

MIAMI

Miami commission approves Worldcenter agreement

BY DAVID SMILEY
dsmiley@MiamiHerald.com

The backers of the massive Miami Worldcenter won two key approvals Monday from the Miami City Commission that will allow them to move forward with the \$1.5 billion project — but not before watching the whole deal teeter briefly on the edge.

The commission's unanimous vote in favor of zoning changes and a development agreement modified by 11th hour tweaks — including a frantic backroom huddle with Commissioner Keon Hardemon — means the businessmen pushing the mega-project can move forward and submit actual site plans.

"We're excited," Worldcenter principal Nitin Motwani said. "This is just another step forward."

Motwani and his partners needed the commission approvals Monday for a special zoning plan and new development agreement after sitting for nearly a decade on the land, located in a blighted neighborhood to the west of downtown. Worldcenter has been planned as a massive retail, hotel and residential complex stretching from 11th Street to Sixth Street, and from North Miami

Avenue to Second Avenue.

Dozens of residents, real estate reps, entrepreneurs and property owners spoke in favor of the project, saying they've been waiting for years to "ride its coattails." But for all its support, Worldcenter's backers continued to be dogged Monday by critics who said the city's planning office has negotiated overly cozy terms that would allow the developer to privatize public streets for free, cluster bars into an intense nightlife district and erect gaudy billboards.

Commissioners were initially dismissive of those concerns, and Planning Director Francisco Garcia said they were unfounded.

But on Friday, Worldcenter's development agreement was quietly changed to clarify that any signage on site has to comply with Miami's new zoning code, and to require that Worldcenter pay a fee should it build over or under any public street. Garcia, however, said the changes were more clarification than modification, and noted that while critics have said the developer should pay money to encompass public streets, none of the plans submitted by Worldcenter to date would

• TURN TO WORLDCENTER, 4B

DRUG KINGPIN GIVEN A 50-YEAR SENTENCE 7:31 SHERIFF, DCF WAS WARNED ABOUT SPIRIT IN 13

LOCAL & STATE

Correction: Retirees still love Florida

LIBERTY CITY

Fight preceded gunfire, chaos

Correction: Retirees still love Florida

PIZZI'S BID TO RECLAIM MAJORITY ADVANCES

MUSIC TEACHER HITS ALL THE RIGHT NOTES

MIAMI COMMISSION APPROVES WORLDCENTER AGREEMENT

Commission OK's Worldcenter plan

• WORLDCENTER, FROM 1B

have incurred that fee.

Those changes appeased some critics, though many nevertheless urged commissioners to delay a vote two weeks so that the amended agreement — which wasn't made publicly available until Monday night — could be vetted. But the most powerful critic emerged as Hardemon, who surprised some commissioners by slamming Worldcenter for backtracking on a commitment to local jobs and living wages.

"To me it's disheartening. It's insulting," he said.

To keep the deal alive, commissioners paused their meeting and Worldcenter's team of Greenberg Traurig attorneys met for an hour with Hardemon and city lawyers to craft an agreement that committed more jobs to locals, and with better wages.

The last-minute negotiations, however, only emboldened critics who said the city was rushing the Worldcenter deal through. Some warned that the city was giving short shrift to a deal that would likely be carried out by other developers, considering Motwani acknowledged that Worldcenter principals have always intended to flip some of the project.

"You need to know who you're doing business with," said Brad Knoefler, a Worldcenter tenant who has tangled repeatedly with the developer. "Those of us who live and work in the neighborhood could be left hold-

ing the bag once this project is flipped."

It all made for a long, unusual hearing that started not with a presentation by the developer but a soliloquy from Commissioner Marc Sarnoff about why allegations that he stood to benefit from the project were inflammatory. Ahead of the vote, activist Grace Solares sent an email blast noting that Sarnoff's foundation took money from Worldcenter, and his wife worked as a sales associate with Cervera Real Estate, rumored to be working with the developer. Sarnoff said he reaped no benefit from his foundation. And Alicia Cervera, chairwoman of Cervera Real Estate, said her company isn't working with Worldcenter, at least not yet.

Ultimately, commissioners voted 4-0 for both the zoning changes and the development agreement. Commission Chairman Wilfredo "Willy" Gort was absent.

With approvals in hand, Motwani said Worldcenter's principals will move soon to submit detailed development plans from Garcia, the planning director. He said he and his partners have always acknowledged that they intend to flip some of the land, but said they will remain invested in some aspects as developers.

He said the plans they have submitted are what they intend to build.

"We didn't go through all this to show rendering and not move forward," he said.