
Downtown agency OKs lobbyist deals

By CATHERINE LACKNER

After hesitating to do so at their September meeting because they said they didn't have enough information, directors of Miami's Downtown Development Authority renewed contracts last week for both the authority's local and Tallahassee lobbyists.

The Jorge Luis Lopez law firm and Southern Strategy Group have each been allocated \$50,000 in the authority's 2014-15 budget. Each firm was asked what it accomplished last year and what issues it will tackle going forward.

The Lopez firm, which lobbies locally, said it had worked last year on funding for the Flagler Street redesign, homeless issues including the renegotiated agreement on the Pottinger case, transportation changes, and for a downtown conference center, among other projects.

In 2014-15, the firm is to continue its work on Flagler Street and on homelessness and will make as its transportation priorities the Miami streetcar, the

Baylink project to join downtown with Miami Beach, and creating better bicycle and pedestrian access. New priorities will be working with the downtown group and the Beacon Council to develop economic incentives, and advocating for funding to improve South Miami Avenue.

Southern Strategies, a Coral Gables-based firm that lobbies in Tallahassee, said it was instrumental in getting \$250,000 in the state budget for treatment services for the homeless, arranged meetings with the Florida Department of Transportation on the proposed I-395 bridge, advised on developments relating to David Beckham's proposed soccer stadium, got legislators to reduce the tax on those who use car-sharing services, and coordinated meetings between the downtown group and key members of the Florida House and Senate, among other things.

During the 2015 legislative session, which begins March 3, the firm is to continue to lobby for mental health services for the

homeless, work on a second phase of the Flagler Street re-do that will carry improvements west to the Miami River, advocate on behalf of film incentives, and communicate to the Department of Transportation the importance of the proposed Miami streetcar project.

"I'm against hiring lobbyists, but these are important issues," said authority Vice Chair Neisen Kasdin, who is office managing shareholder of the Akerman law firm. "If we could get the streetcar alone, it would be transformative."

"The county is a big monster to move," said board member Bruno Barreiro, who is a Miami-Dade County commissioner. "To coordinate 13 commissioners is difficult."

"Strategy can be a great asset," said authority chair Marc Sarnoff, "and I know of no better strategist than Jorge Luis Lopez."

As far as Southern Strategies, "They will be giving us significantly better performance this year," Mr. Sarnoff predicted.