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SUNDAY, JANUARY 18, 2026

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Broward shifts some graduations to gyms

Parents and students say cost-saving decision is unfair to many high school graduates

By Scott Travis
South Florida Sun Sentinel

The Broward School District plans to cut costs by moving some high school graduation ceremonies from performing arts centers and a university arena to school

gymnasiums, sparking a backlash among some students and parents.

In most cases, the ceremonies, scheduled to be held May 28 to June 3, will be held in gyms that are different than the ones from which students are graduating.

Dillard High in Fort Lauderdale will house 13 graduations, Pompano Beach High will house nine and Blanche Ely High in Pompano Beach will house seven, according to a district schedule. These are the only district-owned facilities large enough

to house graduations, Valerie Wanza, the district's chief of strategy and innovation, told the South Florida Sun Sentinel.

Last year, the ceremonies were held in venues such as the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, the Lauderhill Performing Arts Center and the Rick Case Arena at Nova Southeastern University in Davie. An exception is Pompano Beach High, which has held its own graduation ceremony at the school gym for years.

Eleven of the district's larger high schools

will still be held at non-district venues. The schools with the two largest graduating classes, Cypress Bay High in Weston and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, will be at Hard Rock Live in Seminole Hard Rock Hollywood, while nine others will be at the NSU arena.

In response, one outraged parent launched an online petition to change the plan.

"The disparity in venue selection sends an

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Barbara O'Donnell uses a hose to cool horses during the heat of the day at Irish Acres of Florida in the Agricultural Reserve, west of Delray Beach. AMY BETH BENNETT/SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL PHOTOS

'SOME SEMBLANCE OF A COUNTRY LIFE'

Horse stables and equestrian centers grapple with growth in Ag Reserve

By Abigail Hasebroock | South Florida Sun Sentinel

This feature from the South Florida Sun Sentinel is part of a series of stories highlighting concerns in Palm Beach County's Agricultural Reserve, a region where there's long-standing debate over land preservation and growth.

One summer day, Joe O'Donnell conversed with his wife and daughter inside a gazebo overlooking a small lake, taking a midday break from running their horse boarding facility, Irish Acres.

The scene around them was picturesque — horses strolled in the distance, the sky bore a bright blue. Their dogs relaxed beside them.

Irish Acres, at 14375 Starkey Road in West Delray, is a pocket of tranquility that feels removed from the loud rush of cars exiting the nearby turnpike, or the bustle of shoppers at nearby stores and restaurants, some opening in recent years.

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A horse awaiting grooming stands near boots and supplies at Irish Acres of Florida in the Agricultural Reserve.

High school wins when Miami or IU claim title

Columbus alumni found among both college teams

By Tim Reynolds
Associated Press

MIAMI — Tuesday's classes at Christopher Columbus High School in Miami have been canceled.

There wouldn't be much learning going on that day. No matter what happens Monday night in the College Football Playoff title game between Indiana and Miami — a game that will be played at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens — Columbus will be busily celebrating the sight of alums hoisting the national championship trophy.

Thing is, will it be Indiana quarterback Fernando Mendoza, the Heisman Trophy

Turn to CFP, Page 10

State directive raises concerns about future of pot referendum

By Anthony Man
South Florida Sun Sentinel

A state agency under control of Gov. Ron DeSantis has issued 11th-hour instructions for verifying petition signatures that could hamper efforts to get a referendum to legalize recreational marijuana on the 2026 Florida ballot.

DeSantis does not want recreational marijuana legalized in Florida. He was the most prominent opponent of a similar 2024 referendum, which failed.

Last week, the Secretary of State's Office — which is run by a DeSantis appointee — issued a directive to the state's 67 county supervisors of elections that changed the

Turn to Marijuana, Page 6

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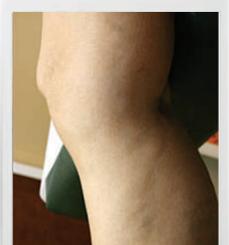
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Ag Reserve

from Page 1

This contrast is exactly what concerns the O'Donnells: How can they be expected to maintain a serene environment for the horses under their care as the Ag Reserve becomes more populated and more development clusters around them?

"I wish I were far more optimistic about where things are going. I really do," Joe O'Donnell said.

The O'Donnells are among several equestrian operators who have watched the Ag Reserve's growth over the years. These equestrian operators have been working to preserve their lifestyle and adapt to the changes, ultimately trying to maintain healthy environments for the horses within one of the state's most lucrative industries.

According to the Florida Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services, the Florida horse industry generates nearly \$7 billion in economic impact and contributes more than 240,000 jobs. And equestrian operators in the Ag Reserve attract horse owners and trainers from all over the United States and even Canada.

When Joe O'Donnell and his wife, Barbara O'Donnell, Irish Acres' founders, bought their 60-acre property in 2014, a primary factor in the couple's decision was the expectation that the land would be protected in perpetuity.

"That has proved to absolutely not be the case," Joe O'Donnell said.

'Sentient beings'

The Ag Reserve was never intended to be completely development-free, but maintaining a calm environment might be in the horses' best interest, some equine experts argue.

"Horses are such sentient beings," said Lynn Phillips, a certified planner and associate professor at the University of Kentucky.

In her dissertation about equine landscapes, Phillips wrote that "suburban development can become uncomfortably close to



Joe O'Donnell and his dog, Quora, walk at Irish Acres of Florida in the Agricultural Reserve west of Delray Beach. AMY BETH BENNETT/SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL PHOTOS

agricultural operations so as to force an economic and political showdown between the competing land uses."

Phillips' research looked at how sprawl — a form of urban growth typically on the periphery of cities in more rural areas — affects thoroughbred operations in Ocala, Florida, and Lexington, Kentucky. Thoroughbred horses are high-value, pure-breed horses often used for racing in events such as the Kentucky Derby.

Sprawl "is often defined in terms of undesirable land use patterns, scattered or leapfrog development or continuous low-density development," Phillips wrote.

Development in the Ag Reserve has taken on somewhat of a sprawl-like, patchwork appearance, largely the result of rules created to keep the area dedicated primarily to agricultural uses.

One of these rules is allowing development projects if a majority of the land is then dedicated to preservation. This began as the 80/20 rule, which allows 20% of a planned development in the Ag



Jenna Trevino, who has been boarding for 12 years at Irish Acres of Florida, grooms her horse, Billy, at the stables in the Agricultural Reserve.

Reserve to be built out while the other 80% be dedicated to preservation.

The 80/20 rule eventually led to the creation of the 60/40 rule, which is the same principle but with 60% preserve and 40% development.

Development of roads and buildings in the Ag Reserve, though

meticulous, has reduced the space available for equine operators to take horses out for rides, the O'Donnells argue.

Like people, horses should have shifts in their routine to avoid getting bored.

Molly Cobb, the owner of the equine facility Pony Paddock in

Newberry, Florida, and an expert in equestrian matters, said taking horses on walks outside of where they live gives them a healthy change of scenery.

If a person exclusively spent every weekday sitting in an office cubicle before heading to the gym, that person might wish for the chance to take a walk outside once in a while — horses feel the same way, Cobb said.

"I don't want to go to the gym today. Let's just go for a walk. You still burn the same amount of calories, you get the same exercise, but it's in a relaxed, totally different environment, and it's good for your brain, good for your soul, and the same thing with a horse," Cobb said.

At Irish Acres, horses eat well and have plenty of space on the property to roam, which is likely why the stables have a waiting list, said Joe O'Donnell. Of the roughly 30 horses there, about half are thoroughbreds.

Horses aren't meant to be confined only to a stable, the O'Donnells explained.

"They're meant to be animals that graze," O'Donnell said.

'The way it should be'

At Irish Acres, "it's all about the horse in a more natural state of being," said O'Donnell's daughter, Lindsey O'Donnell.

She recently started working with her parents at Irish Acres after a career in Kentucky working in different parts of the equine industry.

She remembers how, as a kid, she and her friends rode horses for miles in the Ag Reserve.

"My friends and I used to play hide-and-seek on the horses," she said.

More people and new developments are cramming into Florida's last-remaining greenspace, Lindsey O'Donnell said. She said she thinks the surrounding infrastructure, such as the roads, can no longer handle it.

"People just don't know when enough is enough, and they deface the integrity of land to a point that

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Member Alliance for Audited Media
A Tribune Publishing Company, U.S.P.S. 526520 ISSN 0744-8139. Published every morning by Sun-Sentinel Company, LLC, 333 SW 12 Avenue, Deerfield Beach, FL 33442. Periodical postage paid at Fort Lauderdale, FL. Postmaster: Send address changes to Sun Sentinel, 333 SW 12 Avenue, Deerfield Beach, FL 33442. For customer service, call 1-954-375-2016.

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Ag Reserve

from Page 2

it moves out a way of life that will never, ever return," she said.

"South Florida was known for farming, and now it's like you spend your days like my dad does, fighting just to keep some semblance of a country life."

Joe O'Donnell has appeared before the Palm Beach County commissioners on numerous occasions, with him, his wife and his daughter recently being vocal about opposing a redevelopment plan that proposes warehouses directly southeast of Irish Acres.

Meanwhile, those behind the redevelopment plan, another family, recently told the Sun Sentinel they feel they've made painstaking efforts to offer a proposal that reduces impact to the surrounding areas and serves the needs of the Ag Reserve.

Yet, the O'Donnells still worry about how, if it were approved, it might affect the sanctuary that's been so carefully curated for the horses. They say they aren't against all development; just the wrong kind.

If the surrounding areas aren't, as the O'Donnells have put it, peaceful, they say that could be destructive for Irish Acres.

Do the people who live and work in the Ag Reserve have a responsibility to one another?

"I believe that's the way it should be," Lindsey O'Donnell said.

Judy Hill, who operates Liberty Farm, a 10-acre horse farm with boarding facilities at 9718 Happy Hollow Road just west of Irish Acres, said she has lost business due to the increase in traffic and noise around her farm.

"There's all this development around me," Hill said. "Much more buildings, much more traffic, much more people, restaurants. ... It's not like the country anymore. It's suburbia."

Hill bought her property in 2002, and she said she has seen landowners around her, equestrian operators and otherwise, sell their property and steer away from agriculture. Hill thinks about selling all the time, but that would mean leaving her "slice of heaven right in Palm Beach County."

"I still love my farm," she said. "Do I stay there and get surrounded by concrete? Do I sell out and move somewhere else?"

'It's coming, it's necessary, it's going to happen'

Maybe it's because he's survived his heart stopping and a three-week coma from when he was a bull rider, but Brandon Mills doesn't worry too much about development in the Ag Reserve.

"I think it's inevitable. It's coming, it's necessary, it's going to happen," said Mills, who has worked as the general manager for South Florida Equestrian Village properties since 2013.

South Florida Equestrian Village boasts nearly 300 acres

"There's all this development around me. Much more buildings, much more traffic, much more people, restaurants. ... It's not like the country anymore. It's suburbia." — Judy Hill, operator of Liberty Farm



Harness racing horses work out at Sunshine Meadows in Palm Beach County's Agricultural Reserve in West Delray. AMY BETH BENNETT/SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL PHOTOS



Brandon Mills stands amid his cattle as he gives an interview at the Delray Equestrian Center in Palm Beach County's Agricultural Reserve.

of horse boarding and training grounds and about 1,000 horses divided across three different locations in West Delray: Sunshine Meadows at 16668 Winners Circle, Palm Beach Downs at 10317 W. Atlantic Ave. and Delray Equestrian Center at 14830 Smith Sundry Road.

Work for Mills starts as early as 5:30 a.m., and it doesn't end until after dark. During that time, Mills' phone rarely stops ringing; he says he gets at least 100 calls a day.

Mills' life is wholly unseparated from the equestrian operations he manages. His wife, Heather Mills,

and daughter, Skyler Mills, work with him. And his home, a charming house painted red, is situated within Delray Equestrian Center, wedged among training grounds and horse boarding facilities. The chickens and cows Mills owns live in his backyard.

All development isn't good, necessarily; Mills conceded he's "probably the last person that wants to see another house or some sort of storage facility."

"But at the same time, you got to realize that I have a family. My daughter wants to have a family," Mills said. "So that's going to be

more housing and more development."

And the people who work in the Ag Reserve also need a place to live that isn't a lengthy commute away.

"If you're a landscaper or a waitress or working at the Publix bagging groceries, you can't live in Martin County and drive all the way to Delray Beach and bag groceries, it just doesn't add up," Mills said.

One way the county has addressed this is through the adoption of the Essential Housing land-use designation in 2022. This allows higher-density, multifamily

residential development so people who work in and right around the Ag Reserve have places to live.

South Florida Equestrian Village alone employs more than 1,000 people.

Thus, the Ag Reserve is "extremely important" to the equestrian industry based solely off the jobs it generates, Mills said as he drove through the horse stables at Sunshine Meadows. The stables are somewhat reminiscent of a college dorm: rows of nearly identical units in horizontal buildings with communal areas for the horses to bathe.

Many South Florida Equestrian Village clients are from across the United States and Canada, and because horses demand a lot of attention and care, some owners will uproot their lives for as long as half the year and live at Sunshine Meadows in a tiny home or an RV.

"We have our own sewer plant, our own water treatment plant, and everything here on site, we're pretty much our own self-contained little city," Mills said.

Mills understands some folks in the Ag Reserve feel more opposed to certain developments than he does — "some people like what they've chosen today and they don't want to see that change" — but he also thinks landowners should be able to do what they want with their property, "within reason."

"It's coming. I'm not going to lay down a pound of sand about it," he said while watching his herd of cattle, including a bull named Samson, who weighs about a ton. "I'm just going to deal with it as it comes through and hope that it doesn't cause too many delays in my day. And if it does, I'll make sure to get up a little bit earlier."



Heather Mills puts a bridle on as she prepares to give medicine to Chanel at the Delray Equestrian Center in Palm Beach County's Agricultural Reserve.

Left: Head groom Emilio Sam spreads hay to feed horses at Irish Acres of Florida in the Agricultural Reserve.



A horse and exercise rider take to the 1-mile track at Palm Beach Downs in the Agricultural Reserve.

Left: A horse stands ready to be groomed at Irish Acres of Florida.