

# The Miami Herald

Friday, January 18, 2008

## Park Makeover Applauded

by Michael Vasquez

With construction starting as early as next year -- and funding questions finally answered -- a new signature park for downtown Miami, a Museum Park, was unveiled Thursday evening to a glowing reception.

Green-space advocates who had previously bashed the \$50 million park plans as overly busy and elaborate almost universally applauded the latest, simplified design.

"It's almost like a miracle to sit here and hear one positive thing after another from a lot of people who were not positive in the beginning," Miami activist Kay Hancock Apfel announced during the event's question-and-answer session.

Among the recent design changes: A once-bumpy topography has been largely evened out, save for one large, 12-foot-high hill. The park's tropical gardens were reduced in number from five to three, and numerous nooks and crannies in the park were adjusted to reduce the appearance of concrete and encourage pedestrians, not cars.

Additional shade trees were added, with the city-hired design consultant, Cooper, Robertson & Partners, telling a crowd of about 100 that the tweaks resulted in a "superior" design.

"This, to me, is evidence that this process is working," Alexander Cooper, one of the company's partners, said of the give-and-take.

Some major elements of the Museum Park plan, while altered in minor ways, still mirror the layout presented last year: a dazzling entrance lined with royal palms that seemingly float on water, a tree-lined public baywalk, a tear-shaped Great Lawn for recreation, and assorted gardens for inspired contemplation.

Through cost-cutting measures such as replacing date palms with royal palms in some areas, including less paved areas, and dropping stone in favor of other, less-expensive, building materials, the anticipated construction cost of Museum Park dropped considerably.

The current \$49 million to \$54 million price tag stands in contrast to the \$69 million discussed just three months ago. That figure is one piece of a larger, \$550 million plan to transform what is

now known as Bicentennial Park -- a blueprint that also calls for art and science museums that will occupy roughly the northern third of the 29-acre park.

Nearly \$300 million of the cost of constructing the museums is being picked up by taxpayers, with the museums pledging to raise \$220 million. While some have questioned the wisdom of placing large museum buildings on scarce waterfront park space, city leaders say the park needs a consistent lure to draw visitors.

The park's facelift is set to receive \$68 million under a massive \$2.9 billion city-county public works plan that also includes money for a new Florida Marlins Stadium and port tunnel. Both city and county leaders have signed off on the large spending plan, though opponents vow a court challenge.

In its current state, Bicentennial Park has proved useful as an outdoor concert venue but has struggled to attract steady foot traffic.