

As the Miami-Dade youth fair winds down, fairgrounds fight heats up

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03/29/2015 11:29 AM

03/29/2015 4:51 PM



Each year, rented fairgrounds at Tamiami Park are transformed into the Youth Fair, a four-week county fair. Florida International University, the state school next door, last fall won voter approval to take over the fairgrounds provided Miami-Dade can find another site for the fair. ROBERTO KOLTUN EL NUEVO HERALD

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The Miami-Dade Youth Fair may be wrapping up for the year this week, but the fight over the fairgrounds is just starting to escalate.

Florida International University, the state school that [wants](#) to expand its main campus onto the fair's territory next door, is questioning the festival's authority to convert much of Tamiami Park into a parking lot for the festival. Fair organizers in early March [launched](#) the four-week [festival](#) of rides, junk food, farm shows and school crafts with a string of full-page newspaper ads under the title: "FIU Needs to Do Some Serious Fact-Checking."

And last week, the [administration](#) of Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez sent the fair's parent organization a list of four potential new homes, including one that would require it to run the fair in temporary quarters around Sun Life Stadium without any of the permanent buildings that house the fair's student exhibitions, vendor booths, livestock exhibitions and more. The split [option](#) would have the fair's parent company retain control of the five buildings and pavilions at Tamiami 15 miles away, where it could continue holding events that take place on the fairgrounds throughout the year.

"We understand that this 'new business model' might require more detailed analysis but we are interested to see whether you share our sense of the positive potential in this option," Michael Spring, senior advisor to Gimenez, wrote in a March 23 email to fair president Bob Hohenstein.

Miami-Dade's version of a county fair is 15 years into a 90-year lease on 86 acres of Tamiami, where it has operated since the 1970s and now reports attendance of around 600,000 people. FIU [needs](#) the fair to agree to a new location, since moving the event is the [primary condition](#) of a ballot measure that county voters approved in November allowing FIU to take over the fairgrounds.

The fair's 1995 lease with Miami-Dade requires the county to "secure an equal or better alternate site" for the event if it ever exercises the contract's eviction clause. Miami-Dade also must compensate the fair for constructing replacement facilities. FIU agreed to cover the relocation tab as part of the referendum, and fair organizers have yet to endorse any location that FIU said it could afford to acquire.

Fair organizers see the payout requirement as their prime defense against FIU's designs on the property, given the school's political clout and deeper financial coffers. (Miami-Dade County Fair & Exposition, the non-profit that owns the fair, reported \$13 million in revenue last year. It takes FIU about 11 days to generate that much revenue, according to financial [statements](#) from both non-profits.)

Inside the fair's second-floor suite of offices at the fairgrounds, executives showed no enthusiasm about the latest relocation recommendations, which includes two spots already rejected by the fair in past negotiations (land surrounding Sun Life Stadium in Miami Gardens and an area in Homestead) and two new sites (one near Tamiami but outside the county's western development boundary and the other west of the Florida Turnpike and near the Dolphin Mall).

"I haven't even looked at it, to be perfectly blunt," Hohenstein said three days after receiving Spring's email. "We've got a fair to run." Added fair lawyer J. Patrick Fitzgerald: "We have an 85-year lease. As soon as the fair is over, we will go ahead and explore it."

FIU officials see the fair slow-walking the relocation process, delays they characterize as defying the school's "mandate" to expand into Tamiami. [FIU wants](#) to use 64 acres of fairgrounds for a new business incubator, expansion of medical research, 2,000 new dormitory beds and other academic functions to grow its student body from 50,000 to 65,000. They describe FIU as central to Miami-Dade's prosperity, citing statistics showing the majority of its graduates live in the area and that 35 percent of the county's public-school teachers earned degrees from the university.

The only state university south of Boca Raton, FIU also has one of the smallest footprints in the system and risks losing expansion dollars to competitors elsewhere in the state if it can't secure new territory for its main campus, said FIU President Mark Rosenberg.

"I can assure you those tax dollars will move elsewhere to help expand other universities," he said. "I have a sense of urgency I do not apologize for. But we have to move respectfully."

While the fairgrounds occupy about a third of Tamiami, the amended lease adopted by county commissioners in 1995 formalized the fair's authority to take over as much of the park as it needs for overflow parking. It's a crucial provision, since the fair says it needs 14,000 parking spaces at peak times. Aside from VIP slots, the fair doesn't charge for parking and cars have taken over Tamiami's own parking as well as grass-covered playing fields.

Of particular interest to FIU is a 36-acre section of Tamiami that is fenced off for fair parking. It's not part of the leased 87 acres, and FIU is beginning to publicly question whether it enjoys the fairground's exemption from county-charter rules that restrict private control of county parkland.

"I'm not a lawyer," Rosenberg said. "But it seems as if that extra [36] acres is, given how it's not now available, really, for the public, is inconsistent with the spirit of the charter."

He said the school's own parking deals with the fair may not extend into 2016. The fair contracts with FIU to use some school lots and garages for thousands of overflow spaces, but Rosenberg said FIU's growth may have made the arrangement unworkable. "We don't want to have to close our night school because of parking inadequacies," he said.

Though fairgoers only see the outskirts of it, a transient village of some 400 campers, trailers and RVs sets up inside the fair, housing the barkers, mechanics, entertainers, animal handlers and ride operators who make a living traveling the national circuit of county fairs. FIU is raising questions about that arrangement, asking why a new fair site needs that much room and whether the current operation is legitimate.

"They do have some compliance obligations," said Jorge Luis Lopez, a Coral Gables lawyer and lobbyist representing FIU. "What are the electrical connections? Do they have infrastructure that has been built to accommodate all of these trailers? Do we have to replace that?"

Spring, the Gimenez aide, said no FIU representative has raised any compliance issues with him. Fair executives say they're subject to extensive regulatory inspections each

year, and that the commission-approved agreement clearly green-lights parking throughout Tamiami with advanced notice.

Hohenstein sees a larger war of attrition on FIU's part. He accuses school leaders of trumpeting their [expansion plans](#) to coincide with the fair's opening in an effort to convince ticket buyers and vendors the event's days are numbered.

"This is deliberate, it's orchestrated, and it's well thought-out. Their mission is to do exactly what they're doing," Hohenstein said of FIU. "Seeding doubt in the consumer's mind. Seeding doubt in our guests' minds. Seeding doubt [with] our vendors, our concessionaires, our contractors."

A political committee that backed the FIU campaign raised about \$1.6 million for the referendum, which [won](#) with 65 percent of the vote. After giving \$600,000 during the campaign, the school's [foundation](#) in February transferred \$30,000 to the committee, Friends of Higher Education, to fund ongoing [consultant expenses](#), according to election records.

The fair is paying lobbyist Brian May \$12,500 a month to press its case, according to financial report and interviews, and trying to rally support from fair-goers, too. Signs throughout this year's fair urge attendees to [post](#) photographs of themselves with their hands clasped in a heart. The headline for the signs: "We love the Youth Fair. May it always be here."

Inside a pavilion, prize-winning chickens cluck in cages while children await their turn under Betsy the milking cow, who traveled down from a farm in South Carolina. "I think this is the most important part right here," said John Gentzel, a Homestead beekeeper selling honey across from Betsy. "The little ones say: 'Mommy, go to the store and get some milk.' They don't realize the milk comes from a cow."

The fair is the main revenue driver for the Fair & Exposition non-profit that holds the lease, and financial reports list about \$1 million in rent from the fairgrounds' catering arm and calendar of consumer expos, such as the Florida Gun Shows and [Cuba Nostalgia](#). The fair's lease with Miami-Dade only requires it to pay the county a portion

of the rent it collects from outside groups, and the fair said that amounted to about \$120,000 in 2014 – less than 1 percent of its total revenues.

In 2013, consultants said recreating a fairgrounds with the permanent buildings would cost about \$70 million, with an additional \$150 million for roadwork and utility hook-ups. Produced by an Minnesota firm with [dozens](#) of fairs as past clients, the report studied what were then the top three relocation possibilities (Sun Life and the Homestead site, as well as privately held land near Miami Lakes that's now part of the assemblage for the American Dream Miami mall theme-park project).

But the referendum language FIU won approval for in the November election anticipated a less expansive relocation. While the fair leases 87 acres at Tamiami, the ballot item allows FIU to take over just 64 acres. That's enough to cover the unimproved areas of the fairgrounds, while excluding the fair's permanent buildings.

In proposing the four new sites, the Gimenez administration said three would be large enough for a cluster of permanent buildings, too. The Sun Life option, though, would only work if the fair limited itself to temporary buildings at the new site, since the Dolphins couldn't accommodate permanent structures during football season.

The fair claimed the split idea is an effort by FIU to lower relocation costs by not having to construct new buildings. FIU said the county's parks department wanted the fair buildings, so it agreed to leave them out of the referendum.

A judge could ultimately settle the ongoing dispute, but for now Mayor Gimenez said he's hoping to negotiate a deal that ends with the fair in a new home.

"I'm kind of stuck in the middle of this, with two parties that don't see eye to eye on everything," Gimenez said in a recent interview. "The Youth Fair has its interests. FIU has its interests. I want to get a place where all three of us can say: Alright, our interests have all been met."

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