

The Miami Herald

August 14, 2009

Circulation: 210,884

Ground broken for new park at ancient Miami Circle

Local and state officials put aside their differences and broke ground for a park that will house the ancient Miami Circle downtown.

BY VYTENIS DIDZIULIS

vdidziulis@MiamiHerald.com

More than 10 years after taxpayers shelled out \$27 million to buy the land around the Miami Circle, ground was finally broken Friday on a new park that will open the ancient Native American site to the public.

Located at the mouth of the Miami River, the 2,000-year-old limestone slab was not on display and the park is not scheduled to open until next spring, but local officials said the groundbreaking was an important first step toward developing the historic space.

Archaeologists believe the 38-foot-wide limestone circle's carvings were postholes for a round structure built by the Tequesta, Miami's original inhabitants.

"It's difficult to know who you are today or who you should be in the future if you don't know where you came from," Miami Mayor Manny Diaz said.

The park is as much about Miami's history as it is about its future, Diaz continued.

"This Baywalk that we see here will someday connect us to Museum Park and beyond."

The beginning of construction comes after years of wrangling between local and state officials over the design of the park, the timetable and scope of the final plan, and aesthetic quarrels with the circle's neighbor -- the Icon Brickell.

The sacred site was discovered in 1998, when a 1950s building was demolished to make room for a modern high-rise. A public outcry led county and state officials to purchase the land the following year.

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LENGTHY PLANNING

State officials and the Historical Museum of Southern Florida wanted to embark on a lengthy planning and building process that would have put off opening the circle until 2012.

But proponents of breaking the construction up into two phases so that the public could enjoy the park sooner were given a boost when the federal government designated the site a national landmark this January.

"We've come a long way," said Robert McCammon, president and CEO of the museum.

The \$750,000 first phase of construction calls for a paved promenade around the 2.2-acre site, a drop-off circle for school buses and cars, modest landscaping and lighting and a few interpretive signs.

WALL DISPLAY

The second phase, which would extend the promenade into a figure eight with the circle at the middle, would include a curved wall display featuring a timeline of events and a limestone geologic display.

Small huts for events and educational activities for children will also be added.

All the money needed to complete the second phase was not guaranteed, and under the current economic situation the Florida Legislature might not dole out enough funds.

Secretary of State Kurt Browning said he will request \$2.5 million from the Legislature this fall in hopes the Legislature would appropriate the money in the spring of 2010 -- just in time for the end of construction on phase one.

"We want to keep the project moving," Browning said. "But in this environment, you just don't know."

Miami City Commissioner Marc Sarnoff, who gave \$50,000 of his quality-of-life funds for phase one, said the state had to take control of the remaining development.

"This is really a state park and the state needs to step up," Sarnoff said.