

miami-dade county

Miami-Dade voters to decide courthouse tax, FIU growth, park rules

In this election, Miami-Dade voters will decide whether to pay more property taxes to replace an aging county courthouse, allow Florida International University to expand into a county fair site, and loosen long-standing rules on buildings housed in county parks.

Of the five county ballot questions facing Miami-Dade voters, the courthouse and FIU plans have drawn the most attention and campaign cash.

Miami-Dade commissioners are asking voters for permission to borrow \$393 million for a new downtown courthouse — debt tied to a special property tax that funds a large chunk of county borrowing.

Advocates of the plan, led by the local circuit's chief judge, Bertila Soto, say the money is desperately needed. About \$25 million would go to repairs on the existing 1928 courthouse, and the remaining \$368 million to build a modern facility to replace that cramped, historic building. The courthouse has twice the number of judges than courtrooms, and advocates point out Miami-Dade had always planned to build a replacement courthouse. The deteriorating structure, they say, has only made the need more urgent.

The campaign has focused on disrepair in the courthouse, which has floors closed off for mold, corroding support beams and leaking ground floors. The conditions aren't worthy of the county's justice system, advocates say, or fair to the employees and who must use the courthouse.

"Should they continue to go into a building that is unsafe and unhealthy?" Judge Soto asked the crowd gathered this week in a Miami Beach diner for a forum on the ballot question.

Critics, led by school-board member Raquel Regalado, see the ballot push using mold and alleged structural risks as scare tactics to rush voters into approving higher taxes for an ill-conceived replacement. They note the \$25 million repair plan by Soto only targets the structural beams, and not a wider mold plan, and they point to existing county funds available to upgrade the building. They want time to consider other options for locating a new courthouse somewhere closer to the center of the county.

"If we have a toxic workplace, we need to fix it right now," Regalado said in an interview. "And we have the money to do that."

While Regalado has been the public face of the opposition, she's mostly relying on free media to make her case against the courthouse question. Miami-Dade's legal industry is funding a television and mailing campaign in favor. The latest campaign reports for the Building Blocks for Justice committee show it has raised about \$920,000.



Whether to replace the historic civil courthouse at 73 West Flagler Street is a question facing Miami-Dade voters this election season. EMILY MICHOT/EMILY MICHOT

Backers of FIU's campaign have raised significant cash, too: the Friends of Higher Education committee reported collecting \$1 million in its latest filing. Billboards across the county also tout FIU's role in the community as a large employer and popular school.

FIU wants 64 acres of Tamiami Park that's home to the privately controlled county fairgrounds on Coral Way and Southwest 107th Avenue. A collection of expo buildings, the site holds events year-round but is best known for the month-long carnival and farming celebration held each spring known as the Youth Fair.

The non-profit company that runs the event has 70 more years on its lease with Miami-Dade, and the contract includes costly triggers should the county ever force it to move. Miami-Dade must find the fair a reasonable replacement site and pay for all relocation costs — which one county estimate pegged at about \$230 million. And while that figure is sure to be debated, Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez said Miami-Dade will not turn over the parkland area to FIU if the school won't cover whatever costs the fair is entitled to from the county. FIU leaders say they'll find the money.

Youth Fair leaders opposed county commissioners placing the FIU question on the ballot, but the organization says it has no position on the question facing voters. Fair organizers are counting on exerting leverage in the negotiation process should the ballot question pass on Nov. 4.

"The referendum simply would give FIU the legal ability to expand onto the Fairgrounds. It's one step in a long process. It does not mean relocation of the Youth Fair," fair president Bob Hohenstein said in a statement. "The referendum is peripheral to that process, so the Youth Fair has taken a neutral position on the referendum."

The FIU question would rewrite Article 7 of the Miami-Dade charter, which governs how the county can use parkland. The change would exempt FIU from the restrictions for Tamiami Park.

Separately, three other ballot questions would loosen rules in Article 7, which currently states that parks "shall be protected from commercial development and exploitation."

Open-space advocates opposed the changes to Article 7 during hearings, while park officials endorsed the moves as providing the kind of flexibility that will benefit the public.

Article 7 already exempts a long list of parks with facilities and some for-profit operations, including the Youth Fair site, Vizcaya, Marine Stadium, and the Seaquarium. A pair of questions on the November ballot would add two more: Camp Matecumbe, where parks officials want to add cabins and lodges; and a former landfill off Northwest 58th Street now being pitched as a site for a privately run soccer camp with dormitories. The vacant site is now officially named the Miami-Dade Regional Soccer Park.

The fifth ballot item would expand Article 7 to allow libraries in park facilities. Specifically, the article would be rewritten to "add libraries constructed within recreational facilities to the list of those permissible facilities at parks." County attorneys have told commissioners the proposed language limits Miami-Dade to adding libraries to existing park buildings.

County Commissioner Esteban "Steve" Bovo, whose district includes Hialeah, backed the library change as a way to save money, since the system currently pays about \$1.8 million for some leases in commercial shopping centers and elsewhere. He cited one library renting space in the Hialeah area "a block-and-a-half away from a park which has a so-called rec center that, for lack of a better term, sits empty all year."

Libraries would still pay rent to the parks department — Miami-Dade is currently charging the system about \$3 million for rent space in county centers — but Bovo's office said at least branches wouldn't be forced to pay market rate. But the rental question has some questioning whether the amendment would be a way to siphon the library system's special property tax into the general fund, which subsidizes the parks department.

"I think there are natural synergies between libraries and parks. If it's done right, I think it's a great thing," said John Quick, a Miami lawyer and president of the Friends of the Miami-Dade Public Library. "I think it really opens the door to shift significant dollars.... There's a danger there."