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SOUTH MIAMI-DADE

Developers, farmers facing off for land

Valuable farmland is at the center of a battle between developers, who want to build massive residential communities, and environmentalists and farmers, who want to maintain the agricultural feel of the region.

By Jennifer Monney Piedra

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Fourth-generation potato farmer Tim Williams planned on growing old in the fields of his native Homestead.

Since the early 1940s, Williams' family had dominated the potato industry in South Florida, growing the vegetables on hundreds of acres near Campbell Drive and Southwest 137th Avenue.

But the business stopped making money, and in 2000 Williams made the tough decision to sell to developers. His property became the massive Waterstone Development, a residential community with single-family and town homes.

Williams, 39, who went on to get his real estate license and now buys land to sell to developers, has no regrets.

"It certainly has been a good thing for us," he said.

With development exploding in South Miami-Dade, members of the agricultural community are routinely faced with similar decisions. Some farmers are saying goodbye to the business they love to cash in on their land, while others are staying loyal to their industry -- a billion-dollar sector second only to tourism as the county's top money generator.

It's a choice that should be left up to the farmers, not environmentalists or anti-development forces, says Katie Edwards, executive director of the Dade County Farm Bureau.

"It's nice to see the value of land go up for those farmers who do have to sell for whatever reason," she said. "We realize that the economics have to be there for people to stay in agriculture."

The area is known for producing beans, squash, sweet potatoes, corn and tomatoes, as well as a variety of tropical plants and trees. Tropical fruits, such as avocado, lychee and mamey are also grown in South Miami-Dade.

Redland nursery owner Pat Wade is uncertain about how the battle between big development and agriculture will play out in South Miami-Dade.

"It's people who want to stay in agriculture versus the big bucks of the construction industry," said Wade, chairwoman of the Redland Community Council. "I cannot predict what the bottom line is going to be."

She is hopeful that county officials, when deciding development plans for the region, are mindful of the importance of the agricultural industry: "I would hope they would carve out, protect and preserve enough land where we can maintain a viable agricultural district," she said.

Edwards said farmers will stay in South Miami-Dade as long as their businesses are profitable.

But even with the area's rich agricultural history and current production, the possibility of new farmers moving into South Miami-Dade is unlikely, she said.

"It's difficult for farmers to buy more land," she said. "This year has been particularly difficult."

She is also concerned that new home buyers, whose properties are adjacent to farmland, will have trouble adapting. As it is, she said, she receives phone calls from residents complaining about the smell of fertilizer and dust from trucks.