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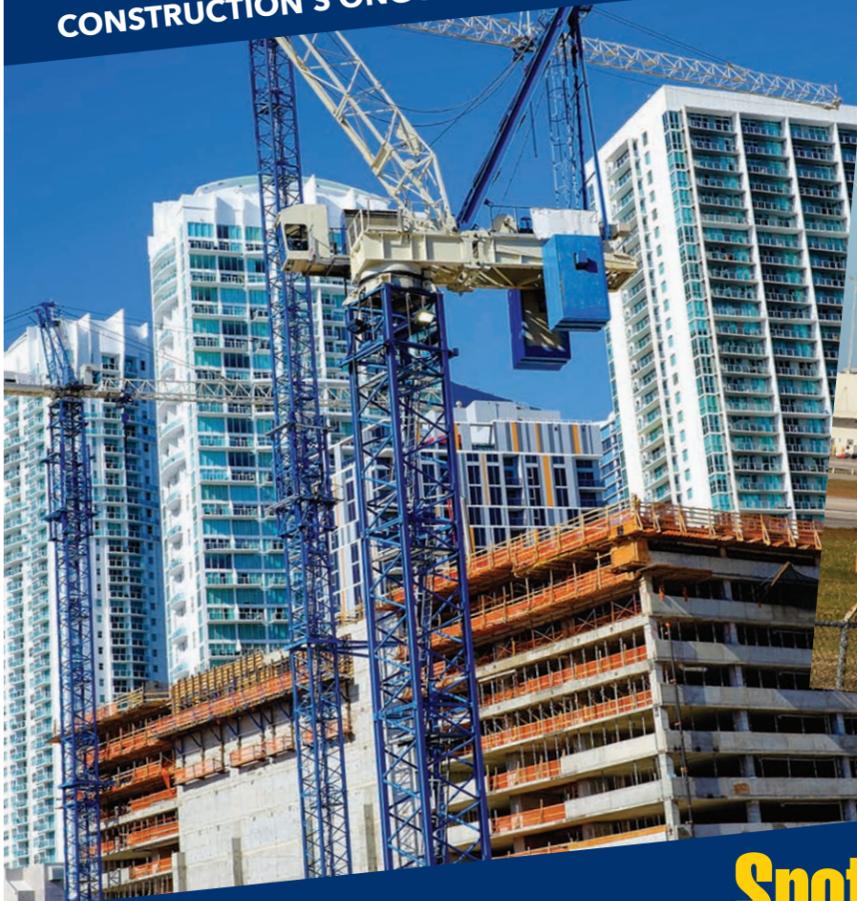
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Stepping up to make Miami more resilient and sustainable

By KYLEA HENSELER

As Miami-Dade seeks solutions to climate change and sea level rise-related issues, a number of individuals have stepped up to help make us more resilient and sustainable.

These two words, said **Aris Papadopoulos**, founding chair of Miami-based nonprofit Resilience Action Fund, don't necessarily mean the same thing, but both are important. "Green," he said, essentially means something is eco-friendly and has a small environmental footprint, whereas something "resilient" is strong enough to withstand the demands of time and nature. "Sustainability," the ultimate goal, he said, is a combination of the two, and the nominees in this section are making strides concerning all three.



Aris Papadopoulos

Mr. Papadopoulos, who is also a Distinguished Expert in Resiliency at Florida International University's (FIU) Extreme Events Institute, was nominated by Miami Beach Commissioner Mark Samuelian for his expertise in the field and efforts in helping the city with a long-term vision project.

Mr. Papadopoulos was on his way to a meeting on the 64th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001 when the first plane struck. After evacuating and thankful to have a "second chance at life," the MIT-trained engineer started looking at why buildings are vulnerable in the first place.

"We control what we develop," he said, "and the more I learned, the more I realized that we have a tendency to develop in a vulnerable way. We invested a lot in the US in developing our infrastructure and communities over the last couple centuries, but they're failing at a very high rate."

This realization inspired him to start the Resilience Action Fund, which provides resources for consumers and policymakers to inform themselves on resilient building practices and what to look



Manny Rionda of Fill a Bag focuses his efforts on beach cleanups.

for in a home.

Last year, Mr. Papadopoulos started working with Miami Beach on the "Miami Beach Resilience Vision Project." The city and its residents, he said, will need to have a continuous dialogue about sea level rise and holistic solutions, and consider some pretty big questions about what the island will look like decades into the future. In the fall, FIU students led by Professor John Stuart got a start on looking into these questions through a project that asked them to consider what various sites may look like in the year 2070.

To this end, the city approved the project with FIU this year, to begin with the Miami Beach Resilience Vision online workshop July 21 that will present ideas from the Miami Beach Urban Studios Sea Level Solutions Center and take comments, reactions and suggestions from the public and policymakers.

One question, for example, is how transportation will look in the future. Will Miami Beach residents have private cars in 50 years, Mr. Papadopoulos wondered, or will

the streets be canals similar to those of Venice? Or some kind of mix?

Such ideas, he said, take a long time to gel, which is why it's important to begin a long-term dialogue with residents and community stakeholders. While there's no doubt any resiliency upgrades will come with a cost, Mr. Papadopoulos noted that future private investors may see opportunity in funding sustainable projects.

Once the workshop is complete, he said, the next step is a charette with experts to further discuss resilient possibilities, followed by a potential international competition where contestants can submit ideas for future resilience projects and win a monetary prize.

While the county and the its cities face a long-term battle with climate change, some members of the community are addressing the issues of waste, pollution and education in more immediate ways.

After moving to Miami from Spain in 2009, **Helena Iturralde** said, she grew more distraught by the amount of waste she saw in the US, from disposable plastics to usable furniture cast aside onto

streets. After a few years running an antique store for repurposed furniture, she started A Zero Waste Culture in 2019 to further educate the community on sustainability issues and make an impact on plastic, tactile and food waste.

Manny Rionda, founder of Fill a Bag and another nominee in this section, said Ms. Iturralde repurposed fabric into thousands of reusable masks at the height of the pandemic in addition to starting a much-needed composting program in Key Biscayne.

When the organization started, Ms. Iturralde said, they scheduled community visits to waste management facilities to learn about recycling. But, since single-stream recycling still leads to a great deal of waste as one contaminated product can spoil many, they quickly turned to reusing scraps and providing sustainable solutions by sewing old T-shirts and sheets into grocery bags. When covid hit, the group, which includes fairly-paid working mothers who lost jobs during the pandemic, pivoted again to making masks. They made over 9,000, she said, under a program where each mask sold provides for two masks to be donated.

The group has started making bags again, she said, buying hundreds of pounds of un-sellable t-shirts from places like Goodwill and giving them a second life. They also visit schools to teach students about recycling, and have started a community composting program that now has 126 participating households on Key Biscayne.

For \$176 per year, she said, families get a bucket every week that can be filled with kitchen scraps and dropped off at a community market or picked up by a volunteer. The waste is then taken to a composting facility, which members can visit to learn more about the process. As part of their dues, members are entitled to a portion of the soil produced by the composting site each year.

Mr. Rionda and **Theo Quenee**, founder of Send It 4 The Sea, were also inspired to start their organizations to combat excess waste, particularly in the ocean and Biscayne Bay.

"The shoreline cleanups this guy and his crew do are second to



none," Frankie Ruiz, Miami's chief wellness officer, said of Mr. Quenee. The group, Mr. Quenee told Miami Today, has removed 30,000 pounds of garbage from Biscayne Bay since 2019 through its cleanup efforts.



Theo Quenee

The core of the organization, he said, is students at area colleges, as young people can reach new generations in a meaningful way. After a surfing trip to Nicaragua demonstrated to Mr. Quenee the global nature of pollution in the ocean, he said, the organization was founded with the goal of helping watersports athletes give back to the ecosystem they depend on.

A message the group tries to get across, he said, is to work on "reducing" because "recycling" isn't as easy as it seems. While Send It sorts the waste it gathers from beach cleanups, he said, almost all of it goes back to landfills.

"Recycling should be the last step in the process," he said. "We're living such a disposable lifestyle, where everything we buy is meant to be tossed and hidden from our sight after we're done using it."

Mr. Rionda, who Mr. Quenee said has driven a great deal of environmental awareness in Key Biscayne, focuses on beach cleanups in a different way.

According to Mr. Rionda, Fill a Bag got started after he and his girlfriend got in the habit of filling a bag with trash each time they hit the beach and posting it on social media to raise awareness of plastic pollution. Inspired by the public stations that allow pet owners to grab bags to pick up dog doo, Mr. Rionda thought a similar concept could work for beach cleanups.

After winning a Miami Foundation Public Space Challenge, he got to work installing on local beaches wooden posts with reusable buckets that allow people to pick up trash as they wander. When covid hit, he said, the organization sponsored over 30 events where small "pods" of people could do a socially distanced cleanup.

The model, he said, inspires lifestyle awareness and participation, as seeing the consequences of pollution can lead individuals to make different choices.

Some, he said, looked to get involved themselves, leading to a Fill a Bag DIY initiative whereby camps, Girl Scout troops, students or other people and groups can apply for Fill a Bag materials and learn how to set up a station on their own beach. There are now 35 stations around the country, Mr. Rionda said, with the majority in Florida, one in Cape Cod, and a participant looking to build one in Indonesia.

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