

Bidding for children's courthouse job may open this month

By RISA POLANSKY

Bidding for contractors to build a children's courthouse downtown is to open as early as this month, with construction on the 14-story building expected early next year.

Miami-Dade commissioners took steps at a committee meeting in July to close a \$72 million funding gap in the \$176 million project, agreeing to raise traffic infraction surcharges by \$15 to create a revenue stream to back courthouse project bonds.

Construction documents for the 375,000 square-foot courthouse, set to rise on a parking lot at 112 NW Third St., are being wrapped up now, said Project Manager Humberto Contreras of Miami-Dade County's General Services Administration.

Once complete, the county is to seek a contractor to build the courthouse, probably between August and October, he said.

Construction should then begin between February and April, and the project is to be completed by the end of 2013.

Mr. Contreras did not know how many construction jobs



RENDERING: The new children's courthouse facility is to rise in downtown Miami at 112 NW Third St., which currently is a parking lot.

the project is to generate, and the Miami Downtown Development Authority has not done a formal analysis on its economic impact to the area. Executive Director Alyce Robertson said she looks forward to more workers and potential residents downtown.

And the project's size suggests it should pack a punch for the ailing building industry, Mr. Contreras said.

"I would think a great deal. A lot of jobs will be created by virtue of this construction —

it's a sizeable project."

It's also a sizeable price tag. "We have a budget shortfall here," Circuit Court Judge Joseph P. Farina told commissioners at a meeting of the county's Health, Public Safety and Intergovernmental Committee last month.

Commissioners on the committee agreed to increase an existing surcharge on civil and criminal traffic infractions to close the \$72 million funding gap.

The proposed \$15 surcharge

increase would provide funding to pay debt service on bonds by doubling the existing surcharge for civil traffic violations.

"It's extremely important and makes a great deal of sense," the former chief judge said.

The proposed charge would generate about \$6.2 million a year expressly to pay principal and interest on Children's Courthouse bonds, as well as other costs related to the courthouse, the proposed ordinance says.

Felony, misdemeanor or criminal traffic offenses mean an \$85 surcharge.

But the charges would be waived for indigents, which could cost the county an estimated \$420,000.

Still, exempting the poor was a selling point for commissioners.

"We don't have a debtors prison and we don't want to encumber those who can't pay to begin with more of a burden for our collections process," committee Chair Sally Heyman said.

She was thrilled also that surcharge collections would remain local.

"This is unique because we keep all the money," she said. Generally, when it comes to fines, "a good chunk goes every place else outside of Miami-Dade County and other jurisdictions. This will all stay here."

The full commission is to consider the surcharge increase Sept. 1.

The funding hole is the latest in a string of issues for the long-planned project.

"We have been at this now since the year 2000," Judge Farina said. "We had three little bumps in the road over these last nine years."

First, the civil filing fees meant to fund the project ended up diverted elsewhere, so the county and court system created the initial surcharge to serve as a revenue stream to back bonds.

After that, officials had to decide who would occupy the facility.

The Juvenile Division of the 11th Judicial Circuit Court of



'We don't have a debtors prison and we don't want to encumber those who can't pay to begin with...'

Sally Heyman

Florida and staffers from complementary agencies, including the State Attorney's office, Public Defender's office, the Guardian Ad Litem program, the Department of Children and Families and others are to set up shop there.

The third "bump" came when the 3.4-acre site became a top contender for a would-be home for the Florida Marlins.

When officials set their sights on the former Orange Bowl property in Little Havana — where the baseball stadium is now under construction — the courthouse project got back on track, though the curveball meant a year's delay, Judge Farina said.

And a new facility is badly needed, he stressed, marveling that tenants in the existing courthouse, 3300 NW 27th Ave., get work done under the "worst possible physical conditions imaginable."

The planned facility is to feature 18 courtrooms.

Judge Farina called it "a green building, a smart building and a signature building courthouse for Miami-Dade County and for the children and families of this community."