

MIAMI BEACH

Goodbye, Bikini Hostel? Miami Beach advances deal to close hostel-turned-shelter

By Max Klaver

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An exterior view of Bikini Hostel in Miami Beach on Monday, June 9, 2025. The property, currently used by the Miami-Dade Homeless Trust as a shelter, is set to be sold and demolished by a local developer, leaving many residents uncertain about their future. Alexia Fodere for Miami Herald

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Miami Beach commissioners voted Monday to advance a luxury development plan for the city's West Avenue neighborhood in an agreement that would shutter a [controversial South Beach hostel](#) that's currently housing homeless people and also order the completion of a publicly accessible path along Biscayne Bay.

Developer Michael Stern still needs approval by a second, final vote of the City Commission later this month before he can build the proposed luxury condo complex at 1250 West Ave. in South Beach. The planned structure would be 330 feet tall, more than double the height permitted under local zoning laws and twice as dense. The project would involve the demolition of an existing, 1960s-era condo building on the waterfront property.

As part of the deal, Stern's company, JDS Development Group, would purchase the Bikini Hostel — located opposite the property — then relocate its 100-plus homeless inhabitants off of Miami Beach and demolish the structure. The developer has offered to build a public park in its place or, if the city prefers, pay Miami Beach \$1.5 million.

Stern also agreed to complete the missing sections of the Baywalk, a series of walking paths along Biscayne Bay, between the MacArthur and Venetian causeways.

After nearly four hours of debate and public comment, commissioners voted 6-1 — with only Commissioner David Suarez opposing — in favor of the project, which will advance to a final June 25 vote.

While most residents who spoke at Monday's meeting supported the project, opponents called the deal a developer giveaway.

"The word on the street is that Miami Beach zoning is for sale to the highest bidder," resident Martin Moller said at the meeting.

[Ron Book](#), chairman of the Homeless Trust, the county agency that placed homeless residents in the hostel, was blunt in his criticism of the proposed agreement. He called it a "zoning for sale deal," instigated by a City Commission that Book claims wants to "purge" homeless people from Miami Beach.

But Mayor Steven Weiner contends the hostel is a public security threat and that it never should have been used as a de facto homeless shelter in the first place.

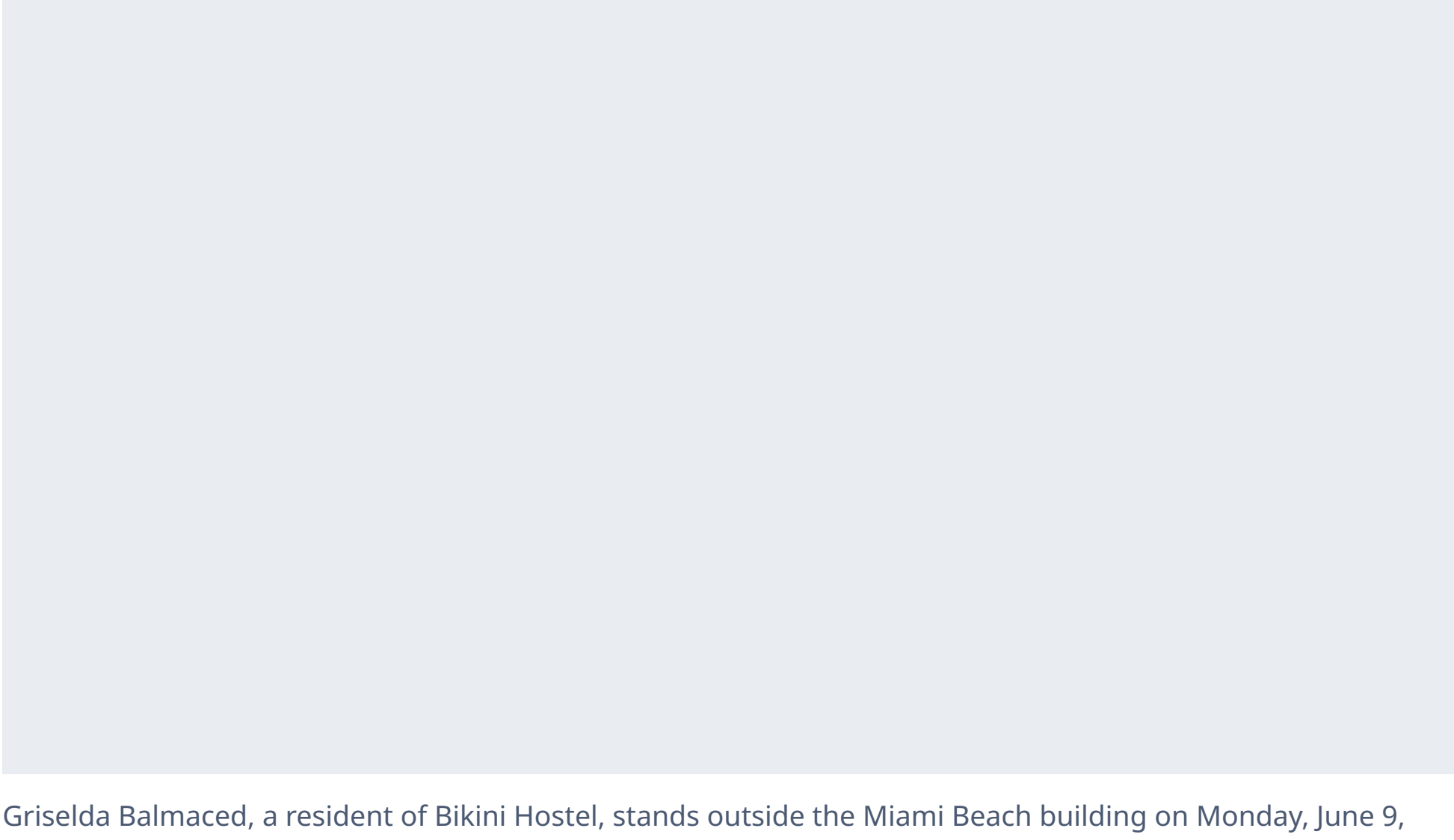
"It's sick," Weiner opined, criticizing the hostel's current form as a "gross injustice" and a "tragedy" for both the neighborhood and the homeless individuals living there.

Hostel's residents face uncertain future

Hours before the commission meeting, Debbie Braverman shrugged as she glanced over the wall separating Bikini Hostel from her condo building, across the street from 1250 West Ave.

"I don't know why people are so up in arms about it now," she said, eyeing a group of hostel residents as they milled about the front patio, smoking cigarettes and chatting. "When it was a full hostel, it was so loud. I mean, actually, this is better because it's not loud."

She doesn't like the fact that the proposed luxury condo complex across the street will be so high, but she does like the idea of living next to a park. Ultimately, she said, that's preferable to a hostel in any form, homeless shelter or otherwise, so she tentatively supports the development agreement.



Griselda Balmaced, a resident of Bikini Hostel, stands outside the Miami Beach building on Monday, June 9, 2025. The hostel, which currently shelters people experiencing homelessness through the Miami-Dade Homeless Trust, is set to be sold and demolished by a local developer, leaving residents uncertain about their future. Alexia Fodere for Miami Herald

Next door, Griselda Balmaced squinted, shading her eyes with her hand as the early afternoon sun beat down on the sidewalk in front of Bikini Hostel. She had been living in the hostel for five days, after being moved from the Salvation Army shelter in the city of Miami.

She preferred the Salvation Army.

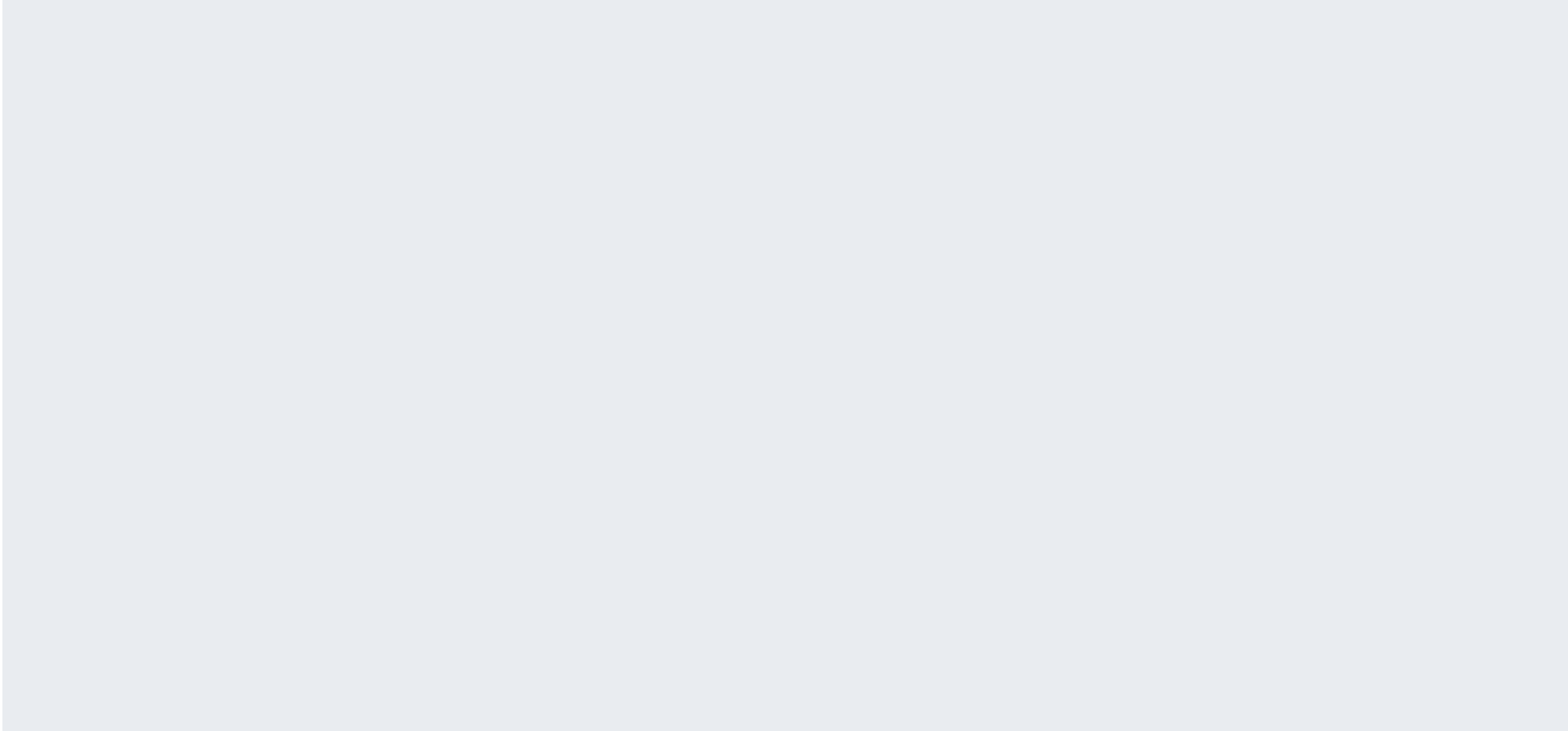
"I can't sit up without hitting my head on the ceiling," she said of her bed, the top cot in a three-story bunk. Still, she admits, "it's much better than being on the street." She hopes to stay as she saves up money from her job cleaning houses before she can eventually afford to move out.

Another hostel resident, Jorge Bellon, said he spent the previous year living on the street.

"There's no food, no bed in the streets, and it would rain. It was stressful," he said. The 50-year-old moved into Bikini Hostel two weeks ago.

The hostel has been a welcome change. Bellon says it's been a good place for him to get back on his feet as he looks for work.

Asked if he wanted to stay there, he laughed and responded "forever."



Jorge Bellon, a resident of Bikini Hostel, stands outside the Miami Beach building on Monday, June 9, 2025. The hostel, which currently shelters people experiencing homelessness through the Miami-Dade Homeless Trust, is set to be sold and demolished by a local developer, leaving residents uncertain about their future. Alexia Fodere for Miami Herald

What neighbors say about Bikini Hostel

Dozens of residents lined up before the commission and on Zoom to express their opinions on the proposed deal at Monday's meeting. Most were in favor.

Their reason: They've had enough of [Bikini Hostel](#).

"It's been a problem for years," said Weiner, who accused the Homeless Trust of "completely inappropriately" [placing homeless individuals](#) in the hostel back in November.

Commissioner Kristen Rosen Gonzalez lamented that, even with the deal's approval, the hostel would continue to operate until September.

Neighbors tended to agree in their disdain for the hostel-turned-shelter. Speaking before the commission, Laura Garofalo claimed the hostel's residents are "scaring our children." She described the development project as "the only chance to make sure we don't have a permanent homeless shelter" in West Avenue.

A board member in the building that Stern would purchase and develop, Jorge Betancourt, said he supports the deal. "I feel like I'm in a zombie movie," he said of living across from Bikini Hostel.

Betancourt added that the 1960s-era condo building that will be demolished has become a "financial trap" for many of the owners there. Between paying for assessments and stocking the building's financial reserves, Betancourt described many of the building's owners as "struggling to make ends meet." He added that "99% of [owners]" approve of the deal with Stern, which would provide them with buyout packages.

But support for the project was not unanimous.

Moller, one of the residents criticizing the project, characterized the Stern deal as a "bellwether" for developers that, if approved, would communicate to builders that they could "bribe the city to maximize their own profits."

While Moller described Bikini Hostel as "maybe not the greatest thing" for his neighborhood, he said he has never felt unsafe.

Book, of the Homeless Trust, flatly rejected suggestions that the hostel was a security concern, calling them a political fabrication.

Bikini Hostel owner Phillip Muskat agreed. "These are human beings," he said of his hostel's homeless residents, who he claims have been negatively stereotyped.

He and Stern are already under contract for the sale of Bikini Hostel. As for the public safety concerns, Muskat says he trusts the Miami Beach Police Department to do its job.

"Is their conclusion that their own officers aren't doing their jobs?" he wondered, referencing the police car permanently stationed outside the hostel. "There's a police officer six feet away, and they say [Bikini Hostel] is rampant with crime. It makes no sense."

[NBC 6](#) reported that the number of police calls for crimes in the area actually fell by 3% year-over-year in the months after November, when the homeless residents were relocated to Bikini Hostel.

Where will the homeless go?

Meiner argues the [homeless Bikini Hostel clients](#) should be moved off of Miami Beach to Camillus House in mainland Miami. [Once the county's largest shelter](#), Camillus House had a falling out with the Homeless Trust late last year over a pricing dispute regarding shelter beds. The two sides were unable to reach an agreement, and their contract lapsed in October. The Trust moved dozens of its clients to Bikini Hostel, where it reports 108 homeless individuals now reside.

Miami Beach opposed the move but had little legal recourse. The Trust — a county agency that falls outside the city government's authority — had struck a housing agreement with Bikini Hostel, a private business. In March, Miami Beach's city attorney [found](#) that the hostel was "operating within its permitted use," scuttling commissioners' hopes of revoking its business license.

But the luxury condo deal — which would see Muskat, the hostel's owner, voluntarily sell the building to Stern, the developer — provides a private-sector workaround to force the homeless residents elsewhere.

Should it go through, Book insists the Trust will have a plan. He cited two undisclosed locations that could be used to resettle the hostel's homeless clientele. While he wouldn't provide specifics, Book remarked that he "certainly would not be opposed to sheltering more people on [Miami Beach] in another location," describing the homeless issue as a "countywide problem" that Miami Beach is obliged to help deal with.

Book and the City Commission have a contentious recent past. Last year, [Miami Beach commissioners scrapped](#) a Book-backed proposal to extend to Miami Beach a 1% food and beverage tax to fund the county's homeless shelters.

Meiner has characterized the relocation of homeless individuals to Bikini Hostel as retribution for the commission's decision to rescind the ballot initiative, an assertion the Trust rejects.

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