

The Miami Herald

September 24, 2010

Circulation: 170,769

MIAMI SCIENCE MUSEUM

New museum clears hurdle

■ Miami commissioners approved an environmentally friendly and sleek contemporary design for a new science museum downtown.

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The planned new Miami Science Museum off Biscayne Boulevard cleared a major hurdle Thursday when the City Commission approved a sleekly contemporary, environmentally friendly design that supporters say will help turn a bleak corner of downtown into a dynamic magnet for visitors.

In doing so, by a 4-1 vote, the commission set aside concerns from activists who questioned the project's legality, alleging it violates city rules limiting development on flood-prone coastal land, and who threatened a lawsuit to stop it.

But after the city's planners and lawyers assured commissioners that the rules do not apply to the government-sponsored museum project, only Commissioner Frank Carollo dissented.

"Sometimes you have to dream," said Commission Chairman Marc Sarnoff, adding that the \$275 million science museum — along with the adjacent new Miami Art Museum — would help transform near-derelict

Bicentennial Park into "Miami's Central Park."

The schematic design approved Thursday was unveiled by the museum in May, with tweaks requested by city planners to make the museum's ground level more pedestrian-friendly. The design is by the New York office of Grimshaw Architects, the firm of renown British architect Nicholas Grimshaw, in association with Rodriguez & Quiroga of Miami.

The five-level museum, with several levels open to the air, would incorporate an aquarium, a new high-tech planetarium, science exhibits focusing on technology and the environment, as well as wildlife exhibits and educational facilities. All would be housed in an energy-efficient building that is, in and of itself, also meant to function as an exhibit of green construction.

"It will make downtown a destination in the way that great cities like Baltimore and Sydney are grouped around the harbor," said science museum Director Gillian Thomas.

The museum would occupy four acres of park land just off Biscayne Boulevard at about 11th Street. Across a planned new plaza to its east would rise the new art museum, previously approved by the city and

Miami-Dade County.

Work on the site has begun, with environmental remediation underway to remove contaminated topsoil and some derelict structures from the old Bicentennial Park, including a long-vacant restaurant building.

Science museum administrators plan to start construction next year, with completion in 2014. Before getting building permits from the city, however, museum administrators must prove they have sufficient funding to finish the job, city officials said. The project is underwritten by \$175 million in voter-approved county bonds. The balance is to come from private donations. Before it will release the bond money, the county must be satisfied that museum has raised the promised amount.

Those assurances did not prove sufficient to satisfy concerns from leaders of Miami Neighborhoods United, who questioned the museum's ability to raise the money and contend the site would put taxpayers' money at risk because it lies partly inside a designated coastal zone at high risk for hurricane damage.

City building officials say the museum has been designed to withstand a Category 5 hurricane and will be required to have insurance.