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An artist's rendering of one possibility for a "signature bridge" on I-395 as the highway connects downtown Miami with the MacArthur Causeway. There's a fight brewing over how to pick the actual design. Proposals have been kept a secret by the state.

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

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It's Miami vs. Miami-Dade in a fight over how to design the I-395 bridge

BY DOUGLAS HANKS

An actual bridge now divides the mayors of Miami and Miami-Dade, with the two local rivals taking opposite sides on whether Florida flubbed selecting an iconic design for redoing I-395 over the city's downtown.

Dueling letters between Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez and Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado highlight the barbed procurement fight under way in the contest to win the \$800 million state contract to improve I-395, including an elevated span crossing Biscayne Boulevard near the Arsht Center performance hall and the city waterfront.

In a letter last week, Gimenez cited a Miami Herald story raising questions about whether a state selection process thwarted a court settlement designed to give local leaders a say in what the bridge will look like.

“As this is a bridge for the ages,” Gimenez wrote Transportation Secretary Rachel Cone last week, “it is more important that we do this project the right way, rather than complete the project quickly.” Gimenez said Florida should seek endorsements from city and county commissioners for the competing designs before making a final decision.

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Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez

Regalado, one of the plaintiffs who secured the court settlement with Florida, rejected the county mayor’s allegations in his own letter sent two days later. The city mayor insists the state is complying with the agreement. “I ask you to dismiss this Monday morning quarterbacking,” Regalado wrote to Cone about Gimenez’s letter, “which seeks to politicize the outcome of this selection process.”

At issue is which of the secret designs under review by Florida’s Transportation Department will ultimately win out in the state-funded project. Regalado and Marc Sarnoff, then a city commissioner, sued the state in 2013 to force Florida to stick with a pledge to build a “signature” bridge for I-395 — a design making enough of an architectural statement to be considered iconic.

Florida settled the suit with an agreement to create an advisory committee of local representatives to review the aesthetics of the project, which would rework the clogged juncture where I-95 meets the eastern route to South Beach in downtown Miami.

That panel — which includes County Commissioner Audrey Edmonson and Alyce Robertson, head of Miami’s downtown business authority — favored the design by a group that includes Fluor Enterprises and Munilla Construction Management, a prominent government contractor in Miami. But a committee of transportation administrators gave higher scores to a rival proposal from a group that includes Archer Western. The result: Archer Western ended up with 88.4 selection points to Fluor and Munilla’s 87.8.

With the aesthetic committee’s pick in the No. 2 slot, the law firm behind the original Miami suit protested, saying Transportation had ignored earlier agreements to give design considerations more weight. “The process was not honored in a way that gave the voice to the people of Miami,” said Mason Pertnoy, a lawyer at Miami’s Solowsky Allen, which represented Regalado and Sarnoff.

The stand-off between Gimenez and Regalado is just the latest example of a cross-town rivalry between the two most prominent municipal leaders in Miami-Dade. Regalado’s daughter, Raquel, challenged Gimenez for reelection in 2016 and the two mayors have feuded on a range of issues in recent years. One of Gimenez’s sons, Carlos J. Gimenez, used to be a lobbyist for Munilla Construction but withdrew his registration earlier this year. (The younger Gimenez said he did no work on the I-395 bid and that his registration really ended in 2016.)

The mayoral divide on I-395 raises the stakes for a meeting Friday, when a three-member state panel is slated to select the winning proposal. While the scores from the two committees carry significant weight in the process, supporters of the aesthetic committee are hoping for a reversal. The designs are also supposed to be revealed at that meeting, after being kept secret through Florida’s procurement laws that preserve confidentiality of competitive proposals.

Manny Diaz, the former Miami mayor who helped champion the signature-bridge idea while in office, said he was concerned that Florida would pick a design panned by local representatives. The biggest divide came from aesthetic panelist John Richard, director of the Arsht Center, who gave Archer Western's bridge design its lone "Poor" ranking. The rest of the judges gave it scores ranging from Good to Excellent.

"If it was a few points here and there — beauty is in the eye of the beholder," Diaz said. "But when it's radically different, that's concerning." Gimenez raised the same point in his letter, saying it appears the aesthetics committee "gave far superior value to one firm..."

Richard declined to comment through a spokeswoman, citing procurement rules that restrict discussing bids that have yet to be awarded.

Transportation officials haven't addressed the controversy publicly. The court settlement labels the aesthetic panel as "an advisory group" and states: "The role of the committee is to serve as an adviser to FDOT." Even so, Florida gave preliminary veto power to the aesthetic group, which had the ability to "fail" bridge designs earlier in the process. Proposers then chose from acceptable designs for the final scoring.

Representatives of the Archer Western group said the team's higher score came from a process clearly laid out in the bidding documents and hashed out during various meetings with the state, city and county. Syl Lukis, a lobbyist representing Archer Western, said a drawn-out fight over the Transportation Department's selection process could prompt the state to say never mind.

Florida "always has the right of deciding that maybe the money could be better spent elsewhere," he said.