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16Mar2001 USA: FEATURE-Miami, in change of heart, wants Latin Grammy show.

By Brett Graff

MIAMI, March 16 (Reuters) - Miami officials, in a change of heart spurred by Cuban exile politics as well as a chance to fill civic coffers, are trying to woo the Latin Grammy music award show away from Los Angeles and into their arms.

Grammy organizers are expected announce in two weeks which city will host this year's awards, scheduled for September.

Miami-Dade County's controversial Mayor Alex Penelas has spent much time and money this year courting the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, jetting off to Los Angeles and attending the Grammy music awards last month.

At his side has been Jorge Mas Santos, chairman of the Cuban American National Foundation, a powerful exile group dedicated to bringing down Cuban President Fidel Castro.

While the link between a glitzy, star-studded pop music awards show and Cuba's veteran Communist leader might not seem clear at first, it makes sense in Miami's passionate but convoluted political scene. "They're backtracking because they've realized they made a mistake," Damian Fernandez, a Cuba expert at Florida International University, said of Miami's about-face.

As a center of the Latin American entertainment and recording business and home to such Latin superstars as Gloria Estefan and Julio Iglesias, Miami appeared to be the perfect venue for the first Latin Grammy show last year.

But Cuban exile politics brought the curtain down on that. The Cuba Ordinance, a local law inspired by opposition to any contact with Communist Cuba, required anyone seeking to use county facilities to pledge they had not done business with Cuban entities. Grammy organizers said the only suitable venue for the event was the county-owned American Airlines arena.

On top of that, on the rare occasions when Cuban musicians have performed in Miami hard-line exiles have mounted sometimes violent protests.

Riot police were called in to control demonstrators when renowned Cuban group Los Van Van played here in October 1999. With Los Van Van and members of the wildly popular Buena Vista Social Club nominees or possible performers at the 2000 show, organizers took it and its attendant benefits to Los Angeles.

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES

Many Miami residents who are not concerned about Castro's fate were aghast at the lost chance to chance to earn needed revenue. Some saw it as a stifling of freedom of expression.

What a difference a year makes.

Penelas, a Cuban American, has formed a committee to raise \$1 million to offset the cost of moving the event to Miami from Los Angeles. The change of heart, commentators say, is partly to do with money. The Latin Grammys are estimated to have a \$35 million direct economic impact on Miami businesses. The indirect economic impact on the city's tourist-driven economy is immeasurable, with Miami and Miami Beach's charms and glamour broadcast to a worldwide audience.

But politics also looms large. The drama of Elian Gonzalez, whose fate sparked an international custody battle last year, put a national spotlight on Cuban Americans and Miami.

Cuban exiles not only lost their bid to stop the shipwrecked Cuban boy from being returned to live with his father; they failed to win many converts to their cause and were seen by other Americans as fanatical and intolerant.

Meanwhile, the Cuba Ordinance was killed by a related case in the U.S. Supreme Court, which struck down a Massachusetts state ban on business dealings with Myanmar (formerly Burma), declaring that

foreign policy should be left in federal hands.

"They know their image suffered tremendously and they had to repair that," said Francisco Aruca, a local radio personality with both Spanish and English talk shows who has opposed hard-line exile positions.

"The position taken by some people in Miami, including the mayor and the president of the foundation, like all of a sudden they're defenders of the freedom of expression, is not true."

Penelas has played down the shift in position. "No one said we didn't want them here ... but the Cuba Ordinance prevented it. I personally support the Cuba Ordinance and wish it were still on the books," he told Reuters.

Mas Santos' support for the bid and the prospect that Cuban performers might be invited to Miami has caused a division in the foundation, according to local media reports. The CANF was founded in the 1980s by his business tycoon father, the late Jorge Mas Canosa, and for years has lobbied hard in Washington to keep the U.S. embargo on Cuba in place.

"Jorge Mas was asked on a personal level and he believed not only was this good for the community but it was good for Cuban Americans," said CANF executive director Joe Garcia, adding that the organization had no position on the issue.

The Recording Academy meanwhile is giving no hints about whether Los Angeles or Miami will get the nod.

"Any time we go into any community we're dealing with their reality," said NARAS president Michael Greene. "I relish the opportunity to talk to the host folks and help them understand our point of view."

The Grammy awards has dealt with controversy before, such as protests by gay rights groups over the lyrics of rapper Eminem, Greene said. "It's a matter of whether or not the community at large is interested in the show coming. You'll always have people that are passionate about something."

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