

Downtown authority OKs study for convention center

BY CATHERINE LACKNER
AND SCOTT E. PACHECO

Miami's Downtown Development Authority board has voted to request proposals to weigh the need for a downtown conference center, though directors say the venture is likely to face Miami Beach opposition.

However, DDA chair and city Commissioner Marc Sarnoff said Tuesday he spoke with Miami Beach Mayor Matt Bower after last week's vote and at least for now the waters are calm.

"She was just curious as to what we were discussing - I told her we were talking about a very small distinct meeting place," he said.

The vote comes as Miami Beach officials are readying for a years-long project to revamp the Miami Beach Convention Center. Miami Beach recently was OK'd to start tapping \$55 million in county bond money for improvements.

Mayor Bower and Miami Beach Assistant City Manager Hilda Fernandez could not be reached. City Manager Jorge Gonzalez did not return calls last week and is on vacation this week. Previously, Mayor Bower's chief of staff said the mayor had concerns over potential poaching of meetings by a downtown center.

A kickoff meeting between Beach convention center stakeholders and architect Arquitectonica to begin master planning a convention center revamp is tentatively scheduled for Jan. 15.

In addition to a possible conference center, related projects are in the works downtown.

The Hyatt Regency downtown is working with City of Miami representatives "on an agreement to take over the James L. Knight center and convert it into a 24,000-square-foot, column-free convention center," said John Visconti, director of sales and marketing.

Also under construction is the Marriott Marquis, which is to sport a 20,000-square-foot ballroom once it is finished next summer.

But that still leaves a niche in size, Mr. Sarnoff said, adding that the plan to revamp the Miami Beach Convention Center would bring it up to about 1 million square feet.

"The convention center is 680,000 square feet to be reno-



Photo by Maxine Usdan

The DDA doesn't need to apologize to anyone,' says board member Jose Goyanes, for studying a new convention center downtown.

vated into a million," he said. "...You are going to tell me there's nothing between 30,000 square feet and a million? Am I missing something here?"

He emphasized that it isn't up to him to determine what size facility, if any, the study would recommend.

Still, he added, "This isn't competition. This is nothing more than to create a different niche."

Development authority officials were vocal in support of the study.

"We want to complement, not compete with, Miami Beach," said Javier Betancourt, authority manager of urban planning and transportation. "We'll look at it holistically with what exists."

"We don't need to apologize to anyone," said board member and downtown retailer Jose Goyanes. "We're trying to make Miami better."



'A strong downtown makes the whole region stronger.'

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"A strong downtown," said land-use attorney and authority board member Neisen Kasdin, "makes the whole region stronger."

There are 8,000 hotel rooms in the City of Miami, he said, and "the Knight Center clearly is inadequate" to handle a large convention. The study will recommend the size and configuration of the center, he added.

If and when the Knight Center is renovated, Hyatt's Mr. Visconti said the hotel still would be happy with a large conference center downtown.

"We'd welcome a major convention center town," he said. "We welcome the study. I'd love to see what a professional analysis would provide."

A downtown conference and convention center has been talked about since 2001, said Alyce Robertson, authority CEO. According to a study commissioned then by the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, "one quarter of surveyed meeting planners would prefer a downtown convention center location and that downtown contains a sufficient number of hotel rooms to accommodate events."

In 2008, the visitors bureau ordered another study that identified "a major deficiency in ballroom general session space throughout the metropolitan area, as well as the lack of a headquarter hotel to serve the convention center." The idea of putting a multiuse facility in Park West has also been discussed by the New World Center Committee of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce.

"This has been talked about for more than 20 years," said Tony Alonso, development au-

thority board member and downtown retailer. "The city dropped the ball and the money went into the Miami Beach facility. The prime hotels are here. It will be a catalyst for jobs and for retail. The next big deals are going to be spurred by governments. I support it."

"It's as valid as a gold mine for this city," Mr. Sarnoff said. "We're always looking for people to bring money in," but without adequate facilities, the effort hasn't always been successful. New facilities, along with new industries, he said, would be likely to spur economic growth.

"It's a good idea," said developer and authority board member Oscar Rodriguez, "and the study will say it's a good idea. When do we get results?"

"Things are afoot," Commissioner Sarnoff told him.

He asked for the authority's support. "I'll be honest with you; I always wanted to be the DDA chair. But if I'm going to be the tip of the spear, I need



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someone to cover my back," he said. Board members voted unanimously to endorse the request for proposals.