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AVE MARIA UNIVERSITY

Will school help the poor, the Everglades?

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If Domino's Pizza founder and billionaire Tom Monaghan has his way, the western Everglades will be the site of "a spiritual military academy," Ave Maria University. Enclosed by a 4,000-acre town, the 500-acre Catholic university "is something God wants," says Monaghan. He hopes that Florida will approve his complex this month, so he can break ground later this year.

Monaghan's ideals are noble. But on the practical side, will AMU deliver everything that it promises, at least regarding Catholic values such as environmental stewardship and the preferential option for the poor?

The environmental-stewardship worry is that Monaghan and his partner, Barron-Collier Companies, want to develop some of the most environmentally sensitive land in the United States. After flawed development nearly destroyed the eastern Everglades, taxpayers are now spending \$8 billion to restore it. Monaghan's proposal might repeat these same mistakes.

Monaghan's complex would sit between Camp Keais Strand and the Okaloacoochee Slough. Two natural "flow-ways" for water running into the Everglades, they provide water, food and travel corridors for black bears, otters, wild hogs and the endangered Florida Panther. The panther, the state animal of Florida, is sacred to the Seminole Indians. It is extinct east of the Mississippi, except for its population of 87 in South Florida -- where Monaghan wants to build. The scientific-consensus position, articulated in the January U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Landscape-Conservation Strategy, is that AMU lands include primary panther habitat. Scientists say nothing ever should be built on this "primary habitat."

Monaghan's original plan was not to build in primary panther habitat but near the coast, in Naples, where AMU is now located. What changed his mind? Monaghan cut a deal with Barron-Collier, the large landowner for whom the county is named. The company donated 750 acres for AMU and one golf course. In return, it agreed to construct the 4,000-acre surrounding town and split the profits with Monaghan. Their sweetheart deal will not benefit the Everglades and panther habitat. But will it help the poor?

AMU supporters claim that the complex will bring jobs, outreach programs and economic vitality to a poor region. Five miles north of the proposed AMU, Immokalee is home to thousands of low-wage immigrant farmworkers. Like a

developing-country neighborhood, Immokalee has crumbling gray apartments, sagging mobile homes and dilapidated flophouses where migrant workers rent beds for several dollars a night.

More than three-quarters of the town of 20,000 has not graduated from high school. One third lives below the poverty level and earns less than \$15,000 a year. Thirty percent of Immokalee jobs are in the fields or packing houses where citrus, tomatoes, potatoes and other produce are grown.

If Monaghan wants to bring economic benefits to Immokalee's poor, why did he not consult with the Immokalee parish priest? Why do AMU spokesmen say that all AMU employees will have on-site housing, so the complex is "as self-contained as possible"? Instead of being part of Immokalee, why is AMU applying for "special district status" to make it a separate governing entity, independent of local taxes that could help Immokalee's poor? Why has Monaghan said nothing about specific AMU-outreach programs, yet already planned two campus golf courses, one for students and another for potential donors?

Perhaps one reason why Barron-Collier says that the AMU complex will be "self-sustainable" is that, to gain first-phase approval, Monaghan had to promise that excess traffic would not overburden the few narrow rural roads. AMU promised that the complex would minimize trips outside and be "self contained." All college students will be required to live on campus or with their parents. AMU will have a private school for grades K-12 and provide all needed goods and services within the AMU town.

But how can AMU, which will have the largest-seating-capacity church in the country, not overburden rural roads? How can it benefit the local poor if it has "special district status"? How can Monaghan claim that the complex will not harm the environment and ignore scientific consensus about AMU lands?

Monaghan criticizes universities that want to have it both ways -- that claim to be Catholic but fail to follow Catholic values. Does he, too, want to have it both ways?

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