

A Waterfront Park for All to Enjoy

Written by Erik Bojnansky
August 2011

Remember “Parcel B,” the land behind the Miami Heat’s arena? You own it but can’t use it -- yet

On a locked gate just behind the American Airlines Arena a sign reads: “No Trespassing, Loitering or Fishing on This Property... Violators Will Be Prosecuted.” Another sign features a Miami-Dade County logo. It says: “Parcel B Bike Path and Shoreline Stabilization Project.”



Beyond the gate and the looming arena is Parcel B, three acres of land county leaders promised years ago to transform into a park.

Also gated is a new 611-foot-long seawall and bike path/baywalk that cost taxpayers \$6.1 million to build.

But the public can’t use the path or wander among Parcel B’s palms, planted for a 2005 MTV Music Video Awards show. Those trees and other “permanent improvements” cost taxpayers up to \$205,000, according to county documents.

A thousand feet to the north, another fence straddles the seawall, keeping out anyone who’d risk climbing over a pile of rocks to reach Parcel B.

“Ever since the arena opened, that area has *never* been open to the public,” grumbles Miami parks activist Steve Hagen.

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But José Perez, director of the county General Services Administration's design and construction division, claims the fences will come down after repairs to the county's seawall, which cracked two days after it was built in 2009.

"Opening up a public area to the public? What a concept!" mocks Greg Bush, vice president of the Urban Environment League. Bush fears that some county officials still want to hand over Parcel B to a private developer. "I think Parcel B is absolutely being set up for failure and to privatize," he says.

Perez insists that the county is determined to transform Parcel B into a park. "When we do get funding, we will finish that back area with landscaping and benches," he assures.

All the land where American Airlines Arena stands was supposed to be a park. In 1981 the City of Miami bought 23 acres from the Florida East Coast Railroad for \$23 million. The intention was to merge the "FEC Tract" with Bicentennial Park. Instead, throughout the 1980s, the tract served as a track for the annual Miami Grand Prix, and as a hangout for vagrants.

In 1996 county voters blessed the concept of leasing much of the FEC tract from Miami and building a 19,600-seat, \$210 million new stadium for the Miami Heat. Helping to sell the idea was a promise that a portion of the tract (Parcel B) would become a park. Hagen remembers that before the vote, the Heat sent out brochures with a color photograph depicting the arena's backyard as a "soccer field on the water."

The new arena had hardly opened when, in 2000, the Miami Heat Group proposed building a marina with restaurants and retail on Parcel B. That scheme mutated into a 23-story apartment building that was to be co-developed by Armando Codina. By 2003 the Heat and Codina had backed off the idea.

"The county and the Heat are in agreement that this should be a park," Heat attorney Richard Weiss told *Miami Today*.

However, the county had never clearly zoned Parcel B as a park. Records show that both the

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arena and Parcel B are in an “8002 Parks & Recreation zone,” yet their legal description is “maritime arena.”

The land languished for a few years before another idea was proposed. In September 2007, the county commission approved a resolution to study the feasibility of constructing a five-story museum and parking garage devoted to the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. But no further action was taken. “I think the museum has gone away,” Bush says.

While the county contemplated what to build, or not to build on Parcel B, the City of Miami was investing more than \$20 million improving the waterfront area between the MacArthur Causeway and the arena, says city spokeswoman Cristina Fernandez. Among the enhancements was a \$10 million seawall along the FEC slip that was completed in 2006, and a new \$1.5 million bollard system capable of docking vessels more than 400 feet long.

Thanks to those enhancements, the FEC slip area has “become an exceptional venue for hosting tall ship events, around-the-world races, military ship visits, the Miami International Boat show, and a variety of other maritime activities and events,” Fernandez writes in an e-mail to the *BT*.

Then, unexpectedly this past June, Miami-Dade County Commission Chairman Dennis Moss proposed studying the feasibility of filling the FEC slip with material dredged from the Port of Miami tunnel project. After an outcry from Miami officials, the study suggestion was pulled from the commission’s July agenda.

The city’s waterfront activity inspired county officials to perform shoreline improvements of their own. In 2008 the county commission hired Shoreline Foundation, Inc. to renovate the crumbling seawall behind Parcel B and connect it to the new FEC slip seawall. The county’s GSA department recommended the Fort Lauderdale-based company because it had also built the seawalls for the FEC slip and Bicentennial Park.

On December 16, 2009, the county’s new seawall, which includes a 16-foot-wide walking and biking path, was completed. Two days later a severe storm hit Miami. “It rained like crazy,” recalls the GSA’s José Perez. The rain seeped through the “millions of holes” still present in the older portions of the seawall. At the same time “the brand-new seawall stopped the water from

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flowing,” he explains. Because the water “had to find a way out,” it ruptured a three-foot hole in the corner where it connects with Miami’s portion of the seawall.

Spencer Crowley, a commissioner with the Florida Inland Navigation District, says a design flaw caused the rupture. “The intersection of these two seawalls did not match up quite right,” Crowley states. “That’s what caused the problem.”

Perez denies the damage resulted from faulty design, claiming that the county’s wall “flexed” as it was meant to do. (Shoreline Foundation did not return a phone call from the *BT*.)

Regardless of the how the hole was caused, the rupture threatened to undermine the both the county and city portions of the seawall. Without repairs, “the ground could keep going under the seawall and into the water,” Crowley explains. If that happens, “we would have to replace the corner of that seawall, and that could be an expensive project.”

Finally on July 7, Shoreline Foundation went to work, repairing the wall substantially by July 27 at a cost of \$167,000, a contingency amount already in the project’s budget, Perez says. In the event of another flash flood, the fixes will allow “the water to go over the edge.”

Meanwhile, the City of Miami is also making some progress with its plan to “complete a signature baywalk around the entire Bicentennial Park, FEC slip, and north toward I-395,” states city spokeswoman Fernandez. Construction on the baywalk should commence in spring 2012, she adds. That baywalk, Perez notes, will be connected to the Parcel B bike path by a sidewalk.

At deadline, neither Perez nor Fernandez could say when the fences blocking access to Parcel B would be removed.

Parks advocate Steve Hagen remains skeptical that Parcel B will ever open to the public as recreational open space. Says Hagen: “I will believe it when I see it.”

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