

# At Zoo Miami, Ron Magill draws a crowd. This time, to fight a zoo project: Miami Wilds

[By Douglas Hanks](#) Updated November 05, 2023 9:16 AM

## Miami Herald

South Florida residents joined Ron Magill, the Zoo Miami communications director during a rally against the Miami Wilds water park plan outside the zoo that could pay millions to the county. By Pedro Portal

Ron Magill has spent his career in county government promoting Zoo Miami, but he arrived there Saturday morning to fight his employer's project.

Standing on a parking lot planned for the Miami Wilds water park that would anchor a new Zoo Miami Entertainment Area and generate an estimated \$3 million a year in rent, Magill ticked off the reasons he thought Miami-Dade commissioners should vote against the plan.

"If we took a countywide vote on this project there's no way it would pass," Magill, 63, said about an hour before the longtime zoo communications director took the stage at a rally he organized to oppose Miami Wilds. "I hope the commissioners understand that."

[READ MORE: More delays for Miami Wilds water park vote as county mayor says other sites on table](#)

Environmental arguments against Miami Wilds hadn't prevented a string of supportive commission votes for the project in [the last few years](#).

The planned Miami Wilds water park project would bring water slides and other aquatic attractions to land currently used as parking lots outside Zoo Miami. *Miami Wilds*

But developers lost momentum in September [with a delayed vote](#) days after Magill publicly urged commissioners to reject a project that his ultimate boss, Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, had recommended.

## **It's Ron Magill versus Miami Wilds in Miami-Dade debate**

Management at the Parks department, which operates the zoo, made the case to commissioners to support the project, which first won board approval in 2020. A main selling point for Miami Wilds is that the bulk of the rent would go into the \$43 million budget at a zoo that [only sells about \\$21 million worth of tickets a year](#).

Magill said those factors have put him on the outs with superiors, as Zoo Miami's most famous employee leads the charge against a project now set for a final vote on Dec. 12.

"He's the Zoo ambassador," said José Romano, president of the [Zoo Miami Foundation](#), a charity supporting the zoo that recently voted to oppose Miami Wilds. "When I go out with him in public, people stop him and take pictures."

Now in his [43rd year as a county employee](#) in a \$130,000 a year job, Magill got his start when the county zoo was still in Key Biscayne. His longevity puts him well past the 30-year mark that locks in a full county pension, and Magill said he's limited his Miami Wilds fight to hours before and after work.

Artist Alexander Zastera finishes a poster he'll display at a rally led by Ron Magill, the communications director at Zoo Miami to convince the Miami-Dade commission to vote against the controversial plan to build the Miami Wilds water park, next to Zoo Miami, on Saturday, November 4, 2023. Pedro Portal [pportal@miamiherald.com](mailto:pportal@miamiherald.com)

Raquel Regalado, a commissioner who opposes Miami Wilds, said [Magill's opposition](#) undermined the notion that the project would help the zoo.

"He took a stand when a lot of the employees were afraid to take this on," she said during an interview at the rally. "His leadership has been amazing."

Standing 6-6, Magill gained fame as the zoo representative who made the media rounds, including frequent appearances on national Spanish-language shows filmed in Miami.

During a 2015 visit with fellow zoo professionals to his father's native Cuba, Magill was alarmed when two guards stopped the Miami-Dade County employee at the airport. Then he heard in Spanish: "Are you the guy from *Sábado Gigante*?"

[READ MORE: The face of Zoo Miami enjoys a star turn in Havana](#)

Nearly 20 years ago, Magill used his prominence to support the plan that ultimately produced the Miami Wilds development deal. He campaigned [for the 2006 referendum](#) Miami-Dade needed to build a for-profit enterprise on parkland, and it passed with the proviso that any project not cause environmental harm.

In court papers, Miami-Dade lawyers described as unfounded the environmental arguments against Miami Wilds made by Bat Conservation International and the Tropical Audubon Society.

## **Developers: This is a project on parking lots, not habitat**

The conservation groups last year [sued the county](#) over a project that won commission approval in both 2020 and 2022. With development delayed by litigation and snags on federal approvals, developers needed another commission vote to win extensions on construction milestones.

Ron Magill, the communications director at Zoo Miami leads a group of South Florida residents during a rally to convince the Miami-Dade commission to vote against the controversial plan to build the Miami Wilds water park next to Zoo Miami, on Saturday, November 4, 2023. Pedro Portal [pportal@miamiherald.com](mailto:pportal@miamiherald.com)

Developer Paul Lambert calls the environmental objections misleading because the land in question is paved parking space already used by thousands of vehicles a day. He's urging Miami-Dade to let a federal environmental review take place before taking any action against a job-producing attraction already endorsed by county voters.

"This is entirely being built on a parking lot in the zoo," Lambert said in a Friday appearance [with Magill on CBS4](#). "None of this is being built in a forest." In a statement after the rally, Lambert added that Miami Wilds wouldn't build anything if federal regulators concluded the [Florida bonneted bat](#) or any other imperiled animal was at risk. "The Endangered Species Act is the gold standard to protect endangered species and must be respected and followed," he said.

Delays in hitting construction milestones, which developers blame on the litigation, require extensions that Levine Cava initially endorsed. Now her administration says problems with federal approvals [have invalidated the Miami Wilds lease](#), a conclusion developers are fighting.

This week, Levine Cava declined to address Magill's fight against Miami Wilds. But she praised him. "Ron is dedicated," she said. "He's very informed, and has clear views."

## **Parks Department: county employees are free to speak out**

In a statement Saturday, the Department of Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces said county employees are free to speak out on county issues.

"Miami-Dade County is proud that many of our employees are active, engaged residents who are involved on issues affecting our community," the statement read. "All County employees, including those in our department, are entitled to express their opinions as private citizens about any matter, as that only reaffirms our nation's core values of freedom of expression."

About 300 people turned up for Saturday's event, many of them donning free aqua T-shirts with the slogan, "The smallest among us need the greatest protection."

Lauren Gregory, 22, brought her own sign and two for her parents. They featured hand-painted bats and the phrase "Rewild Miami" in glitter

letters.

A large group of South Florida residents marched together to the Zoo entrance during a rally led by Ron Magill, the communications director at Zoo Miami to convince the Miami-Dade commission to vote against the controversial plan to build the Miami Wilds water park next to Zoo Miami, on Saturday November 04, 2023.  
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A senior at Florida International University majoring in marine biology, Gregory said she's been passionate about bat conservation since she spent \$200 in birthday money a few years ago to buy audio equipment sensitive enough to hear their high-frequency calls.

She's been attending County Commission meetings against Miami Wilds well before Magill started fighting the project. She said she welcomed Magill's voice.

"If the zoo can't protect the bats, who can?" she said.

On the rally stage, Magill said he wanted the crowd to focus on the importance of protecting wildlife. He released into flight a red-shouldered hawk a local shelter had nursed back to health from ingesting rat poison. A zoo veterinarian's son announced a countdown before the bird soared above the surrounding trees. Minutes later, Magill had the crowd close in behind him for a selfie from a drone flying above.

Magill started the program with an introduction and a disclaimer.

"My name is Ron Magill," he said, "and I'm here today as a private citizen."

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Doug Hanks covers Miami-Dade government for the Herald. He's worked at the paper for nearly 20 years, covering real estate, tourism and the economy before joining the Metro desk in 2014. [Support my work with a digital subscription](#)