

Miami Herald

May 31st, 2017

Circulation: 86,941 / UMV: 8,942,930



Newly planted coconut palms line the baywalk at Parcel B behind the American Airlines Arena, visible at left.
Andres Viglucci- Miami Herald Staff

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

MAY 31, 2017 8:41 PM

The lot on the bay at the AAA finally gets palms and benches. But it's still not a park.

When is a park not a park?

When it has trees, grass, benches, lights and even trash bins, but it's also Parcel B, the notoriously contested slice of bayfront public scrubland that the Miami Heat promised to turn into a soccer field 21 years ago, during the team's successful campaign to win voter approval for a new arena. The scruffy three-acre lot, which sits hidden behind the American Airlines Arena but is blessed with a spectacular panoramic view, is instead used by the Heat as overflow parking and as a staging area for events.

Now Miami-Dade County, which owns Parcel B, has developed a plan that would turn the lot into what appears to be a park, after years of pushing by parks activists and County Commissioner Audrey Edmondson, whose district includes the land.

The blueprint, drawn up by the county parks department, calls for a sloping, half-moon shaped lawn for playing and picknicking, shade trees, a dog park, a running track, sleekly modern lamp posts and coconut palms lining a baywalk. The county is already spending \$315,000 for what it calls the first phase of improvements — a row of 42 palms, shrubs and sod, five ipe-wood benches and 10 light posts along an existing stretch of baywalk at the water's edge.

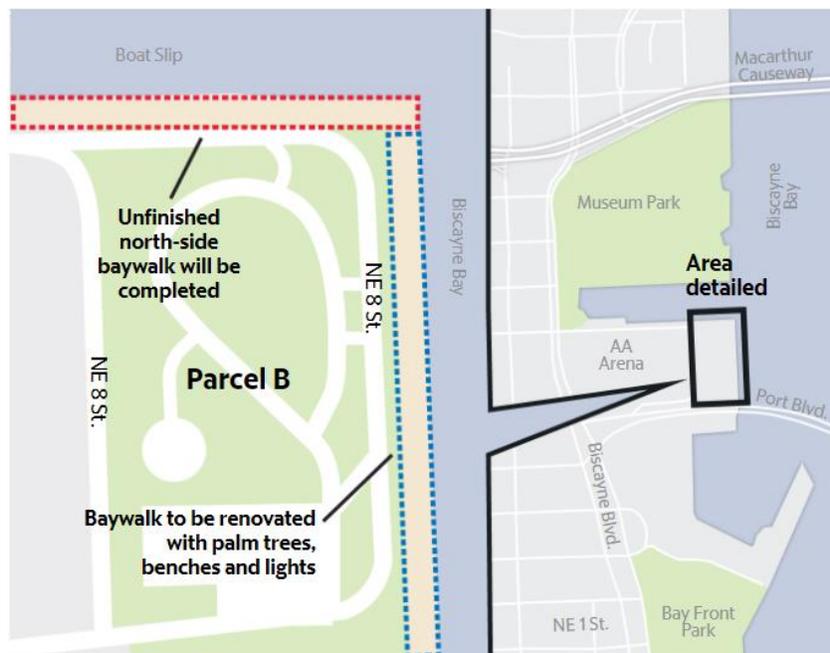
So does that mean the long-promised public park is finally happening?

That, alas, is by no means clear.

At the same time that it's planting palms and installing electrical conduits in the ground at Parcel B, the county is also finalizing an agreement that could cede control of the site to a group that wants to build a Cuban exile history museum. The agreement, which might go to the Miami-Dade commission as soon as July, would give the non-profit group five years to raise \$99 million for the museum without county help, and would grant its backers a long-term lease on Parcel B if they succeed.

A green plan for Parcel B

Miami-Dade is planting palms, shrubs and sod and installing benches and lights along the baywalk on publicly owned Parcel B, a long-contested 3-acre lot behind AmericanAirlines Arena that's used for parking and event staging by the Miami Heat. The city of Miami will also fill in a missing piece of the baywalk on the lot's north edge. But the county may cede control of the rest of the lot to a group wanting to build a Cuban exile history museum on the site.



If it does build, the group promises, two-thirds of the site would remain public open space. The proposed three-story museum building would be elevated off the ground and would accommodate a public plaza and playing fields with artificial turf, said Nick Gutierrez, board secretary of the Cuban Exile History Museum. That, he said, would fulfill the promise made to voters in 1996.

“Our proposal offers a solution to the county to accommodate all of the interested stakeholders,” Gutierrez said.

Gutierrez said he was surprised when the county began greening up the site and Miami Commissioner Ken Russell, whose district overlaps with Edmondson’s, issued celebratory tweets last week with pictures of a row of recently planted palms. “Parcel B green space is happening,” Russell tweeted over an image of the site plan for the full-fledged park.

Only it might not be.



Ken Russell Miami
@kenrussellmiami

Parcel B green space is happening.

7:27 PM - 23 May 2017 · Miami, FL

5 25

Gutierrez said county officials assured him there was no money for further work on Parcel B beyond the initial phase already under way, and that if his group succeeds in raising the needed money for the museum, it could “build on” the improvements being made now.

County officials say that’s correct — but just don’t call any of it a “park.”

Mike Hernandez, a spokesman for Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, said it’s more accurate to call Parcel B “public green space.” It’s not designated as a county park, and will managed by the county’s internal services department, not the parks department, he said. That’s in part because the county has only large regional parks inside municipalities, Hernandez said.

Hernandez said there’s been no decision about what happens to the rest of the green-space plan and Parcel B during the five years allotted to the museum group for fundraising. Michael Spring, the county’s cultural affairs director, noted that the agreement requires the museum group to hit certain fundraising benchmarks along the way or the deal “can be cancelled.” Under the deal, the museum would receive no county subsidy.

The Heat, which has opposed plans for a park as well as a museum on the site, will continue to use Parcel B during games, concerts and other events under [a controversial discounted lease](#) with the county. On those days, the upland portion of Parcel B, otherwise open to the public on a daily basis, will be closed, Hernandez said. The baywalk would be open at all times.

Edmondson is traveling abroad and was unavailable for an interview.

But an activist with a group that has been pushing for a park at Parcel B for nearly two decades called the county’s decision to stall the park again while waiting for what he called a long-shot museum proposition “preposterous.” Peter Ehrlich, a board member at the Urban Environment League, noted the land is probably worth over \$100 million.

“It’s very peculiar. How do you propose to turn it over to a group that has no money and no ability to raise money?” Ehrlich said, referring to the museum group. “We need grass and trees and a landscaped park there, not more concrete.”

Parcel B, which sits below the level of the AA Arena, does now have a clump of trees and scraggly grass west of the baywalk improvements, as well as a paved semi-circular roadway. Entry is through the arena access road. The parks department blueprint also features a road covered in pavers, so the Heat could continue to use the lot. Few Miamians know the place exists. On a recent weekday afternoon, only a couple of people fishing were in Parcel B.

The pending museum agreement comes three years after the Miami-Dade Commission [voted 8-3](#) to instruct Gimenez to open negotiations with the exile group. Edmondson was one of three commissioners to vote against the idea. A year later, at the behest of Commissioner Dennis Moss, Gimenez also said he would explore adding an African American museum to the site. Spring said no group has been tapped to pursue that idea. Moss did not return messages requesting an interview.

Miami Herald

The only thing that seems certain about the site is that it will soon have a completed baywalk. The city and the Florida Inland Navigation District, (FIND) a state agency that funds waterfront improvements, built a new seawall and baywalk on the parcel's eastern edge several years ago, at a cost of \$4.2 million. The city expects to begin work soon on filling a rubble-filled gap in the existing baywalk along the north edge of Parcel B at a cost of \$2.5 million, half of that borne by FIND.

The good news: That means there will shortly be a continuous pathway from the north end of Museum Park at the MacArthur Causeway all the way to the mouth of the Miami River. The existing path already goes around the boat slip that's now part of Museum Park to the north of the arena and Parcel B, but is missing a piece along the end of the slip. It then continues along Parcel B's eastern perimeter, where the county is installing the palms, lights and benches, before ducking under the PortMiami bridge and continuing through Bayside Marketplace, before connecting to the Bayfront Park promenade.