

# CITY OF SWEETWATER

ANNUAL  
REPORT  
2020



SWEETWATER CITY HALL / POLICE DEPARTMENT





## ABOUT SWEETWATER

The City of Sweetwater is located in Western Miami-Dade County. Sweetwater was incorporated on October 10, 1941, and the population has grown from 25 to approximately 20,994 residents. According to Miami Herald staff writer Darrell Eiland, Sweetwater's first residents were a group of Russian circus performers known as the "Royal Russian Midgets." In 1938, Clyde Andrews acquired most of the "Sweetwater Groves" tract and began to market lots. Among his buyers were the "Royal Russian Midgets" performers seeking a place to retire after their circus careers.

During 1941, the little people, along with thirteen other residents, voted to incorporate Sweetwater. A charter was signed, and Joe Sanderlin was elected as the first Mayor. Fast forward to the 1970s, the development of Florida International University and the construction of two major expressways popularized Sweetwater. The growth and development precipitated by these occurrences attracted residents, and the City grew more than double in population.

## FACTS ABOUT SWEETWATER

- Location: Miami-Dade County, approximately 13.5 miles west of Downtown Miami
- Incorporated: October 10, 1941
- Population: 20,994
- Zip codes: 33172, 33174

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

FINANCIAL SOLVENCY .....	4
MAYOR'S MESSAGE .....	5
FINANCE DEPARTMENT .....	6
GRANTS DIVISION .....	7
GRANT EFFORTS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT .....	8
CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS .....	9
PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT .....	10
BUILDING DEPARTMENT .....	11
PRIVATE DEVELOPMENTS .....	12
UNIVERSITY AND HIGHER ED .....	13
POLICE DEPARTMENT AND PUBLIC SAFETY .....	14
POLICE DEPARTMENT MESSAGE .....	15





## MAYOR ORLANDO LOPEZ

Orlando Lopez is the Mayor of the City of Sweetwater. Under the city's strong-mayor form of government, Mayor Lopez serves as the City Manager, overseeing all the city's departments and finances. A successful businessman, investor, and former member of the Sweetwater City Commission, Mayor Lopez brings a wealth of business and institutional knowledge to his role. He is dedicated to aligning all City efforts to the University City vision and to modernizing the deployment of municipal services.

A natural entrepreneur, Mayor Lopez credits his keen understanding of budgets and finances to having been immersed in his family's business from an early age. As an adult, he went on to run several successful businesses, including his most recent real estate investments. In 1999, Lopez moved to Sweetwater and, shortly after, became involved in the community. His passion for public service led him to run for city commissioner in 2001. After serving for 14 years, he was elected Mayor of Sweetwater on May 12, 2015, and was re-elected by constituents on May 28, 2019.

Mayor Lopez was born in Miami Beach, Florida, and he is the son of Cuban immigrants. He grew up mainly in Westchester and graduated from Belen Jesuit Preparatory School. Mayor Lopez enjoys spending time in the Florida Keys surrounded by family and friends. He has been a Sweetwater resident for 22 years and continues to live at the same address with his wife Belkys, step-daughter Abigail and their dog Luna.

## FINANCIAL SOLVENCY

In 2020, the year was undoubtedly marked by unprecedented challenges resulting from the worldwide pandemic. My administration's principal focus in 2020 was to effectively combat the variety of issues prompted by COVID-19 while continuing to provide high-quality municipal services.

We faced many COVID-19-related challenges throughout this year that included financial hardships, temporary closures of many businesses, and adjusting to the "new normal." However, our City has remained strong by finding solutions supporting and prioritizing our residents' and business owners' needs.

We are proud to say that the City's financial status today is sound and healthy, a situation remarkably different from what we initially found. In May of 2015, at the beginning of this administration, the City had insufficient operating capital, no reserves, and over \$4M in past-due debt owed to banks, pension funds, and the State of Florida. In effect, Sweetwater was broke in response Mayor Lopez Administration implemented a vast array of cost-cutting measures. The result of all these measures is that the City of Sweetwater today has over \$7M in reserves and has paid off the previous past-due debts. After teetering on the edge of insolvency, the City is now financially sound and well-run.



# MAYOR'S MESSAGE

It is my pleasure to present the 2020 Annual Report for the City of Sweetwater. This report highlights major accomplishments and initiatives over the past year, along with key financial information for the City of Sweetwater.

In response to the pandemic, the City expanded local assistance for small businesses and procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) like masks and gloves for our residents, police department, and city staff. The City temporarily closed various facilities to stop the spread, including City Hall, Senior Center, public parks, and recreational programs. We established robust social media efforts and outreach by Code Compliance and the Police through quarantine periods to keep local businesses and residents informed.

Upon re-opening, we implemented a host of proactive measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Among these measures were the establishment of social distancing signage, mandatory use of masks, plexi glass partitions, limiting individuals within a room/area and regular disinfection of city facilities. With the safety of residents and employees being paramount, our City marked a milestone by being the first municipality in South Florida to adopt infrared technology to check the temperatures of those entering all Sweetwater government offices.

Moreover, my administration worked strenuously to distribute free food through dozens of drives and events to residents financially impacted by the pandemic and delivered food to at-risk residents. Members of our senior citizens' activity centers continue to receive meals delivered by city employees at their homes.

To address the financial hardships faced by many in our community, we established a Housing Assistance Program (HAP) through the CARES ACT funding allocated through Miami-Dade County. This HAP program allowed eligible homeowners and tenants to pay for past-due mortgages or rent due to loss of income during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the outbreak, my administration prioritized our Sweetwater Police Department (SWPD) officers' safety and health by purchasing protective gear such as infrared thermometers, gloves, masks, hand sanitizers, and hygiene kits to protect them from COVID-19. In addition, we acquired new police vehicles that allow our officers to have the best resources to promote public safety initiatives and keep our City safe.

Furthermore, despite the difficulties occasioned by COVID-19, the Sweetwater Police Department continued to demonstrate compliance with CFA standards and has now attained this distinction twice in a row without conditions.

Despite the unprecedented challenges, my commitment to continuing efforts to repair and improve our City's infrastructure remained steadfast. This year our Engineering Division collaborated with the Grants/Economic Development Division to complete multiple capital improvement projects such as the Northern Sweetwater Drainage Improvements Project, roadway improvements along Northwest 110th Avenue from 14th Street to Northwest 17th Street, and the continuation of sidewalk repairs. Sweetwater's Public Works Department repaired 70,000 linear feet of sidewalks across residential areas throughout the City. Major roadway repairs are also being made in partnership with the Beacon Tradeport CDD to N.W. 14th Street — where a major dip in the road poses a threat of damage to those driving and walking through the area. Revamping our aging roadways and drainage structures will reduce property damage and enhance the City's image. As an added benefit, this new infrastructure will attract new businesses and development to the area, which means new jobs and prosperity for our City.

As we move into 2021, new advances, medical and otherwise, offer a glimmer of hope towards hopefully eradicating COVID-19. We will stay at the forefront and keep our residents informed of resources available to them. As our City has proven during previous challenges, Sweetwater is a strong and resilient community. Working together, we will overcome the challenges posed by COVID-19 and continue to make Sweetwater rise.

# FINANCE DEPARTMENT

The City's Finance Department compiles and administers a budget of over \$23M. It is responsible for ensuring that all vendors and employees are timely paid and that all outstanding debts are collected. Due to the pandemic, the Finance Department administered COVID-19 funds provided by the state and the federal government with the collaboration of our Grants Division.

The Finance Department played an even more crucial role during the City's financial crisis of 2015 to 2017, a crisis so dire the department generated cash flow reports on a daily basis for consideration by Mayor Orlando Lopez and his staff. Today that is no longer the case. The City of Sweetwater has over \$7M in reserves, has paid off the otherwise previous past-due debts, and is currently debt-free. After teetering on the verge of insolvency, the City is now financially sound and well-run. The Finance Director Carlos Cintron has used his decades of forensic accounting experience to bring financial stability to the City's Finance Department and ensure the department's use of best practices.



**Carlos E. Cintron**  
*Finance Director*

Carlos Cintron has a long and distinguished career in public service, attaining captain's rank in the US Army and serving as a supervisory special agent and auditor with the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) until his recent retirement. Mr. Cintron also holds a Bachelor's of Business Accounting from Central University of Bayamon in Puerto Rico and a Master of Business Administration from Oklahoma City University. He is also an adjunct professor at the Florida International University College of Law. In 2020, Mr. Cintron was appointed a member of the Florida League of Cities Finance, Taxation & Personnel Policy Committee to define legislation for the State of Florida.



**Anny Chez**  
*Deputy Finance Director*

Anny Chez is the City's Deputy Finance Director. In this role, Mrs. Chez supports the Finance Director in updating the City's finance procedures and ensuring the adoption of best practices in the budget. Mrs. Chez has been with the City of Sweetwater for eleven years and is a Certified Accounts Payable and Accounts Receivable Manager with over 25 years of banking and accounting experience.



**Cesar Villafaña**  
*Purchasing Agent*

Cesar Villafaña is the City's first purchasing agent in the history of Sweetwater. He strives to unify and streamline the City's purchases to achieve and maximize economies of scale and ensure transparency in the purchasing process. Mr. Villafaña, has extensive experience in law enforcement, both in Puerto Rico and working for the US Department of Justice. Mr. Villafaña retired in 2010 and entered the private sector as a senior anti-money laundering and fraud prevention auditor until October 2018, when he joined the City of Sweetwater as purchasing agent. Mr. Villafaña is a graduate of Garrett Theological Seminary at Northwestern University and is an ordained minister.

# GRANTS DIVISION

## THE GRANTS DIVISION IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FOLLOWING:

- Applying for and seeking new funding opportunities
- The daily administration of federal, state, and local grants for a variety of city-wide projects, programs, and capital improvement projects
- Ensure that the City is reimbursed for all grant-related expenses in a timely manner
- Coordinate budgets, financial reports, reimbursements, and payments
- Oversee the completion of capital improvement projects including drainage and roadway improvements, park improvements, and public building renovations
- Meet with elected officials and agency representatives of funding sources to seek and apply for funds from the local, state, and federal levels
- Conducts all required procurement procedures for project implementation, including creating Requests for Proposals, advertising, hosting pre-bid conferences, scoring bid packages, and executing contracts
- Review, edit and approve city contracts that are grant-related
- Responsible for managing the documentation process pertaining to post-hurricane recovery efforts and submitting all documentation to FEMA to ensure the City is reimbursed

### **Ian Vallecillo**

#### *Grants Administrator*

As the City's Grants Administrator, Ian Vallecillo writes, manages, and administers all grants as well as some of the grant-funded projects and assists with the procurement of contractors to complete grant-funded projects. Since 2017, he has successfully obtained nearly \$10M in grant funds for the City and managed several successful projects, including installing 703 new shade trees, installing a comprehensive stormwater drainage system, and implemented COVID-19 relief funds to help residents who were affected by the pandemic. Mr. Vallecillo holds a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science and International Relations from Florida International University and is also a certified grant writer.



### **Gabriela Cuervo**

#### *Assistant Grant Administrator*

As the Assistant Grant Coordinator, Gabriela aids the Grants Administrator in researching, applying for, and managing the City's various grant awards. Moreover, her daily tasks consist of documentation, compliance, and data-related issues. She is currently managing the disaster documentation process to ensure that the City is reimbursed for COVID-19 related expenditures by FEMA, the State, and the County. Ms. Cuervo holds a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and is certified in Grant Writing with Florida International University and The Nonprofit Leadership Center.



# GRANT EFFORTS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In addition to grant applications and administration, the city's economic development efforts include: capital improvements planning; attraction of new buildings/real estate development; partnerships with academia and nonprofits; municipal annexation efforts; and business attraction and retention.



**Robert Herrada**

*Assistant City Manager*

Robert Herrada is the Assistant City Manager and reports directly to the City's Mayor and Chief of Staff. He assists in managing a variety of the city's daily operations, ranging from department oversight to large-scale economic development initiatives. Additionally, Robert oversees the city's Grants Division, a strategist for grant applications, supervising procurement processes, strategic planning, and managing intergovernmental relations. Mr. Herrada holds a Master's Degree in Public Administration from FIU and a Bachelor's Degree in International Affairs from Rollins College in Central Florida.

COMMUNITY & COVID-19 GRANTS	GRANT DESCRIPTION
Coronavirus Emergency Supplemental Funding (CESF)	Purchase of COVID-19 Equipment and PPE
CARES Act Nutrition Services Incentive Program (NSIP)	Emergency COVID-19 Congregate & Home Delivered Meals for Seniors
Municipality Housing Assistance Program	Provides Rental Assistance to City residents impacted economically by COVID-19
High Risk Nutritional Meals Program	Frozen Home-Delivered Meals to Seniors
Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program (FRDAP)	Linear Park Improvement and Equipment Upgrades
2020 JAGC - Equipment Purchase (Metal Detector)	Purchase of Metal Detector to be installed at entrance to City Hall
Community Development Block Grant	Northern Sweetwater Drainage Improvements
FDOT Sub Area Mobility Study	Sweetwater Traffic Study



# CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

With the safety and health of our residents being top priorities, Mayor Orlando Lopez's administration has embarked on a robust annual capital improvement plan. The administration's mission is to bring about upgrades and maintenance, many long overdue, to our community's facilities and parks. The ongoing capital plan will make our community safer and enrich our community pride.



## THE FOLLOWING PROJECTS WERE IMPLEMENTED THROUGH THIS ADMINISTRATION'S CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN DURING 2020:

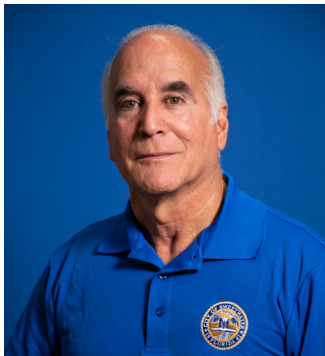
- Northern Sweetwater Drainage Improvement Project (Northwest 108th Avenue from Northwest 14th Street to Northwest 17th Street)
- Roadway Improvements (Northwest 110th Avenue, 14th Street, Northwest 17th Street)
- Continuation of sidewalk and roadway repairs
- Remodeling of City Hall
- Continued tree planting throughout the City to improve air quality and facilitate pedestrian traffic





# PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT

The Public Works Department is involved in nearly every aspect of Sweetwater's infrastructure, from paving roads to painting walls. With a staff of over 18 full-time employees, Public Works ensures that City buildings and property function properly. The Director, Alan M. Abolila, is a hands-on director who is often seen working side-by-side with his employees and demonstrates a keen interest in both the aesthetics and the functionality of his department's projects.



**Alan M. Abolila**

*Public Works Director*

A graduate of the University of Tennessee, with a degree in Business Administration with an emphasis on economics and marketing, Alan M. Abolila is the City's Public Works Director and also its Parks Director. In his spare time, Mr. Abolila enjoys boating, tennis, racquetball and spending time with family.





# BUILDING DEPARTMENT

The Building Department is responsible for overseeing most construction projects within City limits, excluding roads, drainage, and certain minor projects. To this end, the Department is headed by a Building Director and comprised of building inspectors, building clerks, zoning officials, and building officials. The Department prides itself on accessibility and speedy service. Applicants ranging from homeowners to major developers can readily access the Building Director and staff to obtain guidance and input on their projects while ensuring public safety and compliance with zoning codes.

Manuel A. Salazar heads the Department. During his tenure, Mr. Salazar has transitioned the Department into the digital age. He has initiated a program to digitize all the department records to enable quicker and more accurate access to records. He has also implemented a system of redundant backups to cloud storage in order to ensure the long-term safeguarding of these valuable documents. The Building Department is primarily self-funded through building fees.



**Manuel A Salazar**  
*Building Director*

Besides performing as the chief mechanical plans reviewer and inspector for the City of Sweetwater, Mr. Salazar is the Building Director for the City of Sweetwater Building and Zoning Department. Mr. Salazar has spent approximately thirty years in the construction trade. He has worked on everything from residential, commercial, and high-rise commercial construction. Specializing in high-rise smoke control testing, he has worked on many buildings in the South Florida area.



# PRIVATE DEVELOPMENTS

Mayor Orlando Lopez is proud to be presiding over a construction boom and series of vital capital improvements that are unprecedented in the City of Sweetwater's history. These construction projects represent an injection into the city's economy, as they will be occupied by a variety of new businesses and offices that will generate new commerce and jobs. This large-scale economic development is mainly attributable to the efficient and personalized attention granted to the business community by Mayor Lopez's administration. From the Mayor's Office to the re-structured Building Department, Mayor Lopez's Sweetwater has earned a reputation for seamless execution projects from inception to close-out.

Most of these new buildings are "mixed-use," a land use designation that allows for a combination of offices, residential and commercial uses. Our administration is extremely proud of constructing three buildings near the Dolphin Mall (between NW 14 Street and 25th Street, and 107th Ave and 112th Ave) that combine offices with commercial establishments. Additionally, a hotel and University are anticipated to be built in the following years within this same area.

In the city's Southern area (between Flagler Street and SW 8th Street, and 107th Avenue to 109th Avenue), there are currently four high-rise, mixed-use buildings geared towards University students and faculty. In addition, the construction of a third building is expected to begin in the year 2020. This is a total of three new University student/faculty buildings that will revitalize the city and boost its economy.

## THE ONE AT UNIVERSITY CITY

Another milestone for our University City: A monumental 20-story, 886-unit residential tower geared towards university students and staff broke ground this year. This project is located West of 109th Avenue between SW 7 Terrace and SW 7th Street. Amenities will include a resort-style pool and a rooftop sundeck with dining areas, a yoga lawn, and a performance stage. The building will augment Sweetwater's retail mix through its 7,000 square feet for retail stores or restaurants. The building was completed in 2020.



## DOLPHIN PROFESSIONAL CENTRE

The Dolphin Professional Centre is an elegant, modern commercial condominium three (3) story building located at the intersection of NW 17th Street and 110th Avenue. The project is slated to have 54,000 sq. ft. of Class A offices, 26,000 sq. ft. of ground-floor retail, and spaces available from 700 square feet. This project will feature retail and restaurant spaces, offices with unique balconies, and outdoor dining. This project, completed 2020, is a remarkable expression of modern design that includes various condominium options.



## DOLPHIN CITI CENTER

The Dolphin Citicenter, a 70,000+ squared ft. mixed-use commercial project with retail and warehouse condos, offers unique commercial spaces with modern architecture, excellent finishes, and functional areas. Located on NW 17th Street and 108th Avenue, this project's estimated completion is the Summer of 2021.





# UNIVERSITIES & HIGHER EDUCATION

**With nearly ten universities, colleges, and trade schools located within its boundaries or within a two-mile radius, the City of Sweetwater has rightfully earned this title of University City.**

## FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Located just across the Tamiami Trail, the City of Sweetwater has enjoyed a fruitful and long-standing partnership with neighboring FIU. The Lopez administration has continued internships and academic collaborations, leveraging investments of historic proportions through projects like the University Bridge Residences.

## KEISER UNIVERSITY

Keiser University is a private, regionally-accredited, not-for-profit University serving nearly 20,000 students pursuing associates through doctoral degrees. Over 60% of Keiser University students graduate in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) and healthcare fields, providing the talented workforce necessary for South Florida.

Keiser University has partnered with the City of Sweetwater to help increase the quality of its residents' lives. This multi-faceted partnership has been highly beneficial to the community by providing programs for Senior citizens, volunteering for community food distributions, and internship programs where students offer their professional skills to the City while gaining invaluable experience.

## SAN IGNACIO UNIVERSITY

Another addition to Sweetwater's educational niche, San Ignacio University ("SIU"), recently purchased a lot located at 1401 NW 110 Avenue in Sweetwater. SIU is planning to build an 8-floor building with a capacity to serve more than 400 students, including international students.

Based in Lima, Peru, SIU is part of the San Ignacio de Loyola Corporation, a prestigious institution with almost 50 years of experience in education and more than 260 partners throughout the world. San Ignacio's academic offerings include Associate of Science in Culinary Arts, Associate of Arts in Business, Associate of Arts in Hospitality, Bachelor of Arts in Business, Bachelor of Arts in Hospitality, Masters of Business Administration, Masters of Education, and Masters of Hospitality Management.

## URBE UNIVERSITY

URBE University, which established itself in Sweetwater in 2019, offers Bachelor's and Master's Degrees to adult learners. The University also offers classes for professional and personal growth. Educational programs are offered on campus and online. In addition to the classrooms, the University's space will be utilized for administrative services to assist students with their various needs.

## CESAR VALLEJO COLLEGE

Comprised of 11 branches throughout Peru, Cesar Vallejo College opened its City of Sweetwater location in 2018. Cesar Vallejo College offers Bachelor's degrees in Management and International Business, making Cesar Vallejo College a premier educational institution for entrepreneurs. Cesar Vallejo College seeks to train professionals with entrepreneurial attitudes through the rendering of services and development of activities of service to their communities.

## GOLD COAST SCHOOLS

Gold Coast University is Florida's leading classroom and online career provider in Real Estate, Insurance, Construction, Mortgage, and Appraisal Courses. Gold Coast has helped more than a million students obtain and renew their professional licenses through classroom and online learning.

## UNIVERSAL CAREER SCHOOL

Universal Career School (UCS) is an institution dedicated to preparing students interested in the beauty or nursing industry by helping them achieve their careers goals and develop their skills for potential employers. UCS offers beauty programs in Cosmetology, Barber, Full Specialist, Nail Technology, Skin Care, and more.

# SWEETWATER POLICE DEPARTMENT



**Placido Diaz**  
*Chief of Police*



**Aquiles Carmona**  
*Assistant Chief (Administration)*



**Raul Herbello**  
*Assistant Chief (Operations)*



**John Wrvres**  
*Major of Police*

## PUBLIC SAFETY AGENCIES IN SWEETWATER

The City of Sweetwater is home to multiple distinguished and crucial law enforcement agencies that strengthen our communities by keeping them safe from criminals and illegal activities. These agencies have the duty to prevent, investigate, protect life, promote public safety awareness through long-lasting partnerships and solve crimes while protecting our residents, business owners, and visitors.

- Florida Highway Patrol Headquarters (FHP)
- Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE)
- Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF)
- South Florida High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA)
- U.S Customs and Border Protection Intelligence (CBP)
- Homeland Security Investigation (HSI)
- Postal Service Police



# POLICE DEPARTMENT MESSAGE

The COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges for our Police Department. In response, the Chief of Police, Placido Diaz, took immediate action to protect and keep our law enforcement officers and community safe. During the outbreak, the Sweetwater Police Department was one of the first agencies to provide officers with necessary personal protective equipment such as gloves, goggles, hand sanitizer, rubbing alcohol, thermometers, and disinfecting wipes. In order to continue providing quality police services, the Police Department implemented CDC health guidelines and a comprehensive plan to protect our officers when responding to emergency calls. In addition, the department prioritized officers' easy access to COVID-19 testing.

Despite the hardships of COVID-19, officers were assigned new Ford Explorer Police Interceptors to patrol and keep our community safe for the first time in the department's history. During Chief Diaz's tenure, the department has hired an additional 32 full-time police officers' more than double the rank and providing our residents with quality services and higher community surveillance. Furthermore, in 2019 Sweetwater ranked first in the "Safest Cities to Live in Florida," achieving the lowest violent crime far below the national average.

During the pandemic, the department continued to prove its dedication to the residents and maintained the utmost quality policing in the County. As a result, the department earned reaccreditation from the Commission for Florida Law Enforcement. This reaccreditation process recognizes the department's highest standards of professionalism; Sweetwater is only 12 out of 35 police agencies in Miami-Dade County, given this honorable recognition. We will continue working towards our residents best interest and uphold the core values, mission, and vision established by this department.







**CITY OF SWEETWATER**  
City Hall 500 SW 109 Ave.  
Sweetwater, FL 33174

# WE'RE GETTING SOCIAL

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