

Countdown to Parcel B Decision

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer
February 2018

This month county commissioners could vote to doom the long-promised waterfront park



There isn't much on the three-acre site behind the American Airlines Arena: just some trees, some grass, a paved lot, a few benches fronting a baywalk, and fantastic views of Biscayne Bay, PortMiami, the Miami Beach skyline, and neighboring Museum Park.

Park advocates would like to see this place become a passive green park named after Dan Paul, the late attorney renowned for advocating public access to the waterfront.

But members of a nonprofit organization, Cuban Exile History Museum Inc., have other ideas. They want to build a \$12 million plaza called Freedom Park with stairways, pedestrian bridges, restrooms, elevators, and sports fields. Not to mention an 80,000-square-foot, \$77 million museum to celebrate the history of Cuban exiles. Also: restaurants, a gift shop, parking garage, a 300-seat theater, and maybe a permanent Latin American art wing.

"The theme of the museum is very simple, 'From Tyranny to Freedom,'" says William Muir, president of the Cuban Exile History Museum group and a veteran of the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Vietnam War.

The Miami-Dade County Commission's Parks and Cultural Affairs Committee is tentatively scheduled to vote on two measures on February 15 -- a memorandum of understanding (MOU) and a 55-year lease for the site. From there, the full county commission may vote on the MOU as early as March. Both measures are sponsored by county commission chairman Esteban Bovo, the son of a soldier from Brigade 2506, a CIA-sponsored outfit of Cuban exiles that invaded Cuba in a botched operation in April 1961.

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The memorandum of understanding requires that the museum raise the funds it needs to build over a four-year period. “If we meet the parameters of the MOU, then it goes to a lease,” Muir explains. “If not, then everything stops.”

The proposed memorandum has benchmarks. Twelve months after it becomes effective, the museum group must raise \$3 million in actual cash and \$4 million in pledges. In 24 months, an additional \$8 million must be raised and \$9 million more pledged. In 36 months, \$18 million has to be in the bank and an added \$19 million pledged. In 48 months, \$38 million must be raised and \$39 million more pledged.



“The publicly funded museums like PAMM and Frost want more public money,” says Nicolas Gutierrez, secretary of the Cuban Exile History Museum’s board. “We aren’t going to have that issue because, specifically, it states [in the MOU] that there is no access to [county] funds.”

Greg Bush, vice president of the Urban Environment League, an organization that seeks to preserve public spaces in Miami, doesn’t believe Muir’s claims. “You know, once the nose gets under the tent....” Bush says. “That’s the way it goes in Miami. That’s the way it’s gone here forever. You get an agreement that says no public money and then it’s, ‘Oh wait, we’ve gone

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this far. We won't fail if you give us an additional subsidy.”

Peter Ehrlich, a UEL board member and real estate investor, points out that the land itself is a subsidy. Under the proposed lease, the museum will only have to pay \$1 in rent per year, plus utilities.

“We believe the site would be valued at over \$500 million,” Ehrlich asserts in an e-mail to the *B T*

“More important, 20 years ago the site was promised by the Miami Heat and by Miami-Dade County officials to be a world-class landscaped park, including a soccer field.”

Indeed, then-county Mayor Alex Penelas did make that vow in order to garner voter support for the construction of a new 19,600-seat sports arena for the Miami Heat on land that was long slated to become a public park. But instead, Parcel B was fenced off for years while it was used for special events and as a staging area for Miami Heat home games and other arena events.

The land was also considered as the site for a 20-story high-rise residential building until 2003. Then in 2007, the county initiated a study examining whether to build a Bay of Pigs Museum. By July 2014, the county commission voted 8-3 authorizing county Mayor Carlos Gimenez to negotiate a deal with the exile museum group to lease Parcel B, if its members can raise the funds.

Key to that vote was a promise from the commission majority, extracted by Commissioner Dennis Moss, that the county would fund the construction of an African-American history museum.

While negotiations between the county and Cuban Exile History Museum Inc. stretched on, groups like civic Emerge Miami and the UEL pushed for Parcel B to become a park. Finally, in 2015, gates surrounding Parcel B were opened wide, allowing people to enter Parcel B when the land wasn't in use. By July of 2017, the county invested \$396,000, adding new trees, grass, and benches along the baywalk.

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