



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

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Public is shut out as I-395 rebuilding and bridge design chosen

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After 90 minutes of sometimes ardent public testimony, a state transportation panel — without a single word of discussion — stuck with a controversial ranking on Friday to select a contractor for the \$800 million reconstruction of Interstate 395 and the design of its long-awaited “signature bridge.”

Each of the three panel members endorsed a proposal by a joint venture team led by Archer Western and The de Moya Group by saying “I concur” to signal agreement that scores given the three finalists by two previous review panels had been added up accurately. The Archer Western team beat out its closest competitor, the Fluor-Astaldi-MCM team, by a razor-thin margin of half a point.

Archer Western’s winning plan for a new bridge over Biscayne Boulevard: Six support arches of varying heights that sprout from the center of the elevated span toward its outer edges, a design explicitly meant to evoke a fountain.

But that was not the bridge preferred by a panel of community representatives charged with evaluating competing proposals on aesthetics, a key element in the competition. By a significant margin, the four-member panel preferred the runner-up’s bridge — a design consisting of two scissor-like support towers meant to resemble dancers cavorting before the adjacent Arsht Center for the Performing Arts.



A rendering of the proposal for the I-395 bridge submitted by Fluor-Astaldi-MCM, which was rated second place by a slim margin by the Florida Department of Transportation.

As Friday's committee made that final decision, no member of the public or local government had seen the competing proposals because they were cloaked in the Florida Department of Transportation's "cone of silence," rules meant to keep lobbying out of the selection process. The agency, following what it says are routine procedures, released the proposals and bridge designs only after the decision was already made.

The aesthetic scoring has been the linchpin of public controversy over FDOT's selection process. Marc Sarnoff, a former Miami commissioner who helped craft an agreement with FDOT to weigh aesthetics strongly in the decision, claims the agency manipulated the score tallies to effectively override the community panel's preference. The agency has not responded to the allegation, which has been echoed in a letter of complaint by the second-place team.

Neither team could comment on Friday's decision because the cone of silence remains in place for 72 hours afterward. A formal bid protest by the Fluor-Astaldi team is widely expected, however, and that would extend the cone.

The opaque FDOT process baffled and shocked numerous stakeholders who testified at Friday's hearing. They said it means that one of the most consequential — and contentious — urban-design and transportation decisions in Miami in years was arrived at almost entirely behind closed doors, with no opportunity for public feedback on particular designs, and no public discussion by the decision-makers on their merits.

The decision is especially sensitive, they noted, because one of the project's principal goals is undoing damage to Overtown wrought by construction of the expressway in the 1960s.

"How can Miami-Dade County residents judge this?" said Michael Hernández, spokesman for Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, who had asked FDOT to make a public presentation on the three final proposals to the county and city commissions. "They have to be able to visually see it. The public should be able to see what all the proposals are. They should not be awarding it to someone based just on points."

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Alan Fein, chairman of the Arsht, questioned why FDOT had the public speak for more than 90 minutes on Friday if the committee's role was merely to rubber-stamp the scores, and if no one got to see the competing proposals before it did so.

"It doesn't make any sense to me to have the public comment to people who have no authority to revisit the decision," Fein said afterward. "As a citizen, it makes no sense to me that you would listen to public comment and then say nothing about it. It suggests that the process is more than opaque.

"Then, when you throw into it the relatively suspicious circumstances where the vote is gerrymandered, it makes me wonder. The optics are bad on two levels. The optics are also bad because no one got to see the bridges. My God, that's what I thought this process was about."

Though Arsht president John Richard was one of the four aesthetic panel members, he could not show or discuss the proposals under FDOT rules, Fein stressed. Richard gave a "poor" evaluation to the Archer Western bridge design, scores released last week by FDOT show.



A rendering of the proposed design by Archer Western-de Moya Joint Venture, approved by the Florida Department of Transportation Friday.

The aesthetic review covered not just the design for the bridge, which would replace a dark, low overpass over the boulevard that has been blamed for contributing to blight in the area. Other significant factors were how well the plans for the new, elevated 395 span required by FDOT would do in improving Overtown at street level.

Both of the top-ranked teams' proposals include plans for parks and public open space beneath the new span, and for reconnecting streets blocked by massive berms supporting the current roadway.

Because those details were unavailable, much of Friday's testimony centered on questions over whether FDOT properly handled the scoring. An attorney for Archer Western told the committee that the agency had followed the scoring procedure laid out in the agency's agreement with Sarnoff and Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado.

"There has been no error in the computation of the scores," the attorney, W. Robert Vezina, said.

THE BRIDGE WILL REPLACE A DARK, LOW OVERPASS OVER THE BOULEVARD THAT HAS BEEN BLAMED FOR CONTRIBUTING TO BLIGHT IN THE AREA.

But Sarnoff, who sued FDOT with Regalado after the agency tried to back out of the signature bridge idea, reiterated his claim that it gamed the scoring in violation of a settlement agreement, thus giving enough of an edge to Archer Western for that team to come out barely on top.

That claim was first aired in a letter to FDOT last week by the firm that handled the lawsuit, Solowsky Allen. Regalado countered with his own letter saying he had no issue with FDOT's handling of the selection.



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The concern over the scoring question was echoed Friday by Jessica Goldman Srebnick, CEO of Goldman Properties and a board member at the Town Square Neighborhood Development Corp., an Arshnt offshoot involved in planning for the neighborhood around the arts district. Other Town Square board members include former Miami Mayor Manny Diaz, a key backer of the signature bridge idea, and influential developer Armando Codina.

“Our group is very disturbed,” she told the committee. “The project has been closed to public opinion, an \$800 million project. That fact alone is shocking. We implore you, do not rubber-stamp.”

FDOT has said that selection committee members would hew to the scoring provided the top-ranked team passed a financial review. An official at Friday's hearing read a note saying the bidder had done so.

But an attorney for Fluor-Astaldi, Brian Newman, told the committee members they have authority to override the score if they concluded the second team offered a better overall value.





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