

4 secret plans unveiled for a cultural center in downtown Miami

HIGHLIGHTS

MDC wants to build a museum, theater and conference center on Biscayne

Developers also envision luxury condos, apartments, offices and shops

Winning project will be chosen next month



BY DAVID SMILEY

dsmiley@miamiherald.com

At the entry to PortMiami, across the street from the Freedom Tower, a massive globe may soon shine atop an 80-story high-rise. Or, perhaps two inward-leaning condo and office towers could be built instead.

Other possibilities for this prime piece of Biscayne Boulevard include a shimmering 680-foot “Gateway to the Americas,” and two condo and hotel towers rising from a cantilevered cultural center filled with \$60 million in artwork.

What gets built depends on Miami Dade College.

On Monday, the college released previously confidential proposals submitted by four developers seeking to turn a 2.6-acre Biscayne Boulevard parking lot into an iconic -- and profitable -- cultural center. The college sought the proposals in the fall after receiving an unsolicited public-private-partnership offer for the site last year by art collector Gary Nader.

Miami Dade College’s purchasing office told developers they wanted projects to include a 3,000-seat conference center, 1,600-seat performing arts theater, and a museum around 100,000 square feet in size. Just about everything else was left up to the private sector.

Projects came in last month, but only the names of the developers were released. Their bids were unsealed Monday, revealing the following:

Gregg Covin Development/Oppenheim Architecture

Miami developer Gregg Covin and local architect Chad Oppenheim partnered to design a roughly \$500 million project that joins two 57-story towers at their base and at their peaks, in the shape of an “extruded quadrangle.” The towers would be built with an exoskeleton of post-tension concrete slabs, with a skin of glass.

Oppenheim designed the towers when the college first solicited bids for the site in the late 2000s, an effort that was aborted. The idea was for the building to look like a “Gateway to the Americas,” and to frame the Freedom Tower rather than obscure or dwarf it.

“It's very unique, very iconic,” says Covin, the developer behind Ten Museum Park and 1000 Biscayne. “That's how you know it's a good design. Chad originally designed this 10 years ago and it still looks cool today.”

The 2.6-million-square-foot structure includes a 1,600-seat theater, a 3,000-seat conference center, and a 100,000-square foot museum encapsulated in the podium. Community spaces include a 52,000-square-foot sculpture garden, 37,000-square-foot outdoor plaza and 75,000 square feet of covered, outdoor balconies.

Covin estimates the cost of the public portion of the project at about \$150 million and proposes to build the cultural center under a guaranteed maximum price. Unlike the other proposers, Covin is proposing to build the project on a fee-based arrangement, and without condos -- which he says are “inappropriate” for a project owned by a state-funded college.

Instead, Covin’s towers include 940,000 square feet of market-rate apartments, as well as a 300-key leisure hotel. The project also includes 300,000 square feet of “trade-oriented” office space.

Nader + Museu LLP

Gary Nader, a prominent art collector, set off the college’s competitive solicitation when he sent Miami Dade College an unsolicited proposal this summer to build out its parking lot. Nader partnered with FR-EE Architects, Brasilinvest, and Sofran Group’s Roberto Rocha to propose two condo and hotel towers and the cultural center the college desires.

He and his team say their approximately \$500 million project is unrivaled, in large part because he has offered not only to build a seven-level, cantilevered museum and cultural center, but also to fill the 238,000-square-foot college facility with \$60 million worth of art pieces he says he will donate to the college. Emilio Estefan is also designing a 1,600-seat theater, and the center includes 30,000 square feet for a “culinary experience.”

Bill Riley, an attorney for Nader’s team, said other developers -- who were given 90 days by the college to design competition for his proposal -- would simply “deliver an empty shell to the college.”

“We’re not just a condominium builder, which I think you’ll find in the other proposals,” said Riley. “We’re trying to create a destination.”

In order to finance their project, Nader’s team would have the college transfer ownership of its land and would then create a special-assessment-based community development district in order to float bonds to finance the public portion of the complex. Nader + Museu LLP would possibly seek property tax rebates to help with the financing, and would contribute \$20 million to the college upon the issuance of CDD bonds.

The team also proposes to pay the college \$40,000 per condo unit in its first tower

and \$60,000 per condo in its second tower, after completing all condo sales.

Pi Art Tech and Trade Center at MDC

Led by Jorge Brugo of Axis Realty Trust, Pi Art Tech and Trade Center proposes to build a \$668 million tower with a circular podium packed with 168,000-square-foot museum, a 2,400-seat auditorium and 3,800-seat convention center -- the largest public facilities offered of any of the proposals. All the structures involved, including an 80-story tower mounted by a seven-story globe on top, are circular in design, an ode to the mathematical symbol Pi.

The size of the theater and auditorium can be modified to fit larger and smaller gatherings. Art collector Ella Cisneros Fontanals has endorsed the project and would house the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation -- or CiFO -- at the museum, according to the proposal. It's not clear if CiFO would move from its current home on North Miami Avenue, or host works in both locations. The pedestal would be lined with 60,000 square feet of retail space. The roof of a parking structure would be the scene of an "art maze."

The proposed tower includes 41 units of "ultra high-end" condos, and 820,000 square feet of office space. The project would be branded as a trade hub through a partnership with the World Trade Centers Association.

The bottom three levels of the tower would be reserved for the college's school of business. There is also space for tech startups.

Brugo allows for multiple options for the financing of the public and private portions of the project. He did not respond to an email and a voice mail.

Related Group

Where Pi Art Tech differentiates itself from its competitors by going larger with public spaces, Related Group has done the opposite. In its proposal -- referred to as ACME, for arts, culture, museum and education -- Related notes that the college's aspirations for cultural facilities are "impossible" to match in size and needed to be rethought.

Related -- whose CEO Jorge Perez has his name on the art museum down the street -- proposed to build a \$673 million project with a 45,000-square-foot museum topped by a 36,000-square-foot sculpture garden on the roof. The project also

includes the 3,020-seat ACME Hall, and a 33,750-square-foot multi-functional performance space that can shrink and grow through the use of sliding acoustic walls and blackout curtains.

Related's smaller museum was considered by the college, which said proposers could design a space that would work with exhibition space in the Freedom Tower. Together, the two facilities would combine to create more than 80,000 square feet in exhibit space.

Designed by Arquitectonica, the project's two towers lean in slightly, as if they were two raised arms. One 75-story tower houses 350 condo units. The other is an office tower with 39 stories and 500,000 square feet of leasable space. At its top, the office tower includes a 10,000-square-foot private club accessible by college faculty and leaders. The project also includes a 100-key art boutique hotel, a 9,000-square-foot restaurant.

Related contemplates financing the public portion of the project in part through naming rights, sponsor equity and \$40 million in property tax rebates. The college would transfer its property into a land trust, and own the public portions of the project. The private portion of the project would be financed through equity and a construction loan. Miami Dade College would receive roughly \$5.3 million in income through a percentage of sales from condos expected to sell for roughly \$850 a square foot.

Lissette Calderon, Related's president of international and strategic projects, was not available for an interview Monday.

At a meeting by a college selection committee earlier this month, Roman Martinez, Miami Dade College's purchasing director, said all four projects met requirements under the competitive solicitation in order to be considered. Developers are expected to present their proposals next month, and a session to select a developer is scheduled for the morning of March 28.

This article was changed to correct the spelling of Bill Riley's name.



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