



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on March 31, 2023

## DeSantis' Board to Curb Disney Is Neutered on Arrival

Ron DeSantis may have warned Disney that there's a new sheriff in town, but, thus far, it seems that Sheriff Mickey Mouse is still calling all the shots.

The Florida Republican governor's effort to shut down Disney's ability to run its own government jurisdiction has hit a snag, as the board DeSantis created to manage the area encompassing Walt Disney World Resort now admits that its hands are tied from any meaningful action due to an 11th-hour deal made between Disney and the DeSantis appointees' predecessors.



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Members of the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District (CFTOD), created during a special session of the Republican-dominated Florida Legislature with the support of DeSantis, say the agreement keeps control in the hands of Disney for the next 30 years, and even prevents the board from taking many major actions without approval from the company.

"This essentially makes Disney the government," board member Ron Peri [said](#) on local television on Wednesday. "This board loses, for practical purposes, the majority of its ability to do anything beyond maintaining the roads and maintaining basic infrastructure."

The agreement was entered into by Disney and the legal predecessor of the CFTOD — the Reedy Creek Improvement District (RCID), a government authority with all the power of a county in the area surrounding Disney World — an authority Disney directly controlled through the appointment of its board members.

Gov. DeSantis took aim at Disney after the company publicly came out against Florida's Parental Rights in Education Act, a law intended to protect children from sexual grooming by educators. Opponents of the legislation have dubbed it "Don't Say Gay."

Despite DeSantis' and Republicans' efforts, however, it appears that not much has changed, thanks to the last-minute machinations of Disney.

The company defended its actions, declaring in a [statement](#) to CNN: "All agreements signed between Disney and the District were appropriate, and were discussed and approved in open, noticed public forums in compliance with Florida's Government in the Sunshine law."

The outlet further reports:

DeSantis stacked the board with political allies, including Tampa lawyer Martin Garcia, a prominent GOP donor; Bridget Ziegler, the wife of the new chairman of the Republican Party of Florida; and Peri, a former pastor who once suggested tap water could be making people gay.

The controversy is central to DeSantis' political narrative of a leader who is unafraid to battle corporate giants, even one as iconic and vital to Florida as Disney.



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...However, it may be a while before the new power structure has control, if Disney gets its way. One agreement signed by the outgoing board – which restricts the new board from using any of Disney’s “fanciful characters” – is valid until “21 years after the death of the last survivor of the descendants of King Charles III, king of England,” according to a copy of the deal included in the February 8 meeting packet.

But the governor’s office holds that Disney hasn’t had the last laugh. DeSantis spokeswoman Taryn Fenske asserts that the new board is working with “multiple financial and legal firms to conduct audits and investigate Disney’s past behavior.”

Fenske added that “The Executive Office of the Governor is aware of Disney’s last-ditch efforts to execute contracts just before ratifying the new law that transfers rights and authorities from the former Reedy Creek Improvement District to Disney. An initial review suggests these agreements may have significant legal infirmities that would render the contracts void as a matter of law.”

It remains to be seen whether DeSantis’ plan will truly be effective, or ultimately amount to nothing more than a reshuffling of the same deck.

Originally, the Florida Legislature flat-out abolished the Reedy Creek Improvement District, along with all special districts formed before November 5, 1968, in a law passed in April 2022.

That law was supposed to take effect in June of this year. But when Florida politicians worried about what would happen with the RCID’s \$1 billion in bond liabilities, they changed course during the special session in February of this year and instead opted to simply replace RCID with a new special district — the CFTOD — whose board members are chosen by the governor, rather than by Disney.

In short, rather than returning power to the localities in whose territory Disney lies, the updated plan basically rebrands the RCID and still keeps power out of the hands of local residents, the people who are most impacted by Disney’s business activities.

Team Trump was quick to pounce on this setback for DeSantis. Taylor Budowich, spokesman for the pro-Trump Make America Great Again PAC, declared, “President Trump wrote ‘Art of the Deal’ and brokered Middle East peace. Ron DeSantis just got out-negotiated by Mickey Mouse.”

Florida’s struggle with Disney is one that will determine whether the people or woke corporations rule in Florida. One thing remains certain: With neither side willing to back down, the fight is far from over.



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