

Downtown study targets 3 conference center sites

By Ashley D. Torres

A study for Miami's Downtown Development Authority has targeted three preliminary sites for a downtown conference center and projected a fully-operational date of 2018.

A panel formed by the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit research organization, supported plans for a downtown conference center, which was called for in the authority's October master plan.

The Omni site, Miami World Center/Park West and the Metropolitan Miami site were the three preliminary sites considered for the downtown meeting space.

The panel's study cited advantages of each: the Omni site provides the opportunity to develop an underused facility, a former shopping center; the Miami World Center/West Park is a ready-to-develop site, and the Met three-building site still under development just north of the Miami River already has supporting infrastructure for a meeting facility.

The panel also outlined a timeline for the downtown conference center: two to three years for pre-development, a few years for construction, a possible 2015 opening and three additional years for a fully-operational facility, said Andrew S. Robins, Proskauer Rose LLP real estate department partner and panel chair.

The 2018 date was reached in the context of whether a demand for a conference center would exist in the future, he said. The panel determined there is to be a demand.

A written report of the findings is due in a month. The authority is then to take the report to a board committee for approval. If approved, the authority is to send out a proposal request for a market study, said Alyce Robertson, authority executive director. The study is to define requirements, opportunities and finances for a downtown meeting space.

The conference center would include 100,000-200,000 square feet of leasable space including meeting rooms, banquet space and multi-purpose areas. The



'We're a new city and so we have new things we have to look at.'

Alyce Robertson

center is to comprise primarily classroom and conference space.

"We think very clearly that a conference center serves a different need than the Miami Beach Convention Center," said Mr. Robins.

Renovations to the Miami Beach Convention Center are to appear before the Miami Beach City Commission in September. The Miami Beach Convention Center Master Plan is to include such proposed improvements as a Lincoln Road main entrance and adding 220,000 square feet of meeting space.

With expansions to the Miami Beach Convention Center it will have the flexibility to take on larger groups that a downtown conference center would not, said Mr. Robins.

"The convention center has more exhibition space. [A downtown facility] would have very little of that type of space and would have a bunch of meeting rooms for breakout sessions," Mr. Robins said.

A conference facility, with a large downtown hotel room inventory, could serve visitors, said Jorge Gonzalez, Mandarin Oriental US southern region executive vice president and a panel member, but it could also serve locals with groups of 35 who have difficulty booking hotel meeting spaces because they are not also filling hotel beds.

"We're a new city," Ms. Robertson said, "and so we have new things we have to look at."