

Miami Dade College seeks former federal court building

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Miami Dade College has rescued, restored and preserved three emblematic historic buildings that are part of the city's cultural heritage: the Freedom Tower, the Tower Theater and the Koubek Center. Facing a growing student body and scarcity of space in its Wolfson Campus downtown, it is now aiming at a fourth property: the David Dyer federal court building.

If Congress approves ceding the structure — unused since 2008 — students would do their learning surrounded by a building in the Mediterranean architectural style that is already on the National Register of Historic Buildings and whose origin goes back to 1933, when it opened as a post office. Mafia boss Meyer Lansky and Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, among others, had their day in court in this property.

"We have a lot of ideas and plans for this building. We are limited in land and we need a place to accommodate the needs of the community," said Ramiro Inguanzo, advisor to the college president. "It would enhance a cultural and historic college campus."

TRANSFER SOUGHT

Last month, U.S. Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., introduced a bill that aims to have the General Services Administration to transfer the property to MDC. Several South Florida members of Congress are supporting the request.

GSA administers the federal government's real estate portfolio, more than 14,000 buildings and other structures. Some are vacated and the agency is looking for a way to get rid of some for tax reasons, but it's not easy.

"This federal property is the poster child for government mismanagement of assets," Mica said in a statement.

"The courthouse was closed in 2008, has cost more than \$6 million to maintain and this historic property continues to fall further into disrepair with a mold problem getting worse by the day."

Since then the court has operated in the adjacent modern Wilkie D. Ferguson Jr. Federal Building. GSA's original plan was to remodel the Dyer building, but the estimated cost of the work was about \$60 million.

It is not clear how expenses will be paid once the property is transferred at no cost to MDC, Inguanzo said.

“The first step is to get it, reach an agreement,” he said. “Then we will figure out how to pay for repairs, with federal subsidies and other available funds.”

TUNNELS

One of the challenges is that the buildings are interconnected by underground tunnels and a courtyard. Separating the facilities to divide the restricted areas from the public ones could cost as much as \$15 million, according to a report by the New York Times.

If MDC acquires the property, it could use it for a law school or studies on government affairs, as well as for architecture and social science.

“Courtrooms have the perfect size to be converted into classrooms,” added Inguanzo. “There are also very spacious and beautiful halls that could become community spaces, as we have done with the Freedom Tower.