

Developer Mark Siffin wants community agency funds to acquire land for billboard towers

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Developer Mark Siffin has turned to a Miami agency charged with fighting blight in an area north of downtown Miami to go after land owned by the Miami-Dade School District, according to public records.

Siffin wants the Miami Community Redevelopment Agency, funded with property taxes, to acquire the land and then to transfer it to his company, Maefield Holdings.

It's the developer's latest effort to build massive electronic billboards after he failed to close on a purchase of land from the Miami Herald's parent for the project.

Siffin needs the 18,636-square-foot school board lot for his latest plan to assemble seven acres of parking lots and rundown warehouses where he wants to build a multi-level garage topped by two 50-story electronic billboard on top.

Siffin's plan to use the CRA to acquire the land has heated up opposition to his billboard proposal.

Community activists say the CRA was created to help improve neglected areas and that the billboards will detract from the neighborhood.

"Billboards do not cure slum and blight," activist Peter Ehrlich said. "They create slum and blight. It appears the Omni CRA and its executive director, Pieter Bockweg, are scheming with the promoter of several 50-story billboard towers."

It's unclear why the CRA would agree to become the go-between the School Board and Siffin.

In an e-mail, Bockweg said only that "if the CRA can serve as a catalyst or conduit on an opportunity that can provide community benefit, the agency will explore all options. "

Siffin said in a March 25 letter to the CRA that his project would "immediately eliminate six blocks of severe blight."

Siffin associate and spokesman Bret Berlin declined to comment.

Siffin's project would cover six blocks immediately west of the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts.

Bockweg said Siffin's garage would bring parking for the area workers, residents and visitors attending events at the performing art center, the American Airlines Arena and other entertainment venues.

"The need for parking is clearly spelled out in the Omni Redevelopment Plan ... and is integral to the [architect Bernard] Zyscovich plan presented to the CRA back in 2004," he said.

The School District uses the land on the southwest corner of Northeast Second Avenue and 14th Street as a parking lot. The district headquarters are across the street from the parcel.

John Schuster, the district's chief communications officer, said the district has no plans for the property at this time.

"The School District will issue a Request for Information in the next few weeks," Schuster said. That would be a step toward considering the Siffin deal.

The neighborhood is one of the few areas in which the city's relatively new zoning code, known as Miami 21, allows electronic billboards of such size.

Siffin, managing member of Maefield Holdings, initially planned to build the "media towers" and garage on parking lots owned by Miami Herald parent company McClatchy Co. He tried to buy the Herald land but couldn't close in February because of a lack of financing. The purchase price for about 10 acres was \$190 million, a price set at the height of the real estate boom in 2005.

Last month, Berlin said Siffin's company was still "in active negotiations" with McClatchy and is keeping its options open.

Siffin wants the Miami City Commission to approve a development agreement to help expedite the permitting process and construction of the billboard towers.

Siffin also recently considered building the towers on a strip of land in Bicentennial Park, a plan also opposed by community activists.

Reaching Out

On March 25, CRA's Bockweg sent a letter to the School District outlining the agency's intent to buy the land.

"The CRA is planning for a parking garage to be built on the parcels to serve not only the School Board's need, but also those of the growing Entertainment District," Bockweg wrote. The CRA

would pay the district market value for the land. Bockweg did not mention a plan to flip the land to Siffin.

To determine if the quick sales would be legal, the CRA consulted Holland & Knight attorney Richard Perez.

"I sought legal advice as to the manner and procedure by which this acquisition would be made," Bockweg said. "Our outside business counsel ... demonstrated that the CRA could legally and ethically acquire this property and legally sell it."

In a March 23 memo to Bockweg, Perez said the CRA "may sell a property" to a private developer under certain conditions. One condition is that the developer "devote" the site only to the uses specified by the agency's community redevelopment plan.

Otherwise, "the CRA will need to amend the community redevelopment plan to reflect the proposed use prior to completing the transaction," Perez wrote.

To flip the land, the CRA will also need to conduct competitive bidding and advertise the property sale for 30 days. After that, the CRA can select any proposal, even if it is not the highest bid.

Promised Revenues

In his March 25 letter to the CRA, Siffin said the project would bring millions of dollars to the city and a "more secure" parking facility to the School District. Once the garage is completed, the district would be entitled to the same number of parking spaces now available in the parking lot.

According to Siffin's proposal, the CRA would sell the land to his company at market value, plus \$300,000 upon closing.

If Siffin gains ownership of the land, the property would return to the county tax rolls, since public institutions don't pay property taxes. By doing so, the CRA could collect nearly \$300,000 a year in property taxes, based on the billboard project's estimated value of \$100 million, according to Siffin's letter.

"What we have is a vacant parking lot not currently on the tax roll and not contributing to the improvement of the community," said Bockweg in support of putting the land in private hands.

The agency collects taxes on properties within its boundaries and is supposed to use the money for economic redevelopment. The CRA's board is comprised of the five Miami city commissioners and is chaired by Miami City Commissioner Marc Sarnoff, whose district includes the Omni area.

Siffin would pay the city \$3.5 million annually in permit fees, according to Siffin's letter.

Bockweg said the garage would attract visitors to the Omni area, "which in turn spurs new investment by potential new businesses looking to capitalize on increased traffic."

But Miami resident Barbara Bisno isn't buying Bockweg's explanation.

She said the CRA shouldn't be participating in Siffin's "scheme."

"The CRA should not be fronting for a private developer in trying to get the School Board to sell in a down market," said Bisno, a founder of scenicmiami.org, a nonprofit group. "He is using the CRA for his own benefit. He said it is a public benefit, but there is a parking lot there, so his garage doesn't add anything. So, it is for him to have these monster billboards."

Bisno and Ehrlich fear the billboard towers will hurt in the long-term the redevelopment of the Omni area, now home to vacant lots and dilapidated commercial properties. They fret condo developers may choose to stay away from the area.

"Why would anybody want to buy a condo there and look at 50-story electronic billboards changing every six seconds all day all night?" Bisno said.

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