

When taxpayers approved \$ 8 billion to restore Eastern Everglades, decades of poorly planned development had nearly destroyed it. But western Floridians may not have learned from their eastern neighbors' mistakes. The same dangerous development is beginning in southwestern Florida.

The US Army Corps of Engineers has given hundreds of permits for drainage, filling, and development of 3700 acres of southwestern-Florida wetlands. And on March 23, 2004, Collier County approved phase one of a massive development by Domino's-Pizza-founder and billionaire Tom Monaghan and his partner, Barron-Collier Companies. On cypress wetlands and old farm fields, they hope to build the 500-acre Ave Maria University (AMU) and a 4000-acre town.

If Monaghan gets midsummer approval from Florida, he says AMU will be the site of the largest crucifix in the world, the largest-seating-capacity church in the US, a university of the size and quality of Princeton, and a self-sufficient town.

Monaghan says the Church will be there to remind people "what we're about." But what is AMU about?

Monaghan says AMU will be "a spiritual military academy." Criticizing US moral laxness, he says his university "is something God wants." It will take a firm stand on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, family planning, and the role of women.

Do Monaghan's plans fit with fundamental values as well as he thinks? What about Catholic values like the preferential option for the poor and stewardship of the environment?

Regarding the poor, AMU officials say their complex will bring jobs, outreach programs, and economic vitality to nearby poor in Immokalee, five miles to the north. 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's 20,000 residents have not graduated from high school. One third lives below the poverty level and earns less than \$ 15,000 a year.

If Monaghan is committed to the preferential option for the poor, his behavior raises some questions. Why does the AMU manager say the complex will be "as self-contained as possible, with all housing provided onsite for AMU employees"? Why is it applying for "special district status," to make it independent of Immokalee and local taxes? Why has Monaghan presented no specific AMU-outreach programs but already planned one golf course for AMU students and another for potential donors? How can he claim to employ and serve the poor, yet design the complex to provide all needed goods and services within the "self contained" community? One reason may that, to gain first-stage approval from Florida, AMU had to promise not to cause excess traffic

on narrow, rural roads. But with the largest-seating-capacity church in the US, it is hard to see how AMU will not cause excess traffic, even if it is self-contained and even if Immokalee's poor receive neither tax nor employment benefits.

Monaghan also seems to want it both ways regarding environmental stewardship. The AMU complex is to be built between Camp Keais Strand and the Okaloacoochee Slough, two natural "flowways" running into the Everglades. They provide water, food, and travel corridors for the region's wildlife, including black bears, otters, wild hogs, and the endangered Florida Panther. An umbrella and keystone species, the panther is the state animal of Florida, sacred to the Seminole Indians. The US Fish and Wildlife Service says the panther must be protected, both for itself and to safeguard other species living within its south-Florida habitat.

The panther is extinct East of the Mississippi, except for its 87-member, South-Florida population – where Monaghan wants to build. The scientific consensus, articulated in the January 2004 Landscape Conservation Strategy of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, is that AMU lands are primary panther habitat. Scientists say nothing ever should be built on primary panther habitat.

How can Monaghan claim to be environmentally sensitive, but ignore the biological consensus that his lands ought not be developed? Why did he fail to consult with Florida groups like Friends of the Florida Panther Refuge? How can he claim the AMU complex will be "self-contained," without negative environmental impacts, but seek widening the two-lane country road (SR 29) on which automobiles already kill Florida panthers?

To protect the Everglades and the panther, Monaghan could have stuck with his original plan to build 30 miles west, near Naples. Why did Monaghan move inland, to more environmentally sensitive land? He cut a deal with Barron Collier, the large landowner for whom the county is named. Barron Collier donated 750 acres for the AMU campus and one golf course. In return, he could develop the new town and split the profits with Monaghan. The sweetheart deal will benefit both. Can the same be said for the poor and for western-Florida panther habitat?

