

Critics: Spending on Miami-Dade highway landscaping excessive

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The palm-lined median of State Road 874 near Killian Parkway.

During the recent debate over a new toll rate on State Road 836/Dolphin Expressway, critics accused the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority of spending excessive amounts of money on landscaping for its highways.

“On [State Road] 874 in Kendall alone Miami-Dade Expressway Authority has ‘rubber stamped’ another very expensive landscaping project,” said a posting in June on the RollBackTolls.com website. “While one can’t argue that the work does not look very nice, there are those South Florida toll payers that believe it is excessive.”

Though the criticism resonated with people opposed to the new toll rate, MDX officials said expenditures on highway landscaping have been appropriate and in compliance with regulations and demands from residents along expressway corridors.

“We typically allocate overall budget for the entire work program of construction dollars 1.5 percent to landscaping,” said Alfred Lurigados, the MDX director of engineering. “For example, when we finished the 836 extension, which is a three-mile corridor, we put in \$4 million worth of landscaping.”

MDX budget documents show that from fiscal year 2008 to today, the agency has consistently allocated about 1.48 percent of its road construction dollars for landscaping, or about \$14.8 million of an overall \$1 billion work program for the period.

The percentage that MDX allocates to landscaping is consistent with what the Florida Department of Transportation devotes to its highway beautification program.

A March 14 memo from FDOT headquarters in Tallahassee to district secretaries and directors throughout Florida instructed them to allocate 1.5 percent of construction contracts “for the purchase and installation of plant material” along highways.

“FDOT is a major investor in landscape design, construction, maintenance goods, and services which enhance the environmental benefits of roadways,” said the memo issued by Brian

Blanchard, the FDOT assistant secretary for engineering and operations.

Moreover, added Blanchard, roadway landscaping expenditures are mandated by state law.

Section 334.044(26) of the Florida Statutes says: “No less than 1.5 percent of the amount contracted for construction shall be allocated by the department on a statewide basis for the purchase of plant materials.”

MDX critics have focused on a contract for palm trees and other landscaping plants, shrubs and flowers, that the agency signed with Manuel Diaz Farms, a South Miami-Dade landscaping business.

Among the reasons critics targeted that landscaping project were that the trees are non-native date palms and that the supplier was Manuel Diaz Farms. In 1996, the contractor was linked to a scandal involving the supply of palm trees to Miami-Dade County that turned out to be shorter than what the contract called for.

In an investigation, the Miami Herald discovered the problem after examining billings for trees purchased by the county, then verifying whether what Manuel Diaz Farms planted met contract requirements.

Manuel Diaz Farms said the reason for the “shortfall” was that the trees likely had shrunk.

In MDX’s case, there is no allegation that the palm trees Manuel Diaz Farms supplied were shorter than expected.

Nevertheless, Lurigados said MDX did check to make sure the trees Manuel Diaz Farms planted were the required height. They were, said Lurigados. In some cases, he added, the trees actually were taller than expected.

MDX officials said they were aware of Manuel Diaz Farms’ background. But they decided to give the business the contract because its bid was the best for the money.

“The winning bidder, which was Manuel Diaz Farms, bid 51 percent reduction on our prices,” said Lurigados. “Fifty one percent less. The budget never changed, MDX was just able to obtain better plant material for the same amount of money. So if we had one tree that was \$10, he offered to do it for \$4.91.”

The contract that has drawn the most attention from critics, including RollBackTolls.com, is the landscaping on State Road 874, the Don Shula Expressway in south Miami-Dade, from Killian Drive to Florida’s Turnpike.

Javier Rodríguez, the MDX executive director, has said that the agency spent about 4 percent of the project budget on landscaping — despite the state guidelines for FDOT, which do not apply to MDX.

Rodriguez told an MDX board of directors meeting last year that while MDX generally follows FDOT guidelines, for the specific 874 project the agency chose to spend more on landscaping because it had spent less or nothing on plant material for some other roadways.

“If you look at the total construction that was set for all of 874, from the Palmetto to the Turnpike, we’re investing over \$220 million,” Rodríguez said. “When you look at all the opportunities for landscaping, we’re going to be above the 1.5 [percent]. But if you look at the entire work program, the five-year work program, we are at 1.5 percent.”

One specific site that drew the most criticism was the row of date palm trees planted in the area of 874 and the Killian Drive junction.

Carlos Garcia of RollBackTolls.com said a total of 56 date palm trees were procured at a cost of \$7,815.50 per tree.

The cost of the landscaping is listed in work orders posted on the RollBackTolls.com website.

Lurigados said MDX used date palms because they are “very resilient”, do not need irrigation, and maintenance is very low. MDX officials said date palm trees are widely used in South Florida because there is no need to replace them annually.

“The landscaping looks very nice,” García said. “But a lot of people are concerned about the cost. So far, over \$3 million has been spent on landscaping on 874, including almost \$8,000 apiece for 56 Medjool non-native palm trees.”

Responding to García’s criticism, Rodríguez said: “This contract was competitively procured. There were multiple bidders, [but] the price for the materials was competitively procured.”