

Not in the Swim of Things

Written by Erik Bojnansky
April 2019

After three years, Morningside Park pool repair remains in doubt



More than half of nearby residents want to see a shuttered 65-year-old pool facility in Morningside Park fixed and reopened, according to a recent survey.

Yet the pool's repair is far from being a done deal. In fact, it could even be removed from the 42-acre park altogether. City engineering studies also state that the pool by Biscayne Bay, which has been closed since 2016 after the building department declared it an unsafe structure, can be fixed.

Steven Williamson, director of the City of Miami's Capital Improvement Projects Department, says

"We're in the midst of our master plan asking important questions like: Can this structure be fixed? Is it in the right location? And is this something that the city wants to continue?" Williamson says. The city is considering different options as part of an ongoing master plan review of Morningside Park. Those options include fixing the pool, building a new pool facility in the western portion of the park, or simply leaving Morningside Park with no pool at all.

It's a stance that baffles Elvis Cruz, an outspoken Morningside activist who has campaigned for the pool's repair, as well as the park's preservation as an historic landmark. As late as

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September 2018, Mayor Francis Suarez and assistant city manager Nzeribe “Zerry” Ihekweba assured him that the pool would be fixed. “I was thrilled,” he says.

But now Cruz doesn’t know what to think. He’s shocked that the city is actually considering having no pool at Morningside Park at all.

“Why would anyone want to take away a public swimming pool that the public, especially children, have enjoyed for 62 years?” he asks. “Is there an unspoken agenda?”



On the other hand, Marc Billings, a board member of the Morningside Civic Association, tells the *BT* that he’d be just fine with Morningside Park *not* having a pool. In an e-mail, Billings argues that the city would be better off improving other aspects of Morningside Park instead of spending millions of dollars fixing the pool. “Priority one is to have a well-maintained and updated outdoor area for Morningside,” he states. “Currently, the fields are dead, full of sand, and unable to be used. We have ten acres of unused space in the form of a driveway, 1980s playground equipment, and a terrible [walkway] along the bay.”

The pool is part of a larger debate over the future of Morningside Park, the second-largest recreational space in the City of Miami’s park system, with a basketball court, tennis courts, picnic grounds, playground, a baseball field, a palm garden, a mangrove forest, a community center, and a looping vehicular road.

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The park itself is surrounded by the residential Morningside neighborhood, the city's first historic district and a place where bayfront homes sell for as high as \$14 million. Since the 1980s, most streets leading into this wealthy enclave just east of Biscayne Boulevard have been barricaded. The only two vehicular access points, at NE 50th Street and NE 58th Street, have guard houses manned by security personnel who record the license plates of any automobiles that don't belong to residents.

In response to the demands of some Morningside homeowners, including Billings, the city paid AECOM, a Los Angeles consulting and planning firm, \$88,000 to examine ways to improve the park and make it more resilient to sea level rise. Cruz and other parkgoers contend that the park is fine the way it is, just needs to be properly maintained, and fear that some residents are trying to create a design that will restrict the park's access to outsiders.

There's a racial element, too. Many of the parkgoers who live outside of Morningside are black -- African Americans or Haitian Americans. Morningside is predominately white. (See "[Rumble in the Park](#)," April 2018.)



Regarding the pool, Cruz says he collected 2100 signatures from parkgoers, both living outside

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and inside Morningside Park, who want the existing pool fixed. The pool's repair is favored by a majority of Morningside residents, Cruz adds. According to an AECOM survey conducted last year, 65 percent of Morningside residents want the existing pool fixed.

Cruz also points out that three studies, for which the city paid a total of \$149,000, determined that the pool can be repaired for \$3.5 million. This, Cruz insists, is far more affordable than paying the \$7 or \$8 million the city has estimated it would cost to build a new pool from scratch.

But Williamson says the studies merely determined that rebuilding the pool was possible, not preferable. "We're trying to come up with a regional [park] system and what is the best way to address the needs for the area," he maintains. "That could mean a pool. That could mean not a pool. We have not come to any conclusions."

Local historian and *BT* contributor Paul George says it would be a shame to remove a pool that has been a part of the park for more than six decades. "I know it's been out of whack for a while, but are you really going to remove a pool that was so heavily used?" he asks.

According to a July 2017 historic designation report that George wrote for the City of Miami, the pool was an integral part of P. Raymond Plumer's original design. Dedicated in June 1953, the Morningside Park pool is 40 feet wide by 100 feet long. While the 35 cabanas were removed in the 1990s, other original features of the pool remain, including the office, restrooms, and refreshment stand.

"This is a really old pool. It's one of the oldest pools I've ever seen in operation," remarks Williamson, who spent more than 20 years as an engineer in the U.S. Army.

In spite of its age, Cruz says the pool remains popular. It was used by more than a hundred kids from the city's Morningside Park and Legion Park summer camps prior to its closure three years ago.

What won't be popular, Cruz admits, will be building a new pool in the western part of Morningside Park, an option depicted in a draft December 2018 AECOM report. "That's going to

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be a huge political can of worms,” Cruz predicts. “The people on the western side of the park don’t want a pool in front of their homes.”

Billings wonders why Morningside Park needs a pool at all. “Is building a pool at Morningside Park a necessity? Probably not,” he states in an e-mail to the *BT*. “This location is an outdoor bayfront park that has huge weather exposure.”

Cruz counters that the city needs more pools, not fewer. To emphasize his point, he cites an October 2018 *Miami Herald* article in which parents line up at 2:00 a.m. for a chance to enroll their kids for swimming lessons at one of five city pools offering them.

But Billings insists that other parks have better pool facilities than Morningside Park, like Hadley Park in Liberty City. There are also other places where a new pool can be built. “If [the city] were going to add another pool, it would likely go to Moore Park [in Allapattah],” Billings suggests, “which has room and is also more conveniently located to the community that Elvis feels is underserved.”

Williamson says the city will be taking into account the opinions of all parkgoers, though he admits that more weight may be given to those who live near it.

For the past two years, Fay Stratford has operated a kayak concession near Morningside Park’s shuttered pool. “I’ve had numerous African-American adults in their 40s who ask, ‘When is the pool going to open?’ and ‘I learned to swim in that pool. I have so many good memories there,’” says Stratford, a 27-year-old white Buena Vista resident.

Stratford says she’s heard different opinions from Morningside residents, though, including some who’d like it to go away. Those residents often note that they already have a pool in their backyard, and they didn’t like the idea of a revamped pool attracting crowds of outsiders into their tony neighborhood. “If word got out that there’s a great public pool here, everyone and their cousin would be coming,” Stratford says, summarizing the objections she’s heard. “Would you like someone schlepping through your yard every day?”

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At a March 12 meeting of the city's Community Relations Board, no one from Morningside was in favor of demolishing the pool. During that session, Cruz made an impassioned presentation to fix the existing pool, a stance that was cheered by a couple of dozen people from Morningside, Little Haiti, Buena Vista, and Overtown.

Commissioner Ken Russell, whose district includes Morningside Park, attended the March 12 meeting as well. And while Russell says he can't guarantee that the current pool will be rehabilitated, he vows to ensure there will always be a pool in that park.

Says Russell: "Renovate it or rebuild it. Whatever logically works best, from my perspective. I will find the money for either plan."

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