

Plan for downtown Miami convention center gains support

By Hannah Sampson, The Miami Herald

There's no reason for downtown Miami not to pursue a new convention center, a panel said Wednesday — not the lousy economy and not concerns from Miami Beach about competition. The Miami Downtown Development Authority, which called for a new convention or conference center in its master plan last fall, invited a panel of experts set up by the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit research organization, to explore the question of whether such a facility makes sense for the city. The answer, according to attorney and panel chair Andrew S. Robins: "Yes, it does make sense."

Officials in Miami Beach protest any plans for a downtown center, saying any resources should go to the aging Miami Beach Convention Center, which has been in line for years for upgrades. A downtown center could "distract from the focus of building and enhancing this facility, and could potentially gobble up some of the funding," said Miami Beach City Manager Jorge Gonzalez. "It really gives us some reason for concern."

Gonzalez called the Miami Beach facility "the regional convention center" and said anything downtown would inevitably compete for business.

"There's not enough business to go around," he said.

Different focus

But the five-member panel disagreed, saying a downtown center would be meeting-focused with an emphasis on classroom space, while Miami Beach is more geared toward exhibitions and trade shows.

"There's no reason to expect that what you would do in Miami would have a significant impact on Miami Beach," said Robins, a [Palm Beach County](#) attorney who specializes in the tourism and hospitality industry.

"There's a whole host of reasons why this is good for Miami and not bad for the city of Miami Beach, in our opinion."

The DDA, which paid \$15,000 to facilitate travel for the panelists, should next do a market analysis to narrow down what it is looking for and what the specifics of the center would be, according to the recommendations. No price tag has yet been attached. Any site, which could be a reuse of an existing facility or a new building, should likely have between 100,000 to 200,000 of leasable square feet with banquet space and a full kitchen suitable more for meetings than trade shows. There should be 500 to 800 adjacent or attached hotel rooms and 2,000 to 3,000 rooms within walking distance, the panel said. A public-private financing partnership would make the most sense, but the next step should include analyzing potential funding, the recommendations said.

Benefits

In its master plan last year, the DDA called for a new center to bring more economic activity downtown; encourage more visitors to stay in the area; attract new hotels, restaurants and shops; and spur investment in infrastructure and transit.

Downtown's existing venue, the James L. Knight International Center, is "not functioning well in today's market," said Alyce Robertson, the DDA's executive director.

The market has changed in the decades since that center was built, she said, and so has downtown Miami.

"What has happened downtown in the last five years is a transformation of great magnitude," she said. "There's new residences, new businesses, there's a new vibrancy."