and people with criminal records to discuss better ways to prepare and assist formerly incarcerated individuals as they try to lead positive and productive lives.

The fact is that when people with criminal records can turn their lives around, we all win. Our families, our neighborhoods and our county's economy all benefit when formerly incarcerated individuals achieve independence and lead healthy, responsible, crime-free lives.

Mental Health

I am proud to say we are decriminalizing mental illness. The Mayor's Mental Health Task Force has fulfilled its mission. The Task Force has successfully implemented nearly every recommendation made in a 2004 Miami-Dade Grand Jury Report.

That report was an indictment of the way our community treats people with mental illness. Since its release two years ago... more than 1,000 law enforcement and correctional officers have been trained to respond more effectively to cases involving the mentally ill.

Our Board of County Commissioners deserves praise for setting up a self-replenishing fund to provide housing and other critical services to those with serious mental illness.

And we're working with our state partners to acquire and develop a first-of-its kind mental health diversion facility. It will assist the mentally ill in re-entering

the community. Judge Steven Leifman – who helped lead this effort -- will now head up a monitoring committee to ensure that we continue moving forward. The judge and I agree – jails are no place for people with mental illness.

Water & Sewer

If public safety and all that comes with it – is the most important service a government can provide... water is a close second. Currently, Miami-Dade County consumes approximately 346 million gallons of water per day. Only 5% of that water is reused.

We should be leading the way in protecting our water supply. Instead... we're wasting what is no doubt our most important natural resource. If we don't work swiftly to find alternative sources of water... our community will "dry up." Water restrictions and building moratoriums will be imposed on us.

Last year we led the state in job growth. Our unemployment rate declined. Our tourism numbers soared. That prosperity equation could be reversed if we don't get realistic and responsible about water usage.

Transportation

Similarly... we're all thirsting for solutions when it comes to transportation.

Our unbridled growth and lack of adequate planning has created an entire profession dedicated to traffic reporting and a thriving jitney industry in neighborhoods where people need public transportation to be more accessible and reliable.

Since the passage of the People's Transportation Plan, our bus service has greatly expanded and ridership is way up. Bus drivers are being trained to ride on the shoulders of expressways when lanes are clogged. We are also improving intersections and synchronizing traffic signals to improve traffic flow. It's not enough. We must do more.

Our MOVN Initiative – created by citizens – has prompted a public education and enforcement campaign. Simple acts – like moving your vehicle to the side of the road following a minor accident and making sure your car isn't the one blocking the intersection – can make a difference. There are many simple solutions out there... and no improvement is too small.

Longer term solutions include eliminating traditional toll plazas to allow barrier-free tolling on roads like the Don Shula... 836... and the Gratigny; and adding new elevated lanes along I-95 to allow motorists the option of paying to travel -- with greater ease -- during peak hours.

Together with the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority... and the Florida Department of Transportation... these ideas have proven to work elsewhere – and can work here too.

We must also move forward with our Metrorail Expansion plans. I am confident more people will use public transportation if it gets them from where they live to where they want to go. Right now – we're idling. We need to be stepping on the gas and moving forward.

CLOSING

Finally... let me say that while our challenges may seem great... they are minimized by our ability to do even greater things. Together, we must search for answers. Together we need to identify problems which have the potential to reflect negatively on our administration. Together we must put aside our differences for the common good of the people.

Just as we changed history by changing our charter... we are now poised to make history. By going back to basics... focusing on the fundamentals... and what truly matters – the people, places and things – that make this community tick.... we are charting a new course for our families and future generations.

I pledge to each and every one of you today that no community will be left behind. No segment of our society will be neglected. This Mayor works for all the people of Miami-Dade County.

Thank you... and God Bless Miami-Dade County.

