

City rejects recommendation on boat ramp beside stadium

BY JOHN CHARLES ROBBINS

A City of Miami official has affirmed that despite repeated recommendations from the Virginia Key Advisory Board not to construct a boat ramp next to Miami Marine Stadium, the city is building it anyway.

The statements were made at the board's latest meeting Jan. 25, as city staff members were providing a status report on the city's numerous projects on the island.

The city owns most of Virginia Key, including the historic Marine Stadium and the basin it faces. The city has had a plan to restore the stadium, closed since 1992's Hurricane Andrew, for several years.

Members of the advisory board have tangled with city administrative staff for years, complaining of being ignored.

Board member Vinson Richter, who represents the Dade Heritage Trust, has on numerous occasions said the city staff's contention that a boat ramp exists next to the stadium, or did exist, is simply false.

The issue came up again as Loraine Rosado-Pietrie, with the Office of Capital Improvements, was presenting the project updates and had given each board member a printed handout.

Mr. Richter referred to a portion of the report on the planned installation "of two fixed/floating dock finger piers totaling 1,481 sq. ft, installation of a 60 ft. by 86 ft. (5,160 sq. ft.) boat ramp, and 218 ln. ft. of riprap."

He read from the report, "A portion of the boat ramp is located within the footprint of a previously existing non-functional boat ramp and will be expanded from the historic location."

Then, looking up at staff and moving closer to his microphone, Mr. Richter said: "There was no boat ramp there."

Ms. Rosado-Pietrie said, "We have information as to that there was a boat ramp."

Mr. Richter said, "Go out there and look."

Ms. Rosado-Pietrie said, "OK."

He again said, "There is no boat ramp there."

Board member Peter Ehrlich then said, "This board has been discussing the boat ramp (proposal) for years, and I believe we have voted three or four times to deny this boat ramp, saying we do not recommend this boat ramp going forward. I believe all the votes have been unanimous. Have our feelings and votes been conveyed to city staff and city leaders?"

Yes, "clearly, clearly, very clearly," answered Suzanne Hollander, the new director of the city's Department of Real Estate and Asset Management (DREAM).

The city government was awarded \$1.25 million from the Florida Inland Navigation District (FIND) board, and city leaders approved committing a matching amount for a total project cost of \$2.5 million to construct the boat ramp launch facility.

As he has at previous meetings, Mr. Richter voiced concern that city officials

were willing to let a million-dollar grant influence the overall plan for restoring and operating the marine stadium.

He said, "You're going let a million-dollar grant determine the future of —."

Ms. Hollander cut him off.

"I'm going to interrupt here because Loraine is not who's in charge of it. And I have told you several times," she said.

"I can't understand you, I'm sorry," said Mr. Richter.

"Well, I'm sorry, I'm not going to remove my mask. We're in a pandemic, so I'm not going to," she responded.

"So, we've told you several times that the way to express concerns ... is to go to city commission or speak to the elected or the city manager. We're not the decision-makers here. So, it's no use in taking the time and berating or talking with disrespect or even going over and over what we've said before because we're not the decision-makers here. And I can tell you that I've been very clear about this board does not support the boat ramp and all the reasons why, and I have been told the boat ramp is still going ahead," said Ms. Hollander, who is an ex-officio member of the advisory board.

Board Chair Joe Rasco said: "Basically, our advice has not been taken. They are going forward with the boat ramp even though we have recommended on several occasions against it and given excellent reasons as to why."

Staff did say the boat ramp project must

go to a public hearing of the Planning, Zoning and Appeals Board before moving ahead.

The city has already hired a contractor for the boat ramp project, but approval of the permit is an "exception" that must be reviewed by the appeals board, according to Ms. Rosado-Pietrie.

At an advisory board meeting in April 2021, nearly 20 residents spoke in opposition to the boat ramp proposal. Board support staff noted the ruckus over the ramp resulted in 417 public comments online.

While members of the Virginia Key Alliance called for an immediate stop to the boat ramp, advisory board members tangled with city staff over the project and complained of being ignored.

Many people complained of current dangerous situations that unfold in the historic basin fronting the stadium when aggressive operators of motorboats and Jet Skis get too close to passive water sport users, sometimes purposely trying to swamp canoes and those on paddleboards and more.

Building a boat ramp near the stadium would be an environmental disaster, some said, and only aggravate the already dangerous waters in the basin.

Board members have also said added vehicles pulling boats trying to enter and leave stadium parking lots would create havoc on the already crowded Rickenbacker Causeway, the only road to and from the island.

Profit a key to marine stadium's restoration, advocate says

BY JOHN CHARLES ROBBINS

"Miami Marine Stadium can be enormously successful," said Don Worth, a longtime advocate for restoration of the iconic waterfront venue owned by the City of Miami.

Mr. Worth made the statement at the most recent meeting of the Virginia Key Advisory Board.

He is a co-founder of the group Restore Marine Stadium and has pushed for renovating and reopening the stadium for over a decade.

He spoke to the board about the financial and economic feasibility of a reopened Marine Stadium.

"There are all kinds of emotional reasons for wanting it restored," said Mr. Worth.

For the city commission, it must consider "if restoration is a prudent investment for Miami? Is it sustainable? What can it do? And can it be profitable?" he said.

More than five years have passed since the commission approved bond funding for restoring the stadium, yet no construction has been done.

For several years the city had been working toward restoring the long-idled stadium, closed since 1992's Hurricane Andrew.

Talk of restoring it was just that for years, until November 2016, when the commission approved \$45 million in bonding to borrow money to fund stadium renovation and other improvements.

In January 2017 the commission hired R.J. Heisenbottle Architects for architectural and engineering services related to the stadium.

The most recent status report on the project lists the total estimated cost at \$47,803,022.

Mr. Worth is concerned that efforts to restore the concrete stadium have stalled in part because there's a belief that it is a white elephant.



British crew interviews William Talbert at Miami Marine Stadium for series on US historic properties.

He told the board, "People say 'it didn't work and it lost money ... why put money into a building that doesn't work?'"

"Those concerns are legitimate. It was not financially successful. Some then ask, 'If it didn't work financially then, why will it work now?'" Mr. Worth said.

He and his group have been studying the history of the stadium, opened in 1963, and its financial records. It hosted concerts and speedboat races, political rallies and more.

"The concerns that the stadium didn't work financially are fair. I learned that very clearly. The concessions and ticket manifests from '86 to '92 were not pretty. So, what's different?" he said.

Interviews with city officials and others who worked on the stadium during its years of operation said the city poorly promoted and marketed the venue and didn't have enough events there, he said.

Mr. Worth also said it should be no surprise the city lost money on the stadium because it has never made money on similar venues.

The City of Miami never made money when it operated the Knight Center downtown or the Bayfront Park Amphitheater. Since then, the venues have made money after the city hired outside management companies and promoters, he said.

Mr. Worth acknowledged the disadvantage of a lack of institutional memory about the stadium. Since 2008, the city has gone through six city managers and an equal number of changes at the assistant city manager level, he said, plus changes in department heads involved with the stadium.

"There's not a lot of knowledge about what the city has done ... it's a challenge for the administration," he said.

Mr. Worth said the stadium is a very special place.

"No one has the visuals as we do, the fabulous views of Miami Marine Stadium," he said.

Efforts by the city staff to get a private operator onboard have faltered, he noted. A formal request for proposals in 2019 was abandoned.

He said, "I am not here to bash the city because (we) don't have an operator. I understand it's a complicated process, involving the lease of waterfront property ... but why haven't we built the building?"

"The good news is that there are still quality operators out there able to manage the venue," he said.

Concerts can help a reopened stadium profit, he told the board.

"The big national tour concerts are lucrative, that's where the initial great demand will be. Concerts, held out of the gate, is where this will make money," he said.

Music residencies, like extended stays at Las Vegas venues,

is what Mr. Worth envisions.

"If you can get residencies like Dave Matthews and Billy Joel, that's when it really pops. And if you can get 40 or 50 shows there a year, then you can really pop."

Mr. Worth said the bottom line for his support group is that "we want to help ... we're on your side. We'll be at city commission to back you."

He said, "What this project really needs is political leadership. Mr. Mayor, if you're listening, we need you. Big projects don't get done without political leadership ... Mayor (Francis) Suarez this can be your legacy ... this place is magic."

The famous stadium continues to generate lots of international publicity, Mr. Worth told the board.

A television production crew from Great Britain recently filmed a major segment about Marine Stadium for a new series on US historic properties that is being produced by the Science Channel of Great Britain.

The TV crew interviewed stadium supporter Bill Talbert of the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau at the stadium on the historic basin.

The segment is to be shown beginning in July in the US, then Great Britain, and then countries in Europe.

It may be on TV for as long as six years, said Mr. Worth.

Board member Peter Ehrlich asked city staffers the status of the restoration.

Officials with the Office of Capital Improvements said an ad to hire a general contractor is to be published in March, and the process of hiring a company for the construction is expected to take six to nine months.

During that time, another request for proposals for an operator of the stadium is to be published, the officials said.