

MIAMI

# \$40 million needed to restore Marine Stadium

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PATRICK FARRELL MIAMI HERALD

A view of the graffiti-covered grandstand at the historic but long-shuttered Miami Marine Stadium in April 2013.



Miami Herald file A view of the graffiti-covered grandstand at the historic but long-shuttered Miami Marine Stadium on Virginia Key.

They have figured out how to safely remove the decades of layered graffiti from the historic Miami Marine Stadium's raw-concrete shell — with a blast of dry ice, which is soft enough not to harm the concrete.

They have analyzed, laser-scanned and chipped away at the iconic 54-year-old structure to test the concrete and figure out where it needs patching and shoring up. They created a 3-D computer model of the grandstand and its suspended, origami-like roof, and they know how much space they need for disabled-friendly restrooms, concessions, office space and all the high-tech sound and lighting hardware required to reopen the publicly owned landmark as a multi-use venue for the modern era.

They've also added up how much it's all going to cost: \$40 million, well within the \$45 million the city has earmarked for the job. That price tag, by the way, includes a new floating stage for concerts and performances equipped with dressing rooms for the artists.

And now they — the architects, engineers and other consultants hired by the city of Miami to develop a blueprint for the Virginia Key stadium's restoration — say they're ready for the next step: actual construction drawings that the city can put out to bid.

If all goes as planned, that means the drawn-out effort to put one of Miami's signature but long-neglected places back in working order will culminate in a reopening in summer of 2020, the consultant team's leader, architect Richard Heisenbottle, told Miami commissioners.

“Can the marine stadium be successfully restored into a safe structure capable of serving the community’s cultural, sporting and entertainment needs for decades to come?” Heisenbottle said at a hearing at the end of July. “After extensive analysis and evaluation, I am pleased to say the answer to that question is an emphatic ‘yes.’”

City of Miami commissioners practically fell over themselves in expressing enthusiasm over the report and the prospect of a reopened marine stadium, which Commissioner Keon Hardemon said has no equivalent anywhere in the world.

“We’re excited,” said Commissioner Francis Suarez, who is running for mayor. “I think this is going to be a premier event space. Everyone wants these kinds of spaces now.”

“A dream come true,” added Miami commissioner Ken Russell, whose district includes Virginia Key.

The favorable report represents a major step forward for the stadium, which has been shuttered and mostly unmaintained since Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

It largely dispels concerns that the deterioration of the 1963 grandstand structure, which is partially supported by columns sunk in saltwater, was too far gone to repair and confirms the findings of previous, less-extensive engineering studies that suggested it was fundamentally sound. Heisenbottle’s report concludes that proper protection of the concrete following restoration will extend the stadium’s structural life by decades.

“I’m cautiously optimistic that things will go well from here,” Heisenbottle said in an interview this week.

But the project is still not fully baked. Still unknown is who would run the stadium, and there’s still no more than the broadest of operational visions.

City administrators say they received four responses to a recent public request for interest in running the stadium. Those include SMG, which among numerous other arenas and stadiums manages the city’s Knight Center and the Superdome in New Orleans, and iDEKO Productions, a New York special-events company, said city real estate director Dan Rotenberg.

It’s unclear how those expressions of interest will translate into detailed bids or operational plans, however. The city has not yet decided whether it needs an outside operator or will take that role itself, said Alberto Parjus, and assistant city manager.

“We don’t know that at this point,” he said on Thursday.

That uncertainty concerned members of the Virginia Key Advisory Board, a city body, at a meeting earlier in the week.

Board member Vinson Richter said the city needs to get an operator on board quickly to provide Heisenbottle with parameters for his renovation plans, which he noted ought to depend on what uses of the stadium are determined to be viable.

“That architect is going to need some guidance from an operator,” Richter said. “It’s going to require a lot of thought to make the marine stadium economically viable. I’m hoping we can get in front of this issue.”

After convening meetings of citizens and stakeholders, the Heisenbottle report says, the team developed a wish list of 50 uses the stadium could potentially accommodate. Those range from the uses the stadium was originally designed for — powerboat races — as well as the concerts, live performances and Easter sunrise services that made it a cherished landmark for many Miamians.

The Heisenbottle list also includes other uses of the stadium’s basin that are popular today, such as rowing regattas and triathlon competitions, and adds some other potential activities, such as marine education, yoga, TED talks, outdoor movie screenings and water shows.

The stadium restoration is separate from a city project to convert the adjacent acres of parking lot into a long-promised “flex-park” that would accommodate the annual Miami boat show and water-related recreational activities, though the two facilities would often host events in tandem. The city has a request for bids out for a park designer.

The stadium restoration has been in gestation since 2008, when a group of activists and architectural fans won historic designation for the neglected facility, which had been earmarked for demolition by the city. In the years since, the stadium, designed by Cuban-American architect Hilario Candela, has earned growing recognition internationally as a tour de force of design and engineering.

Supporters gradually built a case that, with its dazzling architecture, its waterfront setting and spectacular views of downtown Miami, a modernized stadium could once again become an iconic attraction and point of pride for the city. At its peak, the stadium hosted concerts — using a barge converted into a floating stage — by stars like the Beach Boys, Ray Charles and the Miami Sound Machine. One of its most famous performances was a 1985 concert by Jimmy Buffett, filmed and released as a DVD, that ended with the singer jumping into the water.

Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado made restoration of the stadium a main goal of his administration when he entered office in 2009. But a previous effort by the Friends of Miami Marine Stadium

group to manage the restoration collapsed amid commissioners' skepticism over a financial plan.

It was not until earlier this year that the city commission, flush with revenue from a building boom, felt on sufficiently solid financial ground to vote to issue \$45 million in bonds to fund the restoration. To cover the debt service, the city hopes to tap into revenue from the reconstruction and operation of two aging adjacent city-owned marinas by a private developer.

"It's wonderful to see my baby coming back again," Candela told commissioners after Heisenbottle's presentation. "It's more important than ever in Miami."