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01Jan2001 USA: Miami Marlins ballpark deal faces city, state hurdles.

By Brett Graff

MIAMI, Jan 1 (Reuters) - Spectators anxious for luxury seats at the Florida Marlins' proposed \$385 million baseball stadium slated for downtown Miami may have a while to wait.

The tentative deal between Miami-Dade County Mayor Alex Penelas and Marlins owner John Henry was announced two weeks ago with much fanfare but may still strike out with municipal and state authorities.

The plan for a 40,000-seat facility with a retractable roof to guard against summer rainouts has not only outraged citizens who question Penelas' priorities but also left municipal and state officials wondering what exactly the team and the county had agreed to other than to direct public funds to subsidize private interests.

One big issue is the vague provision of the deal calling for the City of Miami to work with the county to "secure the land" for the stadium, without specifying where the arena would be built or who would pay for the land and how much the land would cost.

"It is by no means a financially negotiated deal," Penelas told Reuters Thursday. "It's a rough blueprint of what could be an agreement."

It outlines only the responsibility of the county and the team, he said.

The City of Miami and the Florida Legislature have yet to approve the contributions they have been asked to make under the tentative deal announced on Dec. 17 by Miami-Dade County and the Major League Baseball team. The city has been asked to contribute some revenues from its existing parking tax, while the state legislature would be asked to rebate to the arena any sales tax revenues raised at its concession stands.

"I don't see any benefit to the City of Miami," Will Gort, vice chairman of the Miami City Commission, the local legislative body, told Reuters on Friday.

Miami is home to about 350,000 people and is one of more than two dozen municipalities within Miami-Dade County, an urban area of more than 2 million residents.

Under the deal, Miami - which is still emerging from financial disaster that in 1996 put it under control of a state oversight board and only recently saw its bond rating rebound to investment grade from junk status - is slated to extend until 2040 a 20 percent parking surtax that was supposed to sunset in 2005. The city imposed the tax as part of its financial recovery plan. The proceeds are currently split with 40 percent for the city and 60 percent in tax relief for residents, said Jason Walker, senior assistant to Miami City Commissioner Johnny Winton.

The Marlins now compete in Pro Player Stadium, also home to the Miami Dolphins National League Football team. That arena lacks a roof, leaving it prey to frequent rainouts during south Florida's summer rainy season.

Proponents of the stadium deal contend that Miami would reap numerous financial benefits. In addition to luring business that increase property values and therefore tax revenues, stadiums have been famous for revitalizing abandoned urban areas, Kenneth Lipner, an economist at Florida International University, told Reuters. Downtown Miami, he said, could certainly benefit from the same urban rebirth spurred by stadium projects in cities such as Cleveland and Baltimore.

The problem with that, according to Gort, is the site favored by Henry - 15 acres (6 hectares) located within Bicentennial Park - is also located near a telecommunications hub that is expected to fill the surrounding buildings to 98 percent occupancy, leaving little room for growth and revitalization, he told Reuters.

Many city officials favor another site by the Miami River for its close proximity to public transportation, but the Marlins said that site is not large enough for their design plans.



Bicentennial Park faces Biscayne Bay and is valued at about \$135 million by Miami's own estimates. And there is fierce opposition to giving up city-owned park land for private use.

"The arrogance, that anyone could assume they could take public park land at no cost," Gregory Bush, president of the Miami chapter of the Urban League told Reuters.

The park is not used much by the public these days, as a lack of funding has turned it into a dangerous haven inhabited mostly by the homeless. In April, however, the commission formed a committee and authorized it to spend \$200,000 to evaluate options that could ultimately turn it into a premiere public space, he said.

"There is a movement going on to preserve and enhance this public space," Bush said.

The stadium deal also reaches into other coffers, such as part of the county's existing convention development tax on hotel rooms and restaurant meals - revenues that some residents say should be used to address more pressing needs.

"Next time heavy rains flood our streets or a child is electrocuted in a poorly wired public bus stop or we waste our lives sitting in traffic, remember that our elected leaders' priorities began with subsidizing billionaire sports moguls and athletes," reader Jeff Dearing wrote in a letter to the editor of the Miami Herald.

Lipner, meanwhile, said accommodating the team was important because other cities are interested in housing the 1997 World Series winner. Henry bought the team for \$150 million in 1999 but said it probably would not survive in the Miami market without a new stadium.

"I'd love to see a stadium in Miami," Gort said. "But not at the expense of the residents."

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