

Private Money Mend the Marine Stadium?

Seems like an easy call, right? Not in Miami

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Although I'm pretty much retired, it's not always easy to completely disassociate yourself with the way you've lived your life for the past 50 years. Every now and then someone calls me and asks for my thoughts or assistance. Recently it happened with the Miami Marine Stadium.

A nonprofit group called Friends of Miami Marine Stadium had approached the City of Miami wishing to raise \$30 million to refurbish the iconic, dramatically cantilevered stadium, which was damaged by Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and has sat in disrepair since then.

The original proposal was for Friends to form a partnership with the city, develop a plan, and come back in six months for final commission approval.

Now, it seems to me that if a nonprofit group wants to give your city \$30 million to do something the city is incapable of doing, that would be a no-brainer.

Obviously it was not, as the city commission deferred the issue twice before voting on March 8 to approve it. Even then the vote was a contentious 3-2.

No doubt there are problems with public-private partnerships, and in Miami, there are no guidelines for them. If there were, they'd have to be flexible, as the political and economic climate is

forever changing. That doesn't mean it can't happen; it just means that, in this case, there hasn't been much political will to do it. Maybe it's just too difficult for our politicians to grandstand an intellectual process.

After the community groups made their presentations to the commission, the commissioners began commenting, starting with Marc Sarnoff. He was the only commissioner to note there was no procedure for this type of process, and also observed that even though the Friends group was going to raise the money and pay for the repairs, there was no plan to pay for the *operation* of the Marine Stadium in the future.

He must have said it a half-dozen times, and I had the feeling he kept repeating it because he didn't think the other commissioners really got it. Sort of like how your kindergarten teacher repeated facts to you until you got them.

The conversation went down the dais to Frank Carollo, who just seemed to be mad as hell and wouldn't support anything that anyone else favored. Not unusual for him; he's been like this for years.

No matter what anybody said, he was voting against it. It also appeared that he had not done his homework on the issue, confusing the Marine Stadium issue with a funding resolution for the Marine Stadium Marina seawall. You'd think a commissioner would at least get his facts straight even if he is going to



A restored Miami Marine Stadium as envisioned by Miami architect Arseni Varabyeu.

vote against it.

Commissioner Willy Gort mumbled a few words that didn't mean much and said he supported it.

And then on to Michelle Spence-Jones. She went off on one of her famous diatribes that must have lasted an hour. Rather than going through her rant piece by piece, let me translate it for you.

Essentially she said she would not support anything that has to do with anything in the community until she got her fair share of it. In other words, she's back and open for business.

My guess is that she will want some of the revenue generated by the development of the Marine Stadium property — if there is any revenue. The Virginia Key Trust, which runs the historic black beach and park at the eastern end of Virginia Key, has been bleeding cash and has no new funding sources. Look for Spence-Jones to dip her hand into any bucket that has money. If you allow her to do that, she'll vote for anything you wish.

She did make the most bizarre statement of the day, saying that she wanted to make sure the Friends of Miami Marine Stadium did not abuse the "Miami brand" while raising funds, and

wanted the funds put into a city account. Excuse me? How could any group abuse the Miami brand more than the city commission already has?

Finally commission chairman Francis Suarez put in his two cents, supporting the measure in a back-handed sort of way. More interesting was that Suarez brought up the "Carollo Amendment" to the city charter (that would be Joe Carollo), which requires a referendum to approve the leasing or selling any city-owned waterfront property.

It became immediately evident that he had no understanding of the amendment, and when he asked city attorney Julie Bru for clarification, she also got it wrong. What a group!

The city has been less than spectacular in its management of city land. How about the fine way the city handled the Orange Bowl, Manuel Artime Theater, Knight Center, the Tower Theater, and Jungle Island — to name just a few?

It only seems to work when the city simply *gives* the property away. Not a grand track record of stewardship of public lands.

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