City OKs funds to start Little Havana improvement district

BY SUSAN D'ANSEYAR

Diverse property owners in Little Havana working for months to establish a unified voice focused on their community’s issues learned they are one step closer to their goal when Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado on Monday told them the city approved funding for their Business Improvement District campaign.

Now, the major work is continuing outreach to local property owners along with ongoing building consensus and momentum toward an independent, self-standing election possibly in November, said Carlos Fausto Miranda, who spearheaded the initiative for the Little Havana Business Improvement District (BID) and received the news from Mr. Regalado Monday morning.

The steering committee no longer needs to collect signatures for the ballot, he said, but there’s still much to do and at stake.

“Ballots are sent out and we need 50% plus one of eligible property owners voting yes,” Mr. Miranda said. “If a property owner doesn’t vote, it’s considered a No vote so we really need to have broad-ranging support.”

For one moment, though, he took a short break from labor and planning to enjoy the day’s milestone.

“Of course, receiving the news from the mayor was exciting,” Mr. Miranda told Miami Today on Monday night. “It legitimized the incredible efforts we’ve put into this effort.”

Moreover, Mr. Miranda said he was taken by the enthusiasm with which the news was given.

“To me, it was obvious that people are rooting for Little Havana, and they understand that it is a powerful pathway for that improvement.”

On May 12, the Miami City Commission amended appropriations in the mid-year budget for fiscal 2015-2016, and approved $75,000 for Little Havana’s BID formation process.

David Collins, the consultant for the BID, will be coordinating with the City of Miami Elections office, creating rolls of subject properties and determining exact area parameters.

The proposal for the BID has it along Calle Ocho from Fourth to 27th avenues, with the possibility of expanding organically into adjacent corridors and cross-streets.

On Tuesday, Mr. Collins told Miami Today the election—which the steering committee is hoping will take place in November—will be conducted by the city in compliance with state statutes that govern BID formations. He said the BID will be responsible for paying back the city’s cost for holding the election.

“There will be an eight- to 10-month process of discussion among the property owners to reach consensus on the kinds of improvements they want,” Mr. Collins said. Once a

focus topic of the group mind,” he said. “Suddenly, Little Havana will have a much clearer picture of what it wants. Some of what it wants will be surprising—amazing things happen when a community sits down together. There is palpable group hope.”

A number of property owners say the BID is going to give those invested in Little Havana—both financially and emotionally—a way to work together for the good of all.

Mr. Fuller, co-owner of the Ball & Chain with Zack and Ben Bush and co-owner of the Burlington Group with Martin Pinilla II, said having a BID will allow property owners to have a stronger voice in what happens to Calle Ocho.

“This is a seminal moment in the revitalization of Little Havana,” Mr. Fuller said. “With Ball & Chain over some 17 properties here, I feel part of the Renaissance that’s taken place on this historic street and want the property owners who’ve helped shape it to have a say in what happens to it.”

He said his investment in Little Havana is not only financial but also emotional. The movement toward forming a BID is bringing property owners closer, Mr. Fuller said.

“This is the first time in all the years I’ve been involved here that I’ve seen a group of stakeholders organize and invest in an oversight effort.”

Little Havana is one of Miami’s greatest treasures, said Marcos Lapciuc, a property owner and member of the original steering committee that formed about three months ago. He said the BID is important for organization, cohesion and maintaining the historic neighborhood’s character as well as organic growth.

“A BID will give us a single voice to identify problems and ways to fix them,” Mr. Lapciuc said. “It’s all the stakeholders working together—property owners, the mayor and his staff and officials like Commissioner Frank Carollo, who has always been responsive to all the community needs.”

Mr. Miranda said the idea for a BID had been floating around in his mind for some time. “Little Havana is a neighborhood with a very distinct character that engenders a tremendous amount of goodwill and is an area with incredible potential,” Mr. Miranda said. “As mayor, I am in love with the neighborhood as it is, I am incessantly disappointed by the untapped and unrealized potential that remains.”

Mr. Miranda said what most frustrated him is all its tremendous potential and the overwhelming goodwill showered upon it, he fostered the incredible efforts Little Havana lacking any cohesiveness of its stakeholders and woefully inadequate in tackling its own problems.

“I knew the way to start seriously confronting the many issues is to have a BID that is a powerful pathway for that improvement,” he said.

“It’s all the stakeholders working together to identify problems and ways to fix them.”

The power of the BID comes from its ability to forge a common and focused vision of diverse stakeholders and its ability to advocate as a collective voice, said Mr. Miranda. “The power of the BID comes to an extent from the funding is collected and invested. More substantially, when 200-plus owners have a single voice, more people listen.”

Little Havana is also an important piece in the economic picture of Miami, said Mr. Collins. “It’s centric to all our major employment centers, highly walkable and dense, it is accessibly well by public transit, and retaining great affordability.”

Little Havana is one of Miami’s core neighborhoods that house its middle- and lower-income residents and are also thriving and vital, he said. Another reason the business improvement district will help the local economy.

“A thriving Little Havana means a more robust Miami.”

Bill Fuller said an improvement district will give property owners a stronger voice in Little Havana’s future.

Carlos Fausto Miranda spearheaded the improvement district drive. Marcos Lapciuc was a member of the original steering committee.