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County may create full-time sports commission to lure events

By Frank Norton

Miami-Dade County may create a full-time sports commission to market facilities, bid for high-profile athletic events and promote professional, amateur and youth leagues.

County Manager Steve Shiver will investigate the feasibility and funding of such an entity and report to commissioners when they reconvene in September. The commission does not meet in August.

The idea, being pushed by Commissioner Jimmy Morales and championed by the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, was unanimously passed in a preliminary review last week by the county commission.

Both commission and chamber officials said they are unsure whether the full-time commission would be a county or non-profit entity, but that it would likely consist of public and private stakeholders.

Palm Beach and Broward counties already have full-time sports councils as does Gainesville and the Lee Island Coast region. Most tend to be quasi-governmental, said Larry Gautier, who heads the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce sports council.

Separate from the county commission's discussion of a sports marketing group, the chamber's council met last week with representatives of locally based professional teams to discuss creating a permanent ticket and merchandise sales venue for professional franchises in Miami-Dade. The chamber group would also like to launch a twice-yearly networking event to bring together franchise representatives and corporate players.

But establishment of a full-time athletic-marketing group by the county would top the chamber's sports council agenda, Mr. Gautier said.

"This plan," he said, "calls for full-time advocacy. It's not only important to bringing major events to Dade County but to bringing families and youth leagues here as well – which could also contribute room-nights" at area hotels.

Earlier this year, Broward County's sports council announced hosting 156 events in 2001 with a combined economic impact of $200 million.

That figure is small in comparison to Miami-Dade's potential bounty, said Crystal Conner, policy adviser to Commissioner Morales, given the impact of events such as the Orange Bowl football game, the Nasdaq 100-Open and Homestead's NASCAR-Winston Cup, which has an impact of about $117 million, according to the Weston-based Sports Management Research Institute.

"This type of commission would put a permanent body in place to bid for the Olympics, the Super Bowl and other major sporting events rather than have to

'This plan calls for full-time advocacy'

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'Those two events as products were really not that profitable'

Jim Jenkins

Stadium Manager Ileana Gomez, that facility is used about 90 days annually, only about 20 of which are for sporting events. She said competition from other indoor and outdoor venues have cannibalized sports and other uses at the famed Miami landmark.

The downtown Miami arena has fared worse. The 16,000-seat venue is now operating in a $1.2 million deficit which is expected to reach $2 million by year's end.

Built in 1989 as home for the Miami Heat and later the NHL's Florida Panthers, both teams left for new facilities. The University of Miami Hurricanes basketball team will soon use the new Ryder Center, an arena under construction at the Coral Gables campus.

And just this week, Feld Entertainment, producers of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and Disney on Ice, announced they too in October will move to the American Airlines Arena.

"Those two events as products were really not that profitable," Jim Jenkins, Executive Director of Miami Sports and Exhibition Authority, which owns and manages arena.

He said a full-time sports commission could significantly improve the arena's usage, now estimated near 100 days each year.

According to research by national economists, while big-ticket sporting events draw considerable outside money, pro sports franchises such as the Miami Heat, Florida Marlins and Miami Dolphins add no net gain to the local economy. After weighing tax incentives meant to attract and retain such franchises against the dollars reinvested in local communities as a result their presence, the net effect is often negative, said Andy Zimbalist, professor of economics at Smith College in Massachusetts and author of the book *Sports, Jobs and Taxes.*