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FINAL EDITION

SANCTUARY AT SEA



CHARLES TRAINOR JR./MIAMI HERALD STAFF

READY TO DEVELOP: A bridge connects North Island to Aventura, after a quick trip through the already inhabited South Island.

If you hate your neighbors — hate all neighbors, in fact — here's a rare chance to purchase a private island in North Miami-Dade. Warning: It's not cheap.

BY DONNA GEHRKE-WHITE
Special to The Miami Herald

You know what they say about waterfront land. The same thing they say about real estate in general: Snap it up while you can, because they aren't making any more of it.

So here's the deal: You can now buy your very own eight-acre piece of land skirted on all sides by water but linked to the Aventura mainland by bridge.

Price tag? \$49.5 million. A lot of money, yes, but for the clients Gary Cohen has in mind, a "drop in the bucket."

Cohen represents the Cohen Family Trust, formed by his father, Norman, who came south from New York to buy property in the 1960s.

It is not quite true, incidentally, that they no longer make waterfront property. North Island, as this undeveloped nugget is dubbed, is in fact a man-made island, born in the '50s, along with its sibling South Island, from sediment



CHARLES TRAINOR JR./MIAMI HERALD STAFF

ON THE MARKET: Gary Cohen and his Realtor, Scott Patterson, are hoping to get \$49.5 million for North Island.

dredged from the bottom of Biscayne Bay.

In the past decade, South Island became South Island of Island Estates, a retreat for the rich. It is now the gated, secluded setting for 22 sumptuous single-family homes, each worth multiple millions of dollars.

The family trust was planning to market North Island when the bottom

fell out of South Florida real estate. Although property values are still at or near low ebb, the trust is ready to try again.

To get to North Island, you have to drive through South Island, which may limit the development opportunities for the former. Plop a Trump Tower on North Island and you'll have a steady stream of fancy cars streaming through South Island en route to homes on North Island, an unhappy prospect for privacy-loving South Islanders.

One of North Island's selling points is that it is in deep enough water for the super-rich to dock their yachts, thanks to the dredging that resulted in its creation.

Although it is set just east of the towering development known as Williams Island — Cohen's father once owned that land, too, but sold it to Julius

• TURN TO ISLAND, 2A

TALLAHASSEE

Budget enables bigger classes

■ State lawmakers are poised to ease class-size requirements at the request of cash-strapped school districts, though voters have rejected the idea.

BY PATRICIA MAZZEI
Herald/Times Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — Florida voters last November rejected relaxing constitutionally mandated limits on class sizes. So state lawmakers have taken matters into their own hands.

Tucked in the House and Senate budget plan is a provision tweaking the definition of the educational core curriculum, a move that would reduce by hundreds the number of courses under class-size restrictions.

The change is welcome news for cash-strapped school districts desperate for looser — and less expensive — class-size caps. But it has irked some Democrats and teachers who pushed through the 2002 constitutional amendment for smaller classes.

Steep cuts loom for school districts as both legislative chambers prepare to slash per-student spending and funding for programs outside the classroom. Miami-Dade and Broward

• TURN TO CLASS SIZE, 2A

MiamiHerald.com/florida
Read more on state politics

TALLAHASSEE

Commercial designers show flair for a fight

■ You might expect a battle in Tallahassee over education, taxes or immigration, but the licensing of commercial interior designers has taken center stage in the state capital.

BY JANET ZINK
Herald/Times Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — The young woman stepped to the podium, eager for a chance to address Florida lawmakers.

"I came to this country for two reasons. I came for freedom, and I also came for a dream, a dream which you want to take away from me," said Lilian Perez, of Miami, her voice shaking. "You just don't care. I see your faces."

You might expect such passion to be about education, taxes or immigration.

Her plea? Save interior design. Forget about the tussles between unions and lawmakers, the Legislature and governor, Democrats and Republicans.

The real knock-down, drag-out fight this session is over commercial interior design.

Tears and cheers have punctuated hours of testimony as licensed interior designers warn

• TURN TO DESIGNERS, 2A

LATIN AMERICA

Former gang members try to shed their skin

■ As police pressure mounts on Central American gangs, former members are trying to get rid of tattoos that mark them for life.

BY TIM JOHNSON
McClatchy News Service

SAN SALVADOR — When Santos Guzman sought help from a state program for one-time gang members, there was no mistaking his gang affiliation.

His forehead bore the large tattooed inscription "MS-13 Sur," a unit of the feared Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, gang that has tentacles across Central America and the United States. Two tattooed teardrops trickled down his cheek below

his left eye. Huge tattoos on his chest and back gave him an ink sort of body armor. His fingers and legs also sported gang tattoos.

On his sixth visit to a state tattoo removal clinic, Guzman lay face down on a padded exam table. A physician aimed a jet of chilled air at a giant tattoo on Guzman's back, drawing a slight wince on his face. Then with a laser, she traced the outline of the tattoo, gently coaxing the ink out from below the skin.

Guzman wants the 20 or so tattoos on his body to vanish. He gave up the life of a gang-banger long ago but only recently learned that the evi-

• TURN TO TATTOOS, 11A



TIM JOHNSON/MCT

SLOW WORK: A laser operator outlines a tattoo on the back of former gang member Santos Guzman.

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TALLAHASSEE

Budget works around class-size limits

• CLASS SIZE, FROM 1A

officials have warned they could be whacked between \$100 million to \$200 million next year.

Over the past three years, Miami-Dade has cut more than \$180 million and Broward more than \$136 million. Broward also imposed a property-tax rate increase last year to help cover its shortfall.

The voter-approved amendment went into full force this school year. It limits the number of students to 18 for kindergarten through third-grade classes, 22 for fourth through eighth grade and 25 for high school.

SHRINKING CORE

The caps apply only to core courses and not to classes like physical education, band and those offered online through the

Florida Virtual School. Legislators are considering excluding more classes previously considered part of the core.

The state Department of Education counted 849 core courses this school year. That number would shrink to 288 under the new proposal.

The only core classes for pre-kindergarten through third grade would be in language arts, math and science — as the rules stand now. The bulk of the changes would affect fourth through 12th grades, where only classes tested by state exams or required by state law to graduate from high school would be taken into account.

In all grades, special education courses and classes for English-language learners would continue to be part of the core curriculum and thus subject to class-size

limits.

But foreign language classes and honors and advanced courses, for example, no longer would be.

“It would mean that the classes could grow exponentially in those areas,” said Sen. Nan Rich, a West-on Democrat and Senate minority leader.

‘RATIONAL’ MOVE

A Senate staff analysis suggests that those classes already have low enrollment. And Sen. David Simmons, the Altamonte Springs Republican in charge of his chamber’s pre-K-12 education budget, said the affected courses “by any stretch of the imagination could not be considered core curricula.”

“It deals with a rational and flexible way to implement the class-size amendment,” he said.

The Florida Education Associa-

tion, the statewide teachers union, does not see it that way.

FEA spokesman Mark Pudlow called the curriculum change a “cost-saving move” and not good policy for students. “They’re going to pack them in like a sardine can,” he said.

The union does back a portion of the class-size provision that would allow schools to temporarily have three to five more students per class. Those additional students would be accepted only after October, when schools carry out their class-size counts. And schools would have to present a plan to be in compliance with the mandates by the following October.

If approved, the measure would likely spur a legal challenge from those who sought to limit the size of classes, a House staff analysis

warns.

The Florida PTA and school districts that support small class sizes have still pleaded for some sort of relief.

“We have been begging for flexibility for years because the mandate is much to rigid to handle logistically,” said Georgia Slack, a lobbyist for the Broward school district.

Thirty-five of the state’s 67 districts fell short of meeting the requirements last fall and now face hefty fines totaling about \$31 million. That includes \$6.6 million from Miami-Dade, \$2.9 million from Broward and \$15.8 million from Palm Beach.

Separately, lawmakers have filed legislation to do away with the penalties.

Patricia Mazzei can be reached at pmazzei@miamiherald.com.

REAL ESTATE

For sale, not cheap: island sanctuary at sea

• ISLAND, FROM 1A

Trump, no relation to Donald — most people are unaware of North Island’s existence.

“We like flying under the radar,” Cohen said of his family.

And yet, Cohen did allow the TV show *Burn Notice* to stage a gun battle on the bridge linking the islands to each other.

“I first said no, but they kept calling me,” Cohen said.

As to why they think now is the time to sell, Cohen and his listing agent, Scott Patterson of Esslinger-Wooten-Maxwell, say the rich are returning to the real estate market. Last year, they point out, sales of Miami-Dade single-family homes that cost at least \$1 million jumped 18 percent — to 434.

“We’re already off to a big start” in 2011, said EWM President Ron Shuffield.

Among those sniffing around, according to Patterson, are a wealthy Greek, Russians, Brazilians and other Latin Americans. A Tokyo television station flew in to shoot footage of the island — currently an unlovely patch of dirt and gravel garnished with a few scraggly trees — before the March 11 earthquake diverted attention, Patterson said.

Peter Zalewski, a Bal Harbour-based real estate analyst who publishes *condovultures.com*, is one who believes that anyone who spends \$49.5 million on North Island will be forced by the economics of that purchase to carve it into condos.

Patterson downplays that sce-



CHARLES TRAINOR JR./MIAMI HERALD STAFF

BACKDROP: North Island is part of the city of Aventura, whose soaring condo towers will define the new residents’ view.

nario because, he says, it underestimates the willingness of the super-rich to pay a premium for a safe, private estate.

If you are into this sort of thing, there are actually hundreds of islands for sale around the world,

says Chris Krolow, an island expert. But the Cohens’ North Island stands out because it is one of the most expensive currently on the market in the United States, said Krolow, who is CEO of Private Islands magazine and

privateislands.com.

Other selling points: North Island is part of a city — Aventura — is zoned (R-2, single-family development) and has the bridge already in place.

If islands are what you like but

North Island doesn’t fit your needs, Krolow suggests checking out Cave Cay in the Bahamas. It’s more than twice the price — \$110 million — but comes with 222 acres and a runway.

TALLAHASSEE

State’s commercial designers showing a flair for a fight

• DESIGNERS, FROM 1A

lawmakers that lives will be lost to flammable fabrics and paints if they don’t keep regulation of the profession in place.

“Buildings do not burn. Interiors do,” Gail Griffin, a professor at Miami Dade College’s School of Architecture and Interior Design, told the House Appropriations committee Wednesday.

She scolded the panel for their ignorance.

“Do you know the color schemes that affect your salivation, your autonomic nervous system?” she said. “You don’t even have correct seating. And somebody chose that for you.”

Deregulation of the profession is covered in a massive House bill intended to boost the economy by ending regulation of about 20 professions, including auto repair shops, hair braiders, charities and intrastate movers.

The thinking is that getting rid of regulations will save business owners money on fees and make it easier for new people to set up shop. It’s part of the end-job-killing-regulations mantra from Republicans.

But no deregulation proposal has generated more controversy in Florida than the one targeting interior design.

Ninety people signed up to speak at Wednesday’s hearing about HB 5005, including dozens of interior design students who fought back sobs as they talked about worrying they had wasted

time and money on degrees. Others highlighted the potential for bad design to result in materials being used for weapons in prisons, flooring that causes falls and fabrics that lead to death.

“Part of my job is to ensure the finishes that I select cannot be made into weapons,” Terra Sherlock, a licensed interior designer from Tallahassee, told lawmakers. “We do that in jails, and we do that in schools.”

A couple of weeks ago, Tampa interior designer Michelle Earley told the House Business and Consumer Affairs subcommittee her expertise means she knows to avoid fabrics that contribute to the spread of hospital-acquired infections.

“By not allowing interior designers to be specialists and focus on the things they do, what you’re basically doing is contributing to 88,000 deaths every year,” she said.

Unlicensed designers argue regulations stifle competition and keep the industry in the hands of a greedy cartel.

Pat Levenson of Lake Worth said she wanted to be an interior designer her whole life and returned to school to earn a degree in the field.

“I had no idea that Florida required a government license just to call yourself an interior designer,” she said. “I came to realize that the licensing scheme had nothing to do with protecting the public, and everything to do with protecting the industry and designers



PROVIDED TO THE MIAMI HERALD

SPOKE OUT: Gail Griffin, a professor at Miami Dade College’s School of Architecture and Interior Design, works with students. She testified Thursday in Tallahassee.

Interior Design and Florida law

- Florida is one of only three states (the others are Nevada and Louisiana) that requires licenses for commercial interior designers.
- To attain a license in Florida, an aspiring designer must achieve six years of education and experience, and pass all three portions of the National Council for Interior Design Qualification exam. There is a \$125 biennial renewal fee, and continuing education is also required.
- The license in Florida allows designers to do work involving commercial spaces, draperies, flooring, clubhouses and swimming pool areas. It enables them to submit stamped and signed drawing plans, and carry out work on design projects.
- No license is needed to offer residential interior design, or services including window treatments and paint.

from fair competition from people like me.”

The House panel spent more time Wednesday on this issue than on the \$66 billion budget proposal.

Florida is one of only three states that requires a license to practice commercial interior design. Currently, 4,203 individuals and businesses hold such licenses. Getting one requires six years of education and experience, passing a national exam, a \$30 application fee and biennial \$125 licensing fee.

High-powered lobbyists have been hired on both sides, but the appeals of licensed designers appear to be gaining traction. Several representatives, including two Republicans, have said they want designers out of the proposal.

Rep. Darryl Rouson, D-St. Petersburg, said he has been surprised by the intense passion and it has convinced him the profession needs to remain regulated.

“Interior design is more than just selecting a color and a piece of

furniture,” he said. “It’s knowing the psychological impact of carpeting, and how carpeting affects the work environment and the living environment. There’s something to be said when you walk into a doctor’s office and the environment puts you at ease in your moment of illness and discomfort. It’s not fun when people get sick because of selection.”

Edward Nagorsky, director of legislative affairs for the National Kitchen and Bath Association, said those concerns are unfounded.

“They make it sound like it’s so difficult, it’s so complicated and it takes years of experience. It doesn’t,” he said, noting retailers sell products specifically designed for commercial spaces. “It’s a cartel because these licensed designers are fighting for regulations to keep other people from entering the field.”

The next stop for the bill is the House floor, which one expects is covered in flame-resistant carpet.

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