

When it comes to Florida developers and water board chair, grease is the word

Jailhouse interview shows how deep the corruption in the development industry goes

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I love music — as the [O’Jays](#) put it so well, “any type of music, as long as it’s grooving.” I’ve long been a fan of such big-voiced belters as [Aretha Franklin](#) and [Linda Ronstadt](#). I’ve even tapped my toes to a few musicals, such as “[Singin’ in the Rain](#)” and “[Chicago](#).”

But there’s a new talent on the scene whose crooning has gotten my full attention. He’d make a great musical star.

I am speaking of Joel Greenberg, the former Seminole County tax collector and noted wingman of Rep. Matt Gaetz, [R-Venmo](#). As what the feds call “a cooperating witness,” he’s been singing up a storm about Florida corruption.

Greenberg [pleaded guilty last year](#) to sex trafficking and other ugly crimes. His sentencing is scheduled for Dec. 1, so he's got until then to convince prosecutors he can help them nail a lot of other politicians in need of indictment.



John Miklos.

What caught my attention is a little ditty he warbled for investigators concerning a developer, disputed permits, and the former St. Johns River Water Management District board chairman John Miklos, who runs a company called Bio-Tech Consulting Inc.

In the heavily redacted 119-page transcript of Greenberg's sworn testimony, released last week, the bit about Miklos shows up on page 114, almost as an afterthought. But wow, what a showstopper!

"Let's say [a development project] is not approved to be built because there are environmental issues," Greenberg told the investigators in his jailhouse interview. "Miklos would get greased off or something, and then they would all magically be approved. And this was rinse and repeat, what they would do."

Grease! It's [the word](#) — to explain why developers almost always seem to get their way in this state.

I talked to several knowledgeable people about Greenberg's comments. Here's what I heard:

- Nobody was surprised that Miklos was alleged to have been less pure than [Sandra Dee](#).
- "Greased off" may be the nastiest euphemism for "on the take" ever uttered.

Among the people I talked to was an Orlando lawyer named David Bear. He has a perspective that I would call “interesting” if I was into serious understatements.

Bear is the guy whose complaint to the cops led to Greenberg’s arrest, which led to everything else.

Bear is also the guy who, as head of an organization called Save Rural Seminole, has called for local governments to halt processing of development permits that Miklos worked on. He’s demanding a full investigation of the alleged chicanery.

As a result of that, Bear is the guy that Miklos had his attorney send a cease-and-desist letter, trying to shut him up.

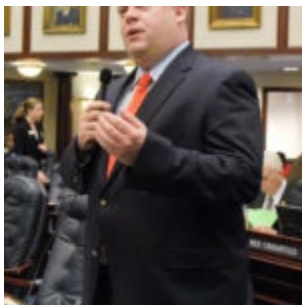
You can gauge the letter’s lack of effectiveness from the fact that Bear and I talked on the phone for at least 20 minutes after he mentioned it.

“I’m not going to be scared by it,” he told me. “But how many others has Miklos and Bio-Tech threatened into silence?”

Hopelessly devoted to bro

Like so many Florida stories, this one starts with a developer drooling over a big chunk of [rural land](#).

The developer is former state representative [Chris Dorworth](#). In case you are wondering what his priorities were as an elected official: During his time in the House he was repeatedly given the “Friend of Free Enterprise Award” by the Association of Builders and Contractors.



Chris Dorworth. Credit: Florida House

He had been chosen by his colleagues to become speaker of the House — one of the most powerful positions in Florida — in 2014. The voters, however, had other plans. In 2012 they [threw him out of his well-funded, carefully drawn district seat](#).

Five years later, Dorworth had his eye on a 669-acre parcel in Seminole County just east of the Econlockhatchee River known as the High Oaks Ranch. In 2017, according to [the Orlando Sentinel](#), he signed a letter of intent to purchase it for more than \$35 million, contingent on getting approval from Seminole County to rezone the agricultural land.

In 2018, he pitched his plan for the ranch: 600 single-family homes, 270 townhomes, 500 apartment units, and 1.5 million square feet of commercial and professional space. All of it would be built under the ironic name “River Cross.”

But to approve that project would mean breaking Seminole County’s rural boundary, which was written into its charter by the voters themselves in 2004.

Save Rural Seminole formed to fight against Dorworth’s suburban sprawl plan, Bear told me. They were successful, too. The county commission unanimously rejected his rezoning request.

That prompted Dorworth to sue in both state and federal court — and lose in both. The federal judge was so disgusted with his specious claims that she ordered him [to pay the county’s legal expenses of more than half a million dollars](#).

One county official who blasted the commissioners for opposing River Cross: Greenberg.

He was a buddy of Dorworth’s, and the two of them palled around with Gaetz. All of them were backslapping good ol’ boys politically aligned with Donald Trump.



Chris Dorworth, Matt Gaetz, and Joel Greenberg at the White House in 2019. Source: Greenberg Twitter account

Greenberg, [a college dropout who liked to boast about his connections](#), even tweeted a photo of the three of them grinning outside the White House in 2019. They seemed sure that their Golfer-in-Chief would be reelected.

That's why Greenberg stuck up for Dorworth and his development. He [was hopelessly devoted](#) to his bros (until his arrest).

“The former tax collector repeatedly pressured county commissioners to settle the River Cross litigation and tried to enlist others into doing the same. He suggested to at least one person that he could run for county commission himself, vote for River Cross and then resign,” the [Orlando Sentinel](#) reported.

As a result, the then-president of Save Rural Seminole, a teacher named Brian Beute, decided to challenge Greenberg's bid for reelection. Beute, by the way, is a lifelong Republican.

Suddenly, Beute's school received a letter accusing him of being a sexual predator. Other letters followed, accusing him of being a horrible racist. Social media accounts picked up the theme, attacking him for being a Very Bad Person.

Bear, representing Beute, denied the accusations and urged the sheriff's office to find who was behind the smear campaign. Turns out Greenberg, who once [pretended to be a cop](#), had apparently never watched any episodes of “[Forensic Files](#).” He'd left fingerprints and DNA on the letters and envelope. The social media accounts traced back to his home computer.

Greenberg was arrested in June 2020 and soon began to warble like [Slim Whitman](#) on steroids.

Which brings us back to the duo of Miklos and Dorworth.

Florida's [five water management districts](#) are supposed to be protectors of the state's precious water supply. Instead, governors have loaded the boards with political donors, many of whom happen to be from the industries most in need of state permits.

As a result, the water boards are full of foxes who swear they'll guard the henhouse — to the death, if necessary.

Miklos started out as just another member when then-Gov. Charlie Crist first appointed him to the St. Johns governing board in 2010. But then he was reappointed by Crist's successor, Rick Scott, who had [gutted the staff and budget](#) of all five water districts.

After Miklos was elected board chair in 2013, business at his Bio-Tech company boomed. Bio-Tech's applications for water district permits more than doubled over the next three years, the [Daytona Beach News-Journal reported](#). Meanwhile, Miklos led [a house-cleaning of top managers](#) at the district, making it clear that he was the one in charge.

“There was a lot of murmuring about how John Miklos was facilitating permits for developers,” Jim Gross, a former St. Johns' water board staffer who's now executive director of Florida Defenders of the Environment.



Dave Bear.

The deal that caused the biggest stink involved [the town of DeBary](#). The town hired Bio-Tech to help with its plans to develop 102 acres of land. That land was owned by the St. Johns River board and was supposed to be maintained for conservation.

To get permission to take it over and build what it wanted, the city paid Miklos \$155 an hour — as a consultant, of course.

The DeBary deal fell apart not long after the cops [raided city hall](#) searching for evidence of Sunshine Law violations. ([No one was ever charged](#), though, because city officials stonewalled prosecutors.)

Miklos [continued serving as chairman](#), despite facing an ethics charge over his DeBary dealings (he was [cleared](#) because the deal never went through)

You'd think all the negative publicity (and the raid) would prompt Miklos to look in the mirror and tell himself, "[You better shape up!](#)"

But it didn't. Instead, the Army Corps of Engineers accused Miklos' company of destroying wetlands without a federal permit.

A Corps permit reviewer, quoted in the [Daytona Beach News Journal](#), said Miklos' "standard business practice is to ignore [the rules] and make other people force them to comply. He doesn't think he needs to get federal permits. He has influence with the state. With people in fear of their jobs, he can have an influence on that process absolutely."

In 2018, Dorworth hired Bio-Tech to work its magic on his River Cross development. But within a year, Miklos was no longer in a position to help with his permitting.

All-Star roster

Miklos finally got his comeuppance in 2019.

That's when a longtime Altamonte Springs land surveyor named [Kimberly Buchheit](#) dug through the water board meeting records. She documented numerous times when he appeared to be concealing his conflicts of interest by ducking out of a meeting for a few minutes.

At that point, Scott had reappointed him to the water board. His was one of scores of [last-minute appointments](#) that the Navy-capped millionaire tossed out like confetti as he headed out the door of the governor's mansion bound for the U.S. Senate. Gov. Ron DeSantis rescinded most of them, including [the one for Miklos](#).

Don't applaud DeSantis, though. Last year he [appointed Miklos to a different government board](#), the one overseeing the University of Central Florida. I am sure he's an inspiration to all those idealistic college kids.

In a way, DeSantis rescued Miklos. The ethics commission found probable cause that he had violated state rules, Buchheit told me. But because he was no longer on the board, they closed the case.

Buchheit said she wasn't shocked to see Miklos' name pop up in what she called "Greenberg's All-Star Roster of Corruption Cronies."

She added that "I am shocked however that ... Greenberg is the only one in jail. Apparently, the wheels of justice turn very slowly and/or the standards for integrity are very low."

We go together

Miklos had mostly faded from the headlines until Greenberg's musical performance made the papers. What was interesting to me was not just Greenberg fingering Miklos for his alleged "greasing." It's the name that was left out: Dorworth.

Greenberg's transcript, as I mentioned, is heavily redacted. Gaetz's name never appears. Neither does the name of the ex-politician turned developer behind River Cross.

But Greenberg talks about one person — name redacted — who is friends with lots of politicians, someone with a tremendous amount of influence. This influencer and his pals, Greenberg testified, were involved in the "[ghost candidate](#)" scandal that led to the [recent conviction for campaign shenanigans of the Seminole County GOP committee chairman](#).

This person, a developer, frequently served as a host for gatherings attended by Greenberg where the pols' pals would yak and drink and plot together. This well-organized group acted like "a little mafia," Greenberg said. I picture them having a lot of loud sing-a-longs to "[We Go Together](#)."

The Developer To Be Named At A Later Date had an interesting financial arrangement with Miklos. Said Greenberg: "Miklos would write checks a lot

to be where [redacted] would ask him to write checks to.” Gosh, if only we could figure out who that was!

There were a few clues in the transcript. Greenberg said the mysterious Mr. X had been frustrated in his attempts to develop land in east Seminole County. Wow, who could that be?

Mr. Unnamed Developer persuaded some friends in the Legislature — “who would file bills on his behalf, pretty much,” said Greenberg — to change the rules stopping his development plans. They were supposed to pass a bill that would have declared land within 3 miles of a state university campus open to urban development, no matter what local rules said about it

You will not be surprised to hear that Dorworth’s River Cross project would have been built within 3 miles of the University of Central Florida, and thus the beneficiary of that legislative largesse.

What is surprising is that the bill failed to pass our [perpetually pro-development Legislature](#).

The [Orlando Sentinel](#) got Dorworth to confirm that his is the redacted developer name in the Greenberg transcript. He acknowledged he was behind the 2018 legislation that Greenberg testified about. But he insisted that Greenberg’s other claims about him are “100% lies.”

Dorworth also told the paper that Greenberg had “overstated the closeness of their relationship.” Pay no attention to that White House photo!

Is it any wonder, then, that Bear and Speak Up Wekiva founder [Chuck O’Neal](#) have written to several government agencies urging them to review Miklos’ permitting work? Or that Miklos wants them cease and desist?

O’Neal told me that Greenberg’s revelations underscore why it was such a bad idea for the state to take over [federal wetlands permitting](#). That put those crucial decisions in the hands of agencies such as the one Miklos used to oversee.

Not ‘Grease’ but ...

I tried repeatedly to contact Miklos for a comment, to no avail. Perhaps he was busy applying some degreaser, sending out more cease-and-desist letters, or practicing that [crazy hand jive](#).

There's a lot more to this story, but I have to put it aside now. I am far too busy writing a new musical about it. I think it will be a smash!

The lead singer will, of course, be Greenberg. But it will be Dorworth arranging all the choreography, telling everyone what steps to take and where.

The developer will get one big solo, though. It will be an updated version of Jimmy Cliff's "[Many Rivers to Cross](#)."

I also picture a big scene where Miklos starts to sing something, then abruptly announces he's got a conflict and dances off the stage. Then he returns and does it again.

And as the audience watches the show unfold, the backdrop slowly changes from quiet country to thickly built urban sprawl, often despite rules to protect against it.

The title? No, not "Grease." I'm calling it "Cahoots."

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