

## Conference facility could add meeting space to downtown Miami

BY OSCAR PEDRO MUSIBAY

A proposed conference facility for downtown Miami could be operational in 2016, with financing likely coming from a public-private partnership, according to a report.

The conference facility may have as much as 200,000 square feet of leasable space, and possibly an on-site hotel component that would include up to 800 rooms, according to the Urban Land Institute.

The Miami Downtown Development Authority hired the ULI to produce a report exploring the concept of a conference center in the area. The findings of ULI's Technical Assistance Panel, which included Andrew S. Robins, a partner at law firm Proskauer Rose, were presented Sept. 17 to the DDA board, which voted to fund a market analysis of demand. The TAP originally released some of its findings over the summer.

The report particularly emphasized that the proposed conference facility would complement the Miami Beach Convention Center.

"A downtown conference facility would not be a competitor of the Miami Beach Convention Center," the report states. "It would focus primarily on much smaller meetings and events than those that would gravitate toward a convention center venue."

But, some observers question whether there is enough public money to fund both, and worry the conference facility could draw business away from Miami Beach.

DDA Vice Chairman Neisen Kasdin, Miami Beach's onetime mayor, also emphasized the complementary focus of a downtown Miami conference facility at the Sept. 17 meeting.



Kasdin

### A TOUCHY SUBJECT

But, the potential competition is a touchy subject among several entities, including Miami Beach, which has been promised \$50 million in bond money for a possible convention center renovation that could cost from \$500 million to \$1 billion. Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Alvarez told Miami Beach Mayor Matti Herrera Bower at his State of the County speech in February 2009 that the county was committed to providing bond dollars toward the renovation.

The message came as the county redirected money that could have gone to the convention center toward construction of the \$600 million Florida Marlins ballpark.

There is a big difference between saying funding is coming and allocating it, said one Miami Beach official, who asked not to be named. Bower could not be reached for comment.



Blumberg

Stuart Blumberg, retired president and CEO of the Greater Miami & the Beaches Hotel Association, filters the proposed project through his position as co-chairman of the group appointed to create the blueprint for renovating the convention center.

He told the *Business Journal*

he doesn't want to be critical or position the convention center as a financial adversary to the proposed conference facility. However, he did raise questions about the prospective funding sources, and said demand for public financing is crowded and includes players such as Sun Life Stadium, which wants to add a roof, and supporters of bringing soccer's World Cup to Miami in 2018 or 2022.

### 'MORE INTIMATE MEETING SPACE'

The ULI report describes the difference between the tone of a "big-box" convention center and a conference facility: "Although a convention center would also include conference and meeting space, a conference center is differentiated in that it would typically offer more intimate meeting space and a higher level of finishes and service than would be found within a convention center."

The conference facility would include kitchen, storage and service areas; loading docks; offices; pre-function areas; lobbies and back-of-house operations.

The renovated Miami Beach Convention Center could also include an 850-room hotel on the current site of the Fillmore Miami Beach at Jackie Gleason Theater. The convention center renovation is supposed to be finished by 2016.

**'A DOWNTOWN conference facility ... would focus primarily on much smaller meetings and events than those that would gravitate toward a convention center venue.'**

Urban Land Institute report