

Miami Marine Stadium rehab on hold in dispute between city, preservationists

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PATRICK FARELL / MIAMI HERALD

A look at Miami Marine Stadium in Virginia Key as it stands April 17, 2008. A young couple ride their jetski by the stadium.

A three-year effort to restore one of Miami's treasured waterfront landmarks has been put on hold by the nonprofit group spearheading the task because the city is suddenly proposing changes that could scuttle the plan's financial and historic-preservation underpinnings.

Leaders of the Friends of Miami Marine Stadium group, the nonprofit that has pledged to raise \$30 million to renovate and operate the historic facility, said they were astounded to find out last week that the city wants to take 90 percent of any income derived from the naming of the stadium – money that the group was depending on.

Moreover, the city wants the right to extend a marina inside the basin that runs in front of the stadium's grandstand. The move could ruin the chance for Friends of Miami Marine Stadium to obtain valuable tax credits from the state. The group said it also would alienate the rowers and swimmers who have joined Friend's fight to save the musical and sporting venue.

In a five-paragraph letter hand delivered to Mayor Tomas Regalado last week, historian Don Worth and architect Hilario Candela – key players in the Friends group -- told the mayor that city staff has "imposed obstacle after obstacle to the preservation and future operation of the Marine Stadium." The letter went on to say, "We are unable to continue this process."

Reached Monday, however, Worth and Candela said they believe the restoration of the 10-acre facility on Virginia Key will eventually continue, and that they are "just taking a pause" on renovation planning. The stadium is a globally-renowned architectural jewel listed as a protected landmark by the city's Historic Preservation Board.

At a meeting planned for Thursday, Miami commissioners were expected to vote to deed the stadium property to the city's quasi-independent Miami Sports & Exhibition Authority, a

move necessary for the nonprofit Friends group to eventually take control.

But the vote was removed from the agenda after Worth and Candela complained that the city's revenue request was unfair and not in line with an agreement reached between commissioners and the Friends group last summer. That agreement, part of the Virginia Key Master Plan, did not address specific revenue splits and allowed for a more-limited expansion of the marina.

Worth called the city's latest stance "just plain wrong."

By awarding the property to the Sports & Exhibition Authority, the city avoids a public vote needed before any major changes are made or developments are built on waterfront property. It's the same process followed several years ago when the Museum Park property at Bicentennial Park was handed over the Bayfront Park Management Trust.

Alice Bravo, the city's assistant city manager, said the city is trying to protect its interests, especially for decades down the road when the facility is paid for and renovated. She said the 90 percent split for the stadium naming rights was only a "starting point."

As for expanding the marina into the basin, Bravo said the city needs to preserve that right in case the state doesn't allow for a southern expansion of a marina already on the south side of the property.

Bravo downplayed the Friends group's worries, saying the city wrote the Exhibition Authority contract "looking 20 years into the future."

*Friends of Miami Marine Stadium, the nonprofit that has worked to resurrect, refurbish, and eventually operate the stadium, has not asked for any money from the city or Miami-Dade County for the project. But the historians say they need whatever income can be derived from the naming rights to help pay for the renovations.

Only two weeks ago Worth, Candela, Regalado and others visited The Miami Herald's editorial board, speaking of the virtues of rehabbing the stadium. Its floating oil barge moored to the grandstand served as a floating stage for some of the most famous concerts in Miami history. Elvis, Jimmy Buffet, and Fela all performed there.

When Hurricane Andrew laid waste to Key Biscayne in 1992, it damaged the concrete grandstand and half sunk the barge. Inoperable since then, weeds have grown up around the stadium and graffiti artists have used it as a canvas. It was earmarked for destruction before the Friends group sought the support of the design and engineering community. The city's historic preservation board declared it a protected landmark in 2008.

"We're going to be applying to the Federal Register" for historic preservation status, Worth said. "That would enable us to get the historic tax credits, which is why the basin is so important to us."

He said the credits could be worth as much \$6 million. New engineering studies done in 2010 found the stadium structurally sound for the most part, and Regalado made its renovation a cornerstone of his 2009 election.

A 2004 public vote had already earmarked \$3 million in bond money to the stadium's renovation.

Bravo, the assistant city manager, said she hopes to talk again with Worth and Candela and have a more concrete agreement with the Exhibition Authority in place by September or October, after the city's budget hearings.

Worth said taking some time off might help everyone get back on the same page.

"In spite of it all, I think we'll get there eventually," the historian said.

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