

Miami's Business Leaders Try to Learn How to Make Money From Sea-Level Rise

BY JESSICA WEISS

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What do an architect, an insurance broker, and a teacher have in common? In South Florida, they should all be thinking about sea-level rise.

You know the story by now: The seas are rising, to the tune of at least three feet over the next 100 years. And Miami is the number one at-risk community in the world.

But Wayne Pathman, the chair-elect of the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce and chair of Miami's Sea Level Rise Committee, is tired of reading news articles that say the Magic City is doomed. For Pathman, the encroaching seas present huge opportunities.

That's why he and the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce gathered business leaders, social scientists, government officials, and sea-level rise specialists this week. He wants to turn the threat into a conversation about innovation and investment in the city.

"Water and water-related issues will be big business over the next 50 years," Pathman says. "It will foster a lot of jobs and development, and we have to adapt and change."

Pathman, a land-use attorney who has lived in Miami Beach his entire life, has long spoken out about the need to prepare for sea-level rise. A few years ago, he visited the Netherlands, where nearly 50 percent of the country sits below sea level. The Dutch are well known for their creative and aggressive flood-control measures, such as floating houses and office buildings and "water squares" that can catch runoff during high-water periods. The more Pathman traveled and learned, the more he became convinced Miami's business community was not as engaged as it should be.

"In the Netherlands, there seems to be more consensus from everyone to find solutions, because otherwise, the country would be flooded," he says. "We all have to work together here so that there is a feeling that this can create economic prosperity. We have to rebuild and rethink."

Some 100 people, from across all sectors and industries, took part in Wednesday's meeting at the W Hotel in South Beach. Present were representatives of some of South Florida's top businesses, such as David Martin, president and cofounder of the development firm Terra Group; Manuel Medina, chairman of the technology conference eMerge Americas; and Jessica Goldman Srebnick, CEO of Goldman Properties. And 20 specialists traveled from across the country to

represent every aspect of sea-level rise, from law and planning to geology and environment to insurance and business. Specialists included architect Reinaldo Borges, natural-hazards expert Megan Linkin, and landscape and urban designer Walter Meyer.

Geospatial analyst Keren Prize Bolter presented University of Miami architecture student Isaac Stein's aerial rendering of a vision of a resilient Miami Beach, featuring mangroves and new canals and channels. "Here's an idea: Make it floodable," she told the crowd. "This is the greatest threat humanity has ever faced," Bolter said of sea-level rise. "The government usually takes care of it. But this is bigger than that. What if they can't?"

Attendees separated into eight groups, met with various specialists, and then rotated every ten minutes for more than an hour. Pathman says the event was just the first in a three-year series to engage the business community in the sea-level-rise conversation.

"The world is waiting to see what Miami does," Pathman says. "Hopefully, this was the match that lit the fuse."

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