Florida is waking up to The Miami River's importance. As the state's fifth largest port, the source of most of its Caribbean sea trade, it is a $5 billion business employing more than 8,000. It is also Biscayne Bay's largest tributary, and environmentally critical. The Miami River Commission has worked with the river community to reverse the area's historical neglect and bring it the verge of a renaissance. Yet the most important work lies ahead...
The Miami River is a 5.5-mile navigable working river running through Miami’s heart to Biscayne Bay. This exotic, vibrant urban waterscape flows past boatyards, shippers, tugboats, marinas, public parks, mangroves, historic homes, pleasure craft, public parks, restaurants, hotels and downtown office and condominium towers into Biscayne Bay. It is the center of a 69-square-mile urban watershed twice the size of the City of Miami.

Most of Miami-Dade County’s marine businesses operate here, some in the same family for generations. The river is the source of more than 15 feet at the center of the channel, but silt and shoaling over more than two generations have reduced its navigability.

For more than a thousand years, people have dwelled along the river’s banks. In 1513, Ponce de Leon found a spring-fed river with a large Tequesta Indian village and ... through historic residential neighborhoods and parks, and one-third through Miami’s bustling downtown into Biscayne Bay.

As an international trade center, the river is one of the state’s most important bodies of water. Yet because the river has not been dredged since 1933, buildup of sediment has reduced its navigability. That sediment - contaminated by stormwater runoff, sewage, oil spills and other sources - has also made the river among the most polluted bodies of water in the state. Without dredging, comprehensive cleanup of the river is impossible. Two grand jury reports in the last decade and the Miami River Study Commission’s January 1998 Call To Action cited continuing problems of pollution and the buildup of sediments. That report said it was essential to marshal political and civic leadership to dredge the river and thereby remove accumulated pollutants.

In response, the 1998 Legislature established The Miami River Commission as “the official coordinating clearinghouse for all public policy and projects related to the Miami River.” Most importantly, the commission was entrusted with finding solutions and getting results. Its mission is to work to ensure that government agencies, business and residents speak with one voice on river issues, to develop projects to improve the river, to secure funding for projects and make sure they are completed on time and within budget. It includes shipyard owners, government officials, small business owners, Coast Guard personnel, neighborhood activists, and concerned private citizens.

Under Managing Director, Capt. David Miller, the commission works with an operating budget of about $100,000.

The commission’s immediate priority is to get the river dredged and thereby purge it of dangerous pollutants and return the navigable channel to its original depth. Without dredging, the true cleanup of the river and Biscayne Bay cannot happen, and ship traffic can proceed only at high tide. Although most channels in port areas are dredged routinely, The Miami River has not been dredged since 1933. Each passing year, as sediment builds, problems of both pollution and navigability only worsen.

As a watchdog group, The Miami River Commission is the main catalyst and advocate for the river. We operate in the Sunshine, with our documents and meetings open to the public. We approach our work with urgency. By law, that work shall end July 1, 2003, unless the Legislature deems otherwise. In keeping with our mission and mandate, this initial report describes the commission’s purpose, accomplishments and pending tasks.

The Miami River Commission’s first full year was filled with accomplishment and promise. We believe the river is finally on the verge of a revival, but big tasks still lie ahead. In 1999, a varied group of people representing industry, government, residents and businesses rapidly shaped themselves into a results-oriented group speaking with one voice. We brought river dredging and cleanup within sight for the first time in nearly 70 years. Our productive, hard-working committees quickly set about to improve every aspect of river life. These are some of the achievements:

- We got an allocation for dredging in late September 1999, President Clinton signed into law the first $5 million to dredge the Miami River. That happened because, the preceding spring, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers determined that the federal government fund 80 percent of the cost of dredging the river, with the city, county and state paying for the rest. That was critical. Never before had the federal government agreed to pay most of the dredging cost. The decision made dredging fiscally practical for the city, county and state. This was the keystone to the Miami River’s revival.

- We built political support. The partnership would not have happened without the Miami River Commission’s work with the offices of Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Carrie Meek, Sen. Bob Graham and the support of the South Florida delegation. Miami-Dade County Commissioner Bruno Barreiro worked particularly hard to build local support. Today, the city, county and state are working to complete their partnership to raise the local share needed to make dredging happen. We hope to begin dredging in late 2000 or early 2001.

- In 1999, we launched a Greenways project with the Trust for Public Land to ensure that the river is friendly for residents and visitors alike. In September, many of us traveled to Chattanooga, Tenn., to learn from the Trust about that city’s nationally recognized Riverwalk and Greenway. We worked to start an Urban Design Center to harmonize the river’s physical appearance and initiate an action plan to improve blighted areas. We helped get parkland dedicated in the Spring Gardens residential neighborhood. We know that a working river can be friendly for residents and visitors alike, as Chattanooga, Cleveland, Providence, R.I., have taught us. Our hard work is paying off, but we won’t rest until we are confident that the Miami River Basin will develop into an area that benefits shippers, businesses, recreational boaters, residents and visitors.

- We built a consensus with public, private and civic leadership.

- Dramatically increased public awareness of the river.

Robert L. Parks, Chair
Dredging the river is a major project, and needed for both environmental and economic reasons. The Miami River contains some of the most contaminated sediments in Florida – the result of decades of inadequate storm water systems, untreated sewage flowing into the river, and a lack of environmental stewardship.

While the environmental benefits are clear, the economic benefits are equally important. Dredging the channel to its original depth results in timely ship movements ... a better infrastructure to accommodate the foreseen 30-60 percent growth in trade and the associated increase in jobs.

Dredging will take five years. Dredged sediment will travel by barge to an above-ground drying area near the river that Miami-Dade County is working to secure. Trucks will then take dried sediments to an environmentally approved landfill.

Failure to dredge is the greatest stumbling block to stronger international maritime trade with our neighbors in the Caribbean and Latin America. Trade has declined over the past decade as shoaling and sedimentation has reduced the depth of the channel. Loaded ships can only move at high tide. Dredging is the solution.

The Army Corps created a "worst case" estimate of Miami River dredging costs at approximately $80 million – a deliberately high estimate that includes a $16 million contingency fund. Another $32 million is allotted for Miami-Dade County's landfill tipping fee (the per-ton fee to pass the gate to the Miami-Dade Landfill). This, too, is a worst-case estimate with less costly options probable. Eighty percent of the costs are to be paid for with federal funds over five years. For that to happen, local sponsors would pay up to $7 million to acquire land for the fills. Of the other $13.8 million, with the state contributing 50 percent ($6.9 million a year for five years), the city 25 percent ($650,000 a year) and the county 25 percent ($650,000 a year).

When local sponsorships are completed, we can return to the federal government to provide its share to start dredging. From all we have learned so far this year, we believe we are in an excellent position to put all the parts in place and make dredging happen.

The Miami River Commission is divided into working groups. This report highlights work of four groups for Dredging, Quality of Life, Public Safety and Economic Development. These groups operate separately but work in concert, as we believe that dredging, zoning, the environment, public safety and economic development are interrelated.
The Miami River’s position is vital for both the recreational boating and commercial shipping industries. The Economic Development and Commerce group aims to protect and promote these vital industries and other businesses along the river, while adhering to the letter and spirit of laws and regulations to protect the environment.

We are working with the Quality of Life Group to bring zoning, land and water uses into harmony with the best interests of residents, visitors and the general commercial and maritime businesses that support them.

Our group urges developers to make projects and greenways accessible to recreational boaters by including boat slips and docks with new developments. We are also encouraging river area expansion of the pleasure boating and growing mega-yacht business.

This task is urgent, because developers have targeted Miami River as a new hot spot over the last year. Developers have been busy assembling land and announcing an unprecedented number of ambitious plans along the river.

Those plans have included: a three-tower, mixed-used residential development on the river’s north bank; a riverfront restaurant and nightclub district comparable to those found along Cleveland and San Antonio riverfronts, and even a high-rise “mini-city” of apartments, condos, theaters, restaurants, hotel rooms, parking, and shopping. These projects, while preliminary, attest to developers’ growing confidence in the river’s unique appeal after years of stagnation along the downtown riverfront. The Miami River Commission wants developers to complement both the river’s natural and working assets.

In commercial maritime trade, no other port in Florida can so effectively serve the smaller, but vital, maritime markets throughout the Caribbean and the northern cone of South America. These markets, with smaller populations, lack the intermodal road and rail links that big container ships require. This makes the Miami River the state’s most logical port for smaller, shallower-draft vessels that are the staple of maritime Caribbean Basin trade. This river trade is critical to the economic, social and political health of our neighboring nations.

The Miami River is South Florida’s only shallow draft port of vital economic influence internationally. The nearby Miami International Airport is a growing international cargo center, and the planned Intermodal Transportation Center will only strengthen the river’s role as a transportation link.

In 1990, the Miami River was documented as Florida’s fifth largest port. Cargo values rose from $2.3 billion in 1990 to $4.3 billion in 1998, and by most estimates exceed $5 billion today. Terminals rose from 14 to 38. In 1998 alone, 4,172 cargo vessels called on the Miami River, if and when trade opens with Cuba, shoppers say, that traffic could easily double.

Thanks to cooperation among businesses, residents, and law enforcement agencies, the Miami River area is safer than it has been in years. While much work lies ahead, law enforcement is far more visible along the river. Two of the Public Safety Group’s most important arms are the Quality Action Team, which comprises private river businesses and government agencies, and the Miami River Enforcement Group, a team of law enforcement and regulatory agencies.

The Quality Action Team has supervised a dramatic reduction in derelict vessels on the river. In the past 18 months, the number of derelict vessels requiring removal has been cut from more than 50 to fewer than 10. The Coast Guard, as a QAT member, has fully implemented its system targeting high-risk, foreign flag vessels. As a result of this policy of tightened enforcement and strengthened education, foreign flag vessels are significantly safer than they were two years ago, and in full compliance with federal pollution prevention regulations, thereby reducing oil spills and sewage discharge.

The Miami River Enforcement Group has increased nighttime marine police patrols through the City of Miami, created code enforcement inspection teams to educate the public and enforce regulations and laws in a coherent, harmonious way. River businesses appreciate the value of these teams in fostering consistency in enforcement.

The Enforcement Group has systematically promoted a cooperative spirit among the assorted law enforcement and regulatory agencies. That cooperation has produced numerous seizures of contraband and a notable reduction in criminal activity.

MIAMI RIVER FUND, INC. INTEGRATED BUDGET FISCAL YEAR
July 1, 1999 through June 30, 2000

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Miami River Commission Members

Managing Director:
CAPT. DAVID MILLER
Chair:
MR. ROBERT L. PARKS, ESQ.
Member at Large Appointed by Governor
Vice Chair:
MR. PHIL EVERINGHAM
Chair of Marine Council
Designee: Mr. James Wellington
FLORIDA GOV. JEB BUSH
Designee: Mr. James F. Murley
Mr. Ralph D. Cunard
SEN. MARIO DIAZ-BALART
Chair of Miami-Dade Delegation
Designee: Rep. Gustavo Barreiro
MAYOR JOE CAPOLLO
Mayor of Miami
Designee: Ms. Christina Bahamonde
COMMISSIONER JOE SANCHEZ
City of Miami Commissioner
Designee: Ms. Eileen Damaso

MAYOR ALEX PENELAS
Mayor of Miami-Dade County
Designee: Ms. Sandy O’Neil
Ms. Virginia Sanchez
COMMISSIONER BRUNO A. BARREIRO
Miami-Dade County Commissioner
Designee: Mr. Alfredo J. Gonzalez
MR. MICHAEL COLLINS
Chair of Governing Board of South Florida Water Management District
Designee: Mr. Gerardo B. “Jerry” Fernandez
Ms. KATHERINE FERNANDEZ RUNDLE, ESQ.
Miami-Dade State Attorney
Designee: Mr. Gary Weston, Esq.
MR. JAMES BROWN
Chair of Miami River Marine Group
Designee: Mr. Richard Bunnell
MS. PATI ALLEN
Executive Director of Downtown Development Authority
Designee: Mr. Alonso Menendez

MR. WILLIAM O. CULLOM
President,
Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce
Designee: Mr. James E. McDonald, Esq.
GR. ERNEST MARTIN
Neighborhood representative appointed by City of Miami Commission
Designee: Ms. Virginia Newall, PhD.
MS. SALLYE JUICE
Neighborhood Representative Appointed by Miami Dade Commission
Designee: Ms. Jane Caporelli
Representative from Environmental or Civic Organization Appointed by the Governor
Designee: Ms. Theo Long

MS. SARA BABBIN
Member at Large Appointed by the Governor
Designee: Mr. Tom Parker, Esq.
MR. GLEVE JONES, III
Member at Large Appointed by City of Miami Commission
Designee: Mr. William Parkes, Jr.
Ex officio (non-voting) members:
U.S. SEN. CONNIE MACK
Designee: Ms. Nilda Rodriguez (will change)
U.S. SEN. BOB GRAHAM
Designee: Ms. Ellen Roth
U.S. REP. ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN
Designee: Ms. Debbie Musgrove Zimmerman
CAPT. LAWRENCE J. BOWLING
Captain of Port, US Coast Guard
Designee: Commander Mike Miles, USCG

Prepared by: Mark Sell Communications, Inc.