

From Parcel B to Pit Stop



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CAN YOU SPELL P-A-R-K BACKWARD?



Parcel B, intended as a park, is now used as a staging area for events at American Airline Arena.
BT photo by Erik Bojnansky

Next month a piece of taxpayer-owned waterfront land -- long promised as a park but often slated for development -- will be used in an international auto racing event that, organizers say, will be attended by thousands and watched by millions.

This won't be a typical, gas-guzzling, ear-splitting car race. The FIA Formula E: Miami ePrix, which takes places on Saturday, March 14, is part of the inaugural Formula E Championship, the world's largest electric car racing event. The nine-round series was launched in Beijing last September. Miami will be round five of the series, with the final race taking place in London in June.

Chuck Martinez, general manager of Miami ePrix and an employee of Andretti Sports Marketing, expects at least 20,000 people will watch 20 teams from around the world zip along Biscayne Boulevard, between American Airlines Arena and I-395, in electric-powered Spark-Renault SRT_01Es that are capable of reaching 150 miles per hour at decibel levels less noisy than rush-hour traffic.

The race will generate \$10 million in "direct spending" and employ 240 people, according to a Miami ePrix brochure. It will also be broadcast live to an international television audience of up to 200 million people by four networks, and also streamed online. "It's an opportunity to showcase Miami," Martinez says.

Each racing team will have two cars and two drivers. They'll need access to a pit-stop location to help maintain, power up, and switch out electric cars during the race. So last December, Miami-Dade County Commissioner Audrey Edmonson sponsored a resolution to lease a three-acre parcel of county-owned land behind the American Airlines Arena to Miami ePrix in exchange for \$22,200 in cash and \$195,195 in "permanent improvements."

Those three acres, known as Parcel B, have a long and twisted history, which, coincidentally, involves race cars. Parcel B was once part of a 32-acre tract the City of Miami bought from Florida East Coast Railway for \$23 million in 1981, with the intent of creating a waterfront park. Instead,

Miami's publicly owned waterfront was used as a track for Ralph Sanchez's Grand Prix Miami between 1983 and 1995.

In 1996, a year after Sanchez took the Grand Prix to Homestead, county voters agreed to use 29 acres of the former FEC tract for a brand-new, \$210 million arena for the Miami Heat, today's American Airlines Arena. To help sell the idea to voters, county leaders promised to turn the remaining three acres (Parcel B) into a waterfront soccer park. Construction on the 19,600-seat arena began soon after the county bought the tract from the cash-strapped City of Miami for \$36 million in 1998.



[A Spark-Renault SRT_01E, which will be used next month in the Miami e-Prix.](#)

Today Parcel B is owned by the public and boasts beautiful views of Biscayne Bay, but it was never officially made a park. Though it's not illegal to walk around there, it is fenced off and generally unwelcoming.

Today the county leases Parcel B to the Miami Heat at \$1000 a day for valet parking and staging events like concerts and the recent Ringling Brothers Circus. It also leases the land for other events at \$7500 per day.

There have also been proposals to build apartments, restaurants, and two Cuban-exile museums on the land. The Bay of Pigs Museum, first proposed in 2007, fizzled out. However, last July the Miami-Dade County Commission promised Parcel B to a nonprofit group wishing to build a Cuban Exile History Museum -- if the group can raise the \$125 million in private donations necessary to construct it, negotiate a lease with the county, and placate the concerns of the Miami Heat.

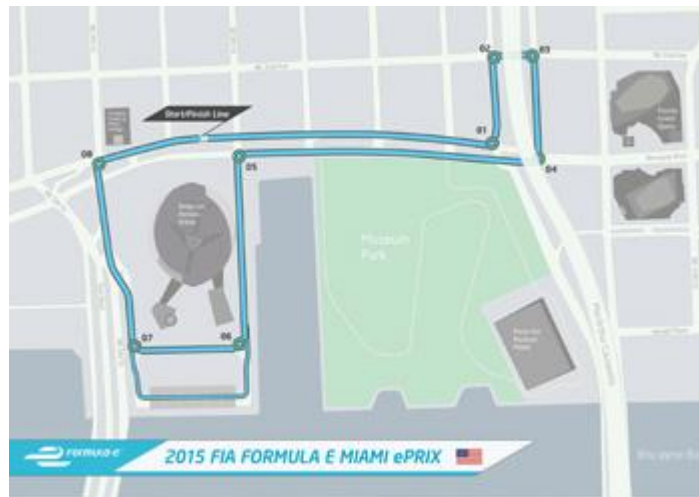
Nicolas Gutierrez, board member of Cuban Exile History Museum Inc., is confident his group can accomplish this task -- in about two years.

"We're off to a very good start. We have a big event coming up and we have some big sponsors coming to us," says Gutierrez, adding that his group is also talking to the Black Archives about building an African-American museum on Parcel B as well. (Other possible sites for the proposed Black History Museum, pushed by county Commissioner Dennis Moss, are Museum Park and Watson Island.)

Meanwhile, the Urban Environment League of Greater Miami (UEL) continues to advocate for enhanced access to Parcel B *without* museums. It was during a UEL meeting last May that Commissioner Edmonson, whose district includes downtown Miami, promised to fight for Parcel B's preservation as public open space.

Now UEL vice president Greg Bush believes Edmonson has changed her mind. "Cars and sports dominate the waterfront and the politics of the male-dominated commission," he states in an e-mail to the *BT*. (Of the county commission's 13 members, 8 are men.) "I'm disappointed in what I gather was Commissioner Edmonson's deference in this regard. At one point she was a major champion of Parcel B as a park."

"This is not a permanent pit," stresses Edmonson aide Marta Martinez-Aleman, referring to the car-race pit stops. "This is strictly a one-time event -- they're not knocking down anything. The space is still Parcel B."



For the e-Prix race, much of Parcel B will become a pit stop, covered with concrete.

Chuck Martinez says his employers will pay for the installation of benches "so that people can sit by the water," as well as electrical upgrades that can be used for future special events.

In its contract, Miami ePrix also promises to pave 85,000 square feet of Parcel B -- 25,000 square feet of which is currently covered by grass. UEL board member Peter Ehrlich warns that it's "25 percent increase in concrete" that can be used for future development.

The lease requires the replacement of "certain landscaping and any trees" removed from the site. The BT could not find any specific reference in the county's lease to grass.

"It's disgusting," Ehrlich says. "Parcel B is zoned parks and recreation, yet it's not an official park."

Martinez insists his group has no position on the ultimate fate of Parcel B. "We're not involved with the politics," he says. "We went to the county like anyone and asked if we could use the space."

Ehrlich has been going to the county, too -- to get the fences taken down. So far those requests have been rebuffed. Miami Heat lobbyist Jorge Luis Lopez admits his client wants to keep the fences up for now. "We don't want people wandering back there," Lopez says. "We've maintained it for the purpose of security because the space hasn't been properly set up by the county for active use."

But once security measures can be worked out, Lopez says, the Miami Heat will have no objection to the fences coming down, so long as the Heat can continue using Parcel B as a staging area for events at American Airlines Arena. In fact, Lopez says, the arena operators would prefer to see Parcel B remain open rather than developed with museums.

"What you have now," Lopez adds, "is an open parcel that's used for a very needed purpose by the arena, with the collaboration and support of the county."

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com