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David Beckham makes case to reshape PortMiami with soccer stadium

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Soccer star David Beckham addresses the media at the Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus Monday, March 24, 2014, about his proposal for a soccer stadium at PortMiami.

One of the world's most famous soccer stars continued to build his case Monday for reshaping the world's busiest cruise-ship port.

David Beckham swept back into the public eye to rally support for a stadium and development plan that would place both his soccer team and persona at the heart of PortMiami. He plans a trip to Tallahassee on Tuesday in a hunt for state subsidies, and on Monday told reporters he hopes to win over critics from the cruise-ship industry.

"I want to change their minds," Beckham said at a well-attended afternoon press conference at Miami-Dade College's downtown campus. "I don't want to be an enemy to the people that are opposed to the stadium. I want to work with them."

Beckham's first public appearance in Miami since announcing his bid for a stadium at the county-owned port came after his negotiating team outlined both the vision for the facility and their case against traffic concerns raised by Royal Caribbean. The world's second-largest cruise operator has a corporate campus that overlaps with Beckham's proposed 25,000-seat stadium site, and top executives are warning elected officials that Beckham's plan would hurt port

operations.

At a morning press briefing, Beckham aide John Alschuler, a top real estate consultant in New York, revealed selected details from a traffic study he said is the most comprehensive

ever performed at the port. He declined to release it, saying the final version would be made public in about a month.

The presentation showed a stadium heavily reliant on parking in downtown Miami, with thousands of fans walking a pedestrian bridge to the island port. He also insisted the soccer and cruising schedules were so distinct — with cruise ships boarding in the afternoon and spectators arriving in the evening — that the two uses have little chance of conflict.

Alschuler also said he expected about a third of the stadium's spectators to bypass downtown and arrive through the new port tunnel scheduled to open in May. The nearly \$700 million tunnel was designed to divert cargo trucks from downtown and make it easier for cruise passengers to get to the port.

Alschuler did acknowledge the parking plan as outlined wouldn't hold up if Beckham's team succeeds in recruiting the University of Miami's football team as a tenant. While the deal would deliver UM's political cachet to Beckham's stadium bid, the college team would also bring requirements for at least 40,000 seats — making the soccer venue twice the size of the Heat's 19,000-seat AmericanAirlines Arena. College football games also take place during Saturday mornings and afternoons — boarding and departure times for cruise ships.

The UM question highlighted just one moving part in Beckham's soccer ambitions. While three other sites have been listed as fall-back options — land near the Miami International Airport, Florida International University's western campus, and a site adjoining Marlins Park in Little Havana — Alschuler only presented renderings for a port stadium, and he said that remains Beckham's top choice.

Funding is another question mark. Beckham pledged not to seek any local aid and to pay market rent for a 12-acre site that a port consultant said could lease for at least \$3 million a year.

Beckham hired a lobbyist to pursue state aid for the stadium, citing existing subsidies for most Florida stadiums, including Sun Life and AmericanAirlines Arena, both of which receive \$2 million a year from Tallahassee (Sun Life as compensation for a baseball retrofit in the 1990s).

"We want to be treated like every other franchise," Beckham said Monday. "We're not asking for anything more or anything less."

Should Beckham persuade Miami-Dade leaders to lease him part of the port's southwest corner, his development team could play a significant role in creating a new commercial district for downtown Miami.

In his presentation, Alschuler offered new details on a one-million square-foot commercial complex woven into their stadium site plan, a potentially lucrative new development opportunity that could have Beckham's organization as the master developer. While he emphasized the plan was mostly a placeholder, Alschuler said two of the four proposed buildings would be hotels and the other two would be office complexes.

“There may be a role — and I stress may be — for the team as the developer and builder of the public spaces,” Alschuler said, referring to the plazas and outdoor gathering spots that were part of the larger stadium design. “We are open to any process that creates a kind of public realm and unity of the site. Our goal is to create a stadium that is inside a great urban destination.”

He said the development parcels should be opened up for bids, with Miami-Dade County earning all of the proceeds. But he did not say whether the Beckham group itself would be interested in competing for the sites. As the group creating the stadium and wanting to manage the surrounding plaza and other public areas, Beckham’s team could bring unique advantages to the bidding process.

The stadium renderings depict an open-air soccer stadium with the Miami skyline as a background and the kind of architectural flourishes sure to bring significant costs. With Beckham seeking a relatively modest operating subsidy from the state (the Heat receive more than \$6 million a year from Miami-Dade, plus \$2 million from Florida) and pledging to pay rent, the elaborate stadium design suggests he and his investors may need the kind of extra revenue that the surrounding land could bring.

“It would be very interesting to see their operating model.... They’re making some concessions you don’t see at this stage of the game,” said Irwin Raji, a stadium-finance attorney at Foley & Lardner in Miami. “That’s a beautiful building that has the potential to be an iconic building in the marketplace. It’s going to have the price tag of an iconic building.”

Beckham’s backers describe the retired star as uniquely positioned to thrive as a Major League Soccer owner in Miami. Part of his 2007 contract to join the Los Angeles Galaxy soccer team included favorable terms for purchasing a franchise once he left the playing field. He’s reportedly paying \$25 million for a team license that cost the owners of Orlando’s MLS franchise about \$70 million.

With a global persona that has already cast him in ad campaigns for underwear, cellphones and cologne, Beckham sees his fame translating into a fan base well beyond South Florida. That could bring significant more television and merchandising revenue than a typical MLS owner could expect.

Beckham’s stadium proposal offers an alternative to a more intensive building plan offered by top port executives, who were in Asia earlier this year pitching developers on a proposal to build as much as 7 million square feet of new commercial space in the southwest corner. The strategy to bring a convention center, hotel, and office towers to PortMiami drew strong objections from downtown Miami business leaders. Alschuler touched on those complaints Monday, noting they don’t want to operate a stadium next to “Blue Lagoon,” referring to the suburban office district.

Marc Sarnoff, a Miami city commissioner and top critic of the port’s development plan, said Monday he opposes the idea of building a “Port City” on the southwest corner but welcomed the Beckham’s proposal for a more modest footprint.

“A million beats the heck out of 7 million,” Sarnoff said. “It is an opportunity for everybody to cooperate on the future of the port.”