



## MIAMI-DADE COMMISSION ON ETHICS AND PUBLIC TRUST

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### MEMORANDUM

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**TO:** William Elgar, Director, Zoo Miami, Miami Dade Department of Parks, Recreation, and Open Spaces

Ronald Magill, Zoo Goodwill Ambassador/Communications Director  
Miami Dade Department of Parks, Recreation, and Open Spaces

**FROM:** Etta Akoni, Staff Attorney  
Miami-Dade Commission On Ethics And Public Trust

**SUBJECT:** INQ 2022 – 106 Outside Employment §2-11.1(k)(2), (j), (g)

**DATE:** June 21, 2022

**CC:** All COE Legal Staff

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Thank you for contacting the Miami Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust and requesting our guidance regarding possible conflicts of interest in Ronald Magill's continued outside self-employment.

**Facts:**

Ronald Magill (Magill) works for the Miami Dade Department of Parks, Recreation, and Open Spaces in the Zoo Miami Division ("PROS") as the Communications and Media Relations Director and Zoo Goodwill Ambassador. In this role, Magill serves as public spokesperson for Zoo Miami; develops and manages media-related activities at the Zoo; produces and delivers a wide variety of zoo-related presentations for social, civic and educational groups; and supervises employees assigned to assist him.

Magill maintains several income-producing endeavors outside of his employment with Miami Dade County, including leading wildlife-based tours to various parts of the world, publishing images captured and stories about said wildlife expeditions, hosting the nationally televised wildlife documentary television series on the Hispanic Information and

Telecommunications Network, Inc. called Mundo Salvaje con Ron Magill<sup>1</sup>(from which he donates all of his compensation to Zoo Miami Foundation's conservation efforts), and works as a wildlife consultant for the film and television industry. In addition, Magill is designated as a Nikon Ambassador by Nikon USA. Also, as a Nikon Ambassador, Magill lectures on wildlife photography to a variety of groups and organizations, both locally and nationally.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of Magill's outside endeavors is wildlife and wildlife conservation. While Magill's 42-year career at Zoo Miami is sometimes referenced in his outside endeavors, Zoo Miami is not specifically the exclusive subject of any of his outside endeavors nor the focus of the overall program given, or story publicized. For example, when introduced as a speaker, his 42-year career at the Zoo Miami may be referenced, or Magill may reference Zoo Miami when discussing the juxtaposition of animal behavior in captivity and animal behavior in the wild. Magill also speaks of his experiences dealing with captive animals during crisis situations such as severe weather events and wildfires, particularly when it comes to media relations in regard to such matters; and Magill also speaks of the conservation programs that he has established through the Ron Magill Conservation Endowment for cheetahs and harpy eagles. It should be noted that in 2015, Magill started the "Ron Magill Conservation Endowment," which provides "sustainable funding used to protect animals in the wild, not in zoos or other human containment edifices<sup>3</sup>." Since its inception, the "Ron Magill Conservation Endowment" has provided tens of thousands of dollars annually to conservation projects and scholarships to those working in the field of conservation, around the world. The Ron Magill Conservation Endowment was created under the umbrella of the Zoo Miami Foundation, a 501(c)3 charitable organization. Zoo Miami Foundation is a private non-profit support organization for Zoo Miami founded in 1956. As such, the Ron Magill Conservation Endowment, and the conservation efforts it funds, is not a part of his employment by Miami- Dade County but is a part of his outside endeavors.

Magill's Nikon cameras are the only tools that he uses for both his work at the zoo and his work on outside projects. These cameras are *personally* owned by Magill and were provided to Magill as a part of his Nikon Ambassadorship position. However, the cameras are used for the benefit of Zoo Miami.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hitn.tv/tu-planeta/mundo-salvaje-con-ron-magill-2-3/>

<sup>2</sup> Collectively referred to hereinafter as "Magill's "outside endeavors."

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.zoomiami.org/ron-magill-conservation-endowment>  
<https://www.ronmagill.org/conservation>

Magill's outside work is conducted outside his County hours and does not require that he interact with County employees, departments, or County Boards, even for routine matters. Magill does not rent any space from any County department. For his outside endeavors, Magill does not have any existing contracts with the County and does not have direct interaction with County vendors. Magill does not have access to non-public information relevant to his outside endeavors; he does not work in a position in the County that provides him the chance to recruit vendors, contractors, bidders or members of the public who could use his outside services; and he does not have any authority over any contracts/agreements between the County and outside vendors.

**Issue:**

Whether any prohibited conflict of interest may exist, pursuant to the Miami-Dade County Conflict of Interest and Code of Ethics Ordinance ("County Ethics Code"), between Ronald Magill's County employment with Zoo Miami and his personal outside endeavors.

**Analysis:**

First, County employees are required to obtain approval from their department director prior to engaging in outside employment. *See* AO 7-1. Departmental directors and their subordinate supervisors may request an opinion from the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust regarding any potential conflict of interest concerning the proposed outside employment. *See* INQ 21-111; INQ 19-101. Department directors and their subordinate supervisors have the discretion to deny a request for outside employment if they determine that, at any time, the proposed outside employment would be contrary, detrimental, or adverse to the interests of the County or the employee's department. *See* RQO 16-02; RQO 00-10; INQ 13-28.

Records available to this writer indicate that Magill has used the current Miami- Dade County Human Resources system to seek annual approval of his outside endeavors since 2019, and the Commission on Ethics has addressed special issues tied to Magill's outside endeavors since 2006. As such, it is clear that Magill has complied with the requirement to seek approval for his outside endeavors and has received said approval for several years.

Second, The Miami-Dade County Conflict of Interest and Code of Ethics ("County Ethics Code") prohibits County employees from accepting outside employment, "which would impair his or her independence of judgment in the performance of his or her public duties." Section 2-11.1(j). Additionally, Miami-Dade County Administrative Order 7-1 provides that, "[u]nder no circumstances shall a County employee accept outside employment . . . where a real or apparent conflict of interest with one's official or public duties is possible."

While Magill's County employment and outside endeavors are based on similar skill sets such as media development, presentations, and public speaking, from this review, it

appears that Magill's outside endeavors focuses on animals in the wild and conservation efforts for said animals in the wild, not animals in captivity such as in a zoo. With two distinct focuses for his outside endeavors and County employment, it does not appear that Magill has a real or apparent conflict of interest by engaging in his outside endeavors.

Moreover, Magill's County responsibilities do not give him access to confidential information about Zoo Miami; he does not work in a position in the County that affords him the opportunity to recruit vendors, contractors, bidders, or members of the public who could use his outside services; and he does not have any authority over any contracts/agreements between the County and outside vendors. In fact, he does not have any existing contracts with the County. Additionally, his outside endeavors do not require that he interact with County employees, departments, or County Boards, even for routine matters, and he does not have direct interaction with County vendors. Magill does not rent any space from any County department. As such, it does not appear that there are any connections between Magill's County employment and his outside endeavors which could lead to an impairment of his independence of judgment. See RQO 15-03.

Lastly, Section 2-11.1(g) of the County Ethics Code, *Exploitation of official position prohibited*, prohibits County officials and employees from exploiting their official position to secure special privileges, exemptions, or benefits for themselves. It is noted that Magill does not utilize public funds, equipment, time, or facilities to facilitate his outside endeavors. See INQ 19-129. Magill's wildlife work, experience, and educational background appears to fuel his continued outside endeavors, as Magill's wildlife work and experience are topics for which his outside endeavors focus upon, not his work at Zoo Miami. There is no indication that his position at Zoo Miami has been used to garner special privileges and/or exemptions, especially since his own education and experience have provided the opportunities he has obtained. See RQO 07-36. While Magill's position as the Zoo Miami Communications and Media Relations Director and Zoo Goodwill Ambassador is referenced in introductions, the Ethics Commission has previously opined that use of one's title does not automatically constitute an inappropriate effort to secure a special benefit and it is appropriate to reference one's public position in public communications. See RQO 05-06. Moreover, Magill's personal observations of captive animals who are made readily available to be viewed by the general public, is not an exclusive benefit enjoyed by Magill. Therefore, any comparisons he draws from his observations of wildlife he has encountered in his outside endeavors and the animals in the zoo is not a special privilege, exemption, or benefit derived from his official position. Likewise, Magill's conservation efforts for cheetahs and harpy eagles are tied to his private endeavors through the Ron Magill Conservation Endowment, which is under the umbrella of the Zoo Miami Foundation, a private 501(c)3 non-profit support organization for Zoo Miami. As the Ron Magill Conservation Endowment and the conservation efforts it funds

are not a part of Magill's employment by Miami- Dade County, his discussion of said private efforts do not constitute an exploitation of his public position.

**Opinion:**

Based on the facts presented and discussed above, and pursuant to the sections of the County Ethics Code cited above, there is no prohibited conflict of interest between Ronald Magill's County employment with Zoo Miami and his personal outside endeavors as described herein.

This opinion is limited to the facts presented to the Commission on Ethics and is limited to an interpretation of the County Ethics Code only and is not intended to interpret state laws. Questions regarding state ethics laws should be addressed to the Florida Commission on Ethics, P.O. Drawer 15709, Tallahassee, FL 32317, phone number (850) 488-7864, <http://www.ethics.state.fl.us/>.

We appreciate your consulting with the Commission in order to avoid possible prohibited conflicts of interest. If the facts associated with your inquiry change, please contact us for additional guidance.

INQs are informal ethics opinions provided by the legal staff after being reviewed and approved by the Executive Director. INQs deal with opinions previously addressed in public session by the Commission on Ethics or within the plain meaning of the County Ethics Code. RQOs are opinions provided by the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust when the subject matter is of great public importance or where there is insufficient precedent. While these are informal opinions, covered parties that act contrary to the opinion may be referred to the Advocate for preliminary review or investigation and may be subject to a formal Complaint filed with the Commission on Ethics and Public Trust.