

## Miami DDA may take over some downtown NET office services

BY OSCAR PEDRO MUSIBAY

During the city's final budget hearing, the Miami Downtown Development Authority was directed to absorb at least \$200,000 in costs for a satellite Neighborhood Enhancement Team (NET) office located in the downtown area.

The direction was part of an effort during the Sept. 29 late-night meeting to continue NET services with a budget of \$1.75 million, instead of the \$4.4 million it had last year.

The NET offices provide business and community services to residences in their respective neighborhoods and help avoid trips to City Hall in Coconut Grove and an administrative center west of downtown.



FILE PHOTO

**'It would be interesting to explore the downtown NET office becoming part of the DDA,' Neisen Kasdin says.**

The \$4.3 million currently budgeted for the 13 NET offices was slated to be eliminated in Mayor Manny Diaz's \$512.9 million budget for next year. The budget proposed layoffs and service cuts to shore up an \$118 million shortfall.

Commissioners unanimously approved the \$512.9 million budget, which included creating strategies of maintaining the services provided by the NET offices. The strategies included having the DDA, which is the downtown's advocacy agency, and two of Miami's community redevelopment agencies pick up the costs for a downtown NET office that was being closed.

Whether it's possible for the agencies to pick up the tab is still unclear, a wrinkle that will be worked out in the weeks to come, as will the impact of reducing their overall budget.

DDA Chairman Joe Sanchez, who is also chairman of the city commission, said he would take the proposal to the DDA board. Commissioner Michelle Spence-Jones, chairwoman of the CRAs, supported the idea to help the NET survive, as did other commissioners, including Angel Gonzalez and Tomas Regalado.

"I've got to speak for the people that I represent, and I represent a district that depends on NETs," Spence-Jones said.

"It's not their full budget," said Helena Poleo, Diaz's spokeswoman. "The future of NET is simply not clear. It's still a pending issue, if the NET will survive and in what form. It definitely won't be in the current form."

#### DETERMINING SERVICES

NET Director David Rosemond said he would submit a proposal with a budget of \$1.75 million to City Manager Pete Hernandez by Oct. 1. It would include folding at least three NET offices into other nearby facilities, laying off three people, cutting salaries and eliminating leases for existing offices.

Rosemond said he also was not clear on whether the DDA and CRAs would be able to absorb services and costs associated with the NET offices.

"The commission agreed and passed a resolution to provide \$1.75 million to maintain the NET department," Rosemond said. "They directed management to work with us to see what that will look like, where we will put the NET offices and how they will be staffed."

The DDA, as a result of new downtown development, saw tax revenue rise by 5 percent. The city commission approved the DDA's millage rate on Sept. 24.

DDA Vice Chairman Neisen Kasdin said he would work with the city to continue to provide the same services the NET office provided.

The DDA is a special taxing district that generally spans from Southwest 15th Road to Northeast 24th Street, from Biscayne Bay past Miami Avenue. Property owners pay 5 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value to fund the DDA, which works to improve downtown. Last year, the DDA was poised to collect nearly \$4.8 million toward an \$8.9 million budget, but that included funding carryovers from prior years. Next year's budget will be closer to \$5 million, Kasdin said.

Kasdin and DDA Executive Director Alyce Robertson have been working to develop a downtown master plan, as well as establish what proposals are important and doable.

The DDA is already responsible for a number of downtown-specific services.

Robertson has said that the DDA's immediate priorities are providing funding for storefront upgrades, landscaping highway ramp exits and entry points, adding trees to open spaces and installing planters throughout the downtown area.

The DDA also has created an ambassador program with student volunteers, who travel the streets providing information to tourists. The organization has teamed with homeless shelter Camillus House to employ a street cleanup team, and pushed for an ordinance banning panhandling in the downtown area.

Kasdin said he could see the DDA operating NET-like services because it already provides similar services. He, like Sanchez, said the board would have to decide how to proceed.

"It would be interesting to explore the downtown NET office becoming part of the DDA," Kasdin said. "We already provide parallel and compatible services to downtown stakeholders. But, we can't replicate the NET office on our existing budget. It is possible that, with some contribution of funds, we could look at absorbing the NET."

