

Miami Herald

April 13, 2017

Circulation: 86,941/ UMV: 8,942,930

Frustrated Miami businesses guaranteed oversight of flagging Flagler Street reconstruction



Construction crew work on the Flagler Street project which is running behind schedule as of Thursday, February 23, 2017.
C.M. GUERRERO. cmguerrero@elnuevoherald.com

Amid suggestions that a flagging reconstruction of Flagler Street in downtown could drag on until the end of next year, Miami commissioners on Thursday agreed to run every success, setback and minute detail of the project past the downtown business community in hopes of pacifying an influential bloc of frustrated business owners.

City administrators will continue to supervise FH Paschen, the Chicago-based contractor hired to complete the \$13 million, five-block streetscape project.

The work was supposed to be on track for completion by the end of this year. But following a series of complications and delays that have pushed away pedestrians and scarred retailers, the city now promises to loop in the quasi-public Downtown Development Authority on every meeting, email and memo regarding the project.

Miami's capital projects office will also consult with the publicly funded business booster group before making any "substantial" decisions, and give it control over the dissemination of public information.

“This was meant to open the front door” to Flagler Street, Miami Commissioner Ken Russell, who is chairman of the Downtown Development Authority, said Thursday. “But if we don’t do it correctly, it could be the nail in the coffin.”

Work to remake Flagler Street into a pedestrian-friendly drag that could serve as downtown’s Lincoln Road began in January of last year and excited business owners who expected a rebirth of Miami’s original hub of commerce. But the situation quickly devolved when workers opened up the street at the southwest corner of the county courthouse and discovered utility lines that no one knew existed.

Currently, the city’s agreement calls for work to end by April 2018, but the contractor is seeking a nine-month extension that is still being negotiated by the city. Capital projects director Jeovanny Rodriguez said crews are now solidly into the fourth phase of a 13-phase project, but surprises are still occurring.

“Unfortunately, we don’t anticipate the level of conflict to be anything less going forward,” he said.

A message seeking comment left at FH Paschen’s Fort Lauderdale office was not immediately returned. The Downtown Development Authority currently has an employee on site looking over the contractor’s shoulder.

The fits and starts by the contractor have angered some influential businessmen. On Thursday, the in-house counsel for Moishe Mana, a developer who has bought up more than \$150 million in property along Flagler, said the businessman and regular political donor is losing tenants and money.

Another politically active developer, Sergio Rok, said in a written statement that the city has given him “shifting commitments” and conflicting information while his business bleeds.

“New tenants? Who would possibly sign a lease when there’s no plan in place to complete the project?” Rok asked.

Further rubbing salt in the wound, Flagler businesses agreed to assess themselves to the tune of \$1 million in order to help fund construction.

In order to alleviate some of the burden, commissioners also signaled Thursday that they’ll waive sidewalk cafe fees of \$11.50 per square foot for affected businesses.

In the meantime, Rodriguez said the city continues to push FH Paschen to finish the job expeditiously. But patience may be running out.

“Mr. Mana is worth a lot of money, but nobody is worth infinite amounts of money,” said Mana’s attorney, David Lederman. “We’re facing mounting losses and every month it’s getting worse and worse.”

Also on Thursday, Miami commissioners agreed to pursue a study to determine whether they can expand the Omni Community Redevelopment Agency to include West Coconut Grove.