



Photos by Risa Polansky

State Archaeologist Ryan Wheeler, Secretary of State Kurt Browning. Miami Circle is buried under grass, foreground, where it will stay until protective viewing window is built.

Phase 1 of Circle park begins, but 99% is in unfunded Phase 2

BY RISA POLANSKY

The famed but long-hidden Miami Circle may one day be open for nearly unadulterated viewing – if proponents can pin down the funding.

State officials, local leaders, historians and park lovers gathered Friday to break ground on the first phase of a Miami Circle Park, to feature landscaping and a river walk.

Money is in hand for this preliminary piece, what some call a “passive park.” Construction is to begin after permitting, now in progress. A contractor has yet to be selected.

The second phase – now unfunded – is to bring a full-blown park and offer the chance to see the national historic landmark partially uncovered.

The 2,000-year-old Brickell artifact can’t be left exposed to the elements.

But rather than forever keep it concealed in limestone as it has been for years since it was discovered, studied and then reburied, officials are considering building a protective replica above the 38-foot structure, complete with a viewing win-

dow allowing a look at the real thing.

“We have to worry about protecting it, so one of the thoughts we would have is a ghosting of the circle, or a replica sitting on top to protect it,” said Robert McCammon, president and chief executive officer of the Historical Museum of Southern Florida, keeper of circle-related artifacts and manager of the site, which taxpayers bought for \$26.7 million in 1999.

The replica could be built with what he called a “window box” that would give visitors a chance to peer down at the circle, believed to be a Tequesta Indian artifact.

State Archaeologist Ryan Wheeler, who emceed Friday’s groundbreaking, called it in an interview “kind of a compromise between exposing the whole feature and letting people sort of see what’s underground.”

That concept, though, is not final. A master plan for fully developing a park at the circle site is in progress, and designers are seeking public input.

About 99% of park development is to come in the second

phase, Mr. McCammon said.

But by starting now, he said, “we’re going to be able to get that park open quicker than if we waited to get it done all at once.”

As part of the first phase, stone pavers are to be placed along the circle’s circumference, giving a sense of its shape.

Funding to make possible the beginnings of a park comes from several sources.

The state authorized spending \$2.2 million to fix a once-collapsing seawall between the circle and the Miami River. That ended up costing only \$1.4 million after the economy crashed, leaving building industry players scrambling for work and willing to drop prices.

The balance of the state allocation helped get the park’s first phase moving, State Archaeologist Dr. Wheeler said.

Secretary of State Kurt Browning, also at the groundbreaking, in an interview called the seawall collapse a “mixed blessing” that opened the door to beginning park development.

He lauded the circle as being “about as historic as you can get,” adding that “the state’s

just pleased to be a partner with the Miami community” on the first phase.

Phase two will probably cost \$2 million to \$3 million, Dr. Wheeler said.

He speculated that seeing the first phase complete could warm officials to contributing to phase two – the major project – and mentioned reaching out to legislators for resources.

On top of the state’s seawall/park allocation, the Florida Inland Navigation District put \$125,000 toward the phase-one park project, the South Florida Water Management District contributed \$50,000, Miami Commissioner Marc Sarnoff’s office pitched in \$50,000 and the Downtown Development Authority gave \$25,000.

Alyce Robertson, executive director of the authority – whose reach includes Brickell – said the new park will help reverse Brickell’s “woeful lack of green space.”

The organization has made it a priority to identify land to convert into usable passive parks and championed a bid to get the circle site open to the public even before a full-blown park is possible, Ms. Robertson

said.

That’s the idea, said architect Jay Hood, principal and director of landscape architecture for firm Glatting Jackson Kercher Anglin in Orlando.

The goal, Mr. Hood said, is “to really make this a park that is going to be usable for a wide variety of Miami’s population, but also tourists and visitors.”

Other goals: paying homage to the site’s history, as well as the nearby Miami River’s, he said.

The park is to be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Mr. McCammon of the historical museum said.

Site tours – including for local schools – are to begin in early spring, he said.

The park, on the river’s south bank, is accessible from the Fifth Street Metromover station.

A few handicapped parking spots are to be available on site, and others can valet at the neighboring Icon Brickell/Viceroy Hotel complex or find parking throughout the Brickell area.

For construction, and later for a school bus turnaround, there’s a staging area near the Brickell bridge.