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Save Miami Marine Stadium

The Miami Herald Editorial
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The iconic Marine Stadium deserves to be preserved after two decades of neglect. Covered in graffiti and weeds since the city overreacted and closed it after Hurricane Andrew in 1993, the stadium is a unique architectural marvel, one that has stood up to time, hurricane-force winds and even the political machinations of city commissioners who seem to prefer perennial neglect to decisive action.

Indeed, the damage the 1963 stadium suffered on Virginia Key after the Category 5 Andrew was minimal, engineers who have inspected the property now say. That's a testament to the stadium's renown architect, Hilario Candela, and engineer Jack Meyer who worked on the project a half century ago. Now heavy-hitters like Gloria Estefan, who in the 1980s performed at the stadium, have joined a national campaign to raise millions of dollars to save this architectural jewel off Rickenbacker Causeway in Biscayne Bay.

Among the stadium's supporters: The National Trust for Historic Preservation, which tapped the stadium as one of 34 "National Treasures" that need to be preserved and a broad-based community group that includes Dade Heritage Trust preservationists, environmentalists and community leaders. The construction firm Skanska USA and the Heat Group, which has experience operating the American Airlines Arena, have joined the effort to find ways to make Marine Stadium a self-sustaining venue. Imagine drawing concerts like those enjoyed back in the day when performers as diverse as Jimmy Buffett and Ray Charles played there.

For five years now the nonprofit Friends of Miami Marine Stadium, which includes Mr. Candela and a Friends founder, Don Worth, have been working on a \$30 million renovation plan that would include a waterfront park and marine museum and exhibition center next to the stadium. All of this would be done without one penny of taxpayers' money. The only public funding that has been earmarked would come from Miami-Dade County's preservation fund, which set aside \$3 million to help this effort after voters approved it in 2004.

So what is the hang up, Miami commissioners?

Some say a city law requires a public vote on any waterfront development with fewer than three bidders. But that's not so. The quasi-independent Miami Sports & Exhibition Authority has joined forces with Friends on this project. The authority, created in 1983 to promote sports, conventions and exhibitions, does not need a vote to move this project forward.

Others worry that the Marine Stadium project has not been opened up for bidding. News Flash: No one else seems willing to put so much money, time and effort into saving Marine Stadium. Nobody has come forward publicly, that's for sure.

It's time for commissioners to seize the opportunity for restoring a dynamic marine stadium. They certainly should ensure that there's public access for a stadium that will be turned over to a private organization. At the same time, the partnership needs to make money to maintain the stadium once it is renovated.

Without public funding for this project, there has to be a way to earn money to make the stadium a self-sustaining entity.

This plan has had community input. It has been vetted by planners and preservationists. And now Gloria Estefan has raised the project's profile by becoming the public face of one of Miami's most iconic structures, the rare and precious Miami Marine Stadium.

Time to dive in.

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