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VIA EMAIL ONLY

The Honorable Daniella Levin Cava
Mayor, Miami-Dade County
111 Northwest First Street, Suite 2460
Miami, Florida 33128

**Re: Miami Dade County Manatee Protection Plan
Proposed Amendments and Comments**

Dear Mayor Levin Cava:

We are writing to express our concerns regarding the proposed amendments to the Miami-Dade County Manatee Protection Plan (“MPP”) recently released by the Department of Environmental Resources Management (“DERM”) for public comment. As a stakeholder committed to the responsible development and activation of the Miami River, River Landing Shops & Residences has a vested interest in the future of waterway access, safety, and environmental stewardship.

As you are aware, DERM presented its proposed amendments to the Miami River Commission (“MRC”), and on July 14, 2025, MRC Chairman Horacio Aguirre submitted a letter to your office recommending further revisions. We fully support Chairman Aguirre’s comments and proposed modifications to the MPP.

To provide context, in 2009, the County Commission created the Manatee Protection Plan Review Committee to develop recommendations in coordination with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (“FWC”). DERM staff worked with FWC, and a consensus was reached in 2010. However, the resulting amendments were never presented to the full Commission for adoption. For your convenience, we are enclosing the County Manager’s Report and Recommendations for your review and staff consideration.

Today, DERM has once again been tasked with updating the MPP—this time during a period of rapid growth and development in Miami-Dade County. As you know, one of the most pressing quality-of-life challenges facing our region is traffic congestion. The County’s Transportation Department is exploring waterborne transit options, including water taxis and ferries, as part of a broader strategy to shift a portion of daily commutes off the roads and onto our waterways. Cities



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like Fort Lauderdale and Tampa are leveraging their waterways to relieve roadway congestion, and Miami-Dade should not fall behind.

The City of Miami is similarly pursuing water-based transit solutions to ease congestion, particularly around Downtown and the River. These efforts align with your administration's broader transportation vision, and it is critical that County policies—especially environmental regulations—reflect and support this strategy.

Unfortunately, the current draft of DERM's proposed amendments is inconsistent with the County's transportation goals, lacks balance between environmental protection and economic development, and fails to account for the importance of enforcement. In fact, DERM's report contradicts itself by highlighting problem areas for manatees while simultaneously allowing increased boating activity in those same areas. The report also places unjustified limitations on the Miami River, potentially encouraging businesses to look outside the County for growth.

Below are specific observations and recommendations regarding DERM's report:

1. **Outdated Focus on Manatee Deaths:** While the report updates data on manatee injuries and deaths, it fails to provide a comprehensive view of contributing factors. In 2025, FWC reported only one manatee death caused by watercraft in Miami-Dade. The other deaths were due to natural causes or unconfirmed. Pollution is a far more pressing threat than boats today.
2. **Lack of Balance:** The report does not address how to effectively balance commercial activity, private boating, and environmental protection along the River and other waterways.
3. **Inaccurate Data on Accidents:** DERM highlights the Downtown area as accounting for 55% of manatee-related accidents. Page 60 claims the area north of the Miami River has the most accidents killing manatees. However, FWC data suggests these numbers are inflated or misrepresented. DERM also references floodgate areas near the airport—where sonar technology has successfully mitigated risks.
4. **Absence of Management Proposals:** Despite acknowledging that Downtown Miami and the Intracoastal require heightened management, the report fails to include any strategies for enforcement or oversight. See pg. 65.



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5. **Noncompliance Issues:** DERM states in page 66 that “Idle No Wake” zones are effective but compliance is poor, especially at Black Point Marina and the mouth of the River. Yet the report fails to offer any concrete enforcement solutions.
6. **Misleading Conclusions:** On page 72, DERM conflates areas of high boat usage with manatee carcasses, citing Downtown, the ICW, and PortMiami—but notably not the Miami River.
7. **Limited Scope of Amendments:** The proposed amendments begin only on page 73 and largely focus on Marine Facility Siting Criteria, excluding the FWC-approved 2010 amendments. The new criteria impose burdensome restrictions that will halt business development along the River, without offering enforcement mechanisms, fines or solutions.
8. **Contradictory Dock Recommendations:** The report on page 95 calls for more transient docks in Indian Creek, Vizcaya, Fisher Island, and Marina Stadium—despite identifying these areas as hazardous to manatees. There are no facts or evidence provided as to why those locations were chosen and not the Miami River . The Miami River, a key economic corridor, is conspicuously omitted all while being an economic engine for the County and City.
9. **Inconsistent Positioning:** DERM comments: “There is a recognized interest in accommodating expansion of certain water-dependent uses in the downtown Miami Area.” However, DERM does not extend this recognition to the Miami River—an oversight that undermines equitable development.
10. **Lack of Standards:** While the report cites the opportunity for new locations to seek transitory docks provided they can prove that the site is protecting the manatee. Yet, DERM offers no standard for this protection. What is that process other than arbitrary decisions by DERM? While DERM mentions improved signage, signage is not working. Why isn’t DERM investigating more sonar on the Miami River to warn boaters like the airport’s flood gates. Why isn’t DERM endorsing more enforcement and heavier fines to fund manatee protection and enforcement.

The Miami River is vital to the economic and urban future of our County and the City. It supports a diverse range of uses—including marine industries, residential growth, and commercial development—all of which are helping revitalize the urban core without expanding into



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environmentally sensitive areas like the Everglades. The MPP should support, not hinder, this sustainable path forward. There must be balance with protecting the environment while preserving growth on the River. But simply saying “no” to growth and change should be unacceptable.

DERM’s treatment of the River is arbitrary and unsupported by data. It applies stricter rules to the River while proposing expanded marine access in more affluent areas—despite similar or greater risks to manatees. River Landing, for example, has no record of manatee deaths in its vicinity, yet faces the same restrictions as problem zones.

Rather than innovating enforcement methods or embracing new technologies, DERM defaults to outdated restrictions from 1995. Saying “no” to growth is not a solution. But then it gives favoritism to downtown Miami and other high income residential areas to allow for more uses and more boats. A balanced approach—protecting both manatees and our economic future—is essential. For example, throughout the report no little distinction is made within the various zones of the Miami River except to say the mouth is the worse part and the airport needs to add protection. As to River Landing, there is no evidence of any manatee deaths on the Miami River by or around River Landing.

We respectfully support the Miami River Commission’s proposed revisions and would like to emphasize the following specific recommendations that promote both environmental protection and economic growth:

Proposed Revisions to the MPP:

- 1. Create a Dedicated Manatee Protection Fund.** Establish a fund to support manatee habitat protection, enforcement of idle/no-wake zones, and compliance against illegal charters. (Motion 22; revise pp. 107–110.)
- 2. Increase Fines for Violations.** Implement escalating penalties for speed zone violations and repeat offenders. (Motion 1; revise p. 112.)
- 3. Expand Waterborne Transportation.** Permit water taxi and other waterborne transit throughout the entire Miami River and its tributaries, consistent with approved plans in Fort Lauderdale and Palm Beach. (Motion 9; revise p. 98.)



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4. **Redefine Transitory Boat Slips.** Exclude water taxis, vessels visiting parks/restaurants, and boats over 100' from the slip count, and clarify that such uses do not count against development limits. (Motion 9; revise p. 19.)
5. **Fund Enforcement through Targeted Fines.** Establish fines for illegal charters and No Wake violations, with revenues dedicated to enforcement efforts.

We welcome the opportunity to work with your administration to adopt policies that strike a fair and responsible balance between protecting our environment and promoting economic vitality on the Miami River.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrew Hellinger

Cc: Board of County Commissioners
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