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Marine Stadium closer to historic status

BY ANDRES VIGLUCCI

Proponents of saving the iconic but neglected Miami Marine Stadium easily cleared a significant hurdle Tuesday when they persuaded the city's historic preservation board to consider designating the modern structure as a protected landmark.

By a 7-1 vote, the board agreed to hear a fleshed-out proposal to designate the 1964 stadium on the Rickenbacker Causeway as historic after some 25 speakers -- including prominent architects, preservationists and rowers who use its basin -- extolled the architectural and historic significance of the raw-concrete building, widely regarded as a masterpiece of design but closed for 16 years. A public hearing and final vote is expected in the fall.

Proponents of designation, grouped as Friends of the Miami Marine Stadium, persuaded board members that the building's dazzling design and significance to a generation of Miamians make it worthy of designation even though at 44 years of age it doesn't meet the 50-year threshold typically used as a guideline for evaluating historic sites.

"This is one of the most exciting buildings ever built in Miami, and for that reason alone it deserves designation," said artist Helene Pancoast, widow of prominent architect Lester Pancoast.

Designation of the city-owned stadium could put Miami officials in a spot. The city's public facilities director, Laurie Billberry, expressed concern over the potential cost of renovation and doubts over what purpose the stadium -- designed for powerboat races but now obsolete for that use -- would serve. A consultant is now conducting a structural evaluation, and planners drawing up a master plan for surrounding Virginia Key have been asked to look into potential re-use.

Backers of designation acknowledge the issues, but say many groups, from rowers to concert promoters, are interested in the stadium's revival. The stadium famously hosted a long and popular series of concerts by performers ranging from Jimmy Buffett to Tony Bennett that one speaker called "magical" because of the setting -- with concertgoers filling the stands to the capacity of 7,000 and others in the water in boats, rafts and inflatables.

"There will be a multitude of uses for this facility," said architect and university of Miami professor Jorge Hernandez, author of the designation proposal submitted to the city.

However, supporters say, the sole criteria for historic designation are its architectural and historical importance, and Dade Heritage Trust executive director Becky Matkov said the stadium is "the finest example in Miami of mid-century modern architecture."

"We feel it's too important to let fall by the wayside," said Matkov, whose group is co-sponsor of the designation proposal, citing the loss of the Orange Bowl and Bobby Maduro Stadium to the wrecker. "Miami Marine Stadium has a universal appeal."

The city closed the stadium after Hurricane Andrew in 1992, in part because of storm damage but also

because the facility was underused and a drain on public coffers at a time of fiscal problems.

Since then, the stadium has deteriorated. Nearly every square foot is covered by graffiti.

Backers, including the stadium's architect, Hilario Candela, have said they're confident the structure is fundamentally sound.

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