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Airport City' could make Miami a medical tourism hotspot

By Risa Polansky

A proposed "Airport City" at Miami International could put Miami on the map as a medical destination, proponents hope.

A Florida International University "Medical City" is a major component of the Airport City project that construction giant Odebrecht is proposing in response to the Miami-Dade Aviation Department's call for a developer to transform four parcels of land at the airport's entrance.

The idea is to create a "one-stop shopping" hub of outpatient centers to serve both residents and out-of-towners, said Dr. Fernando Valverde, associate dean for community and clinical affairs at the university's new medical school.

Florida International wouldn't necessarily provide the health care, he said, but would serve as a "catalyst" to offer opportunity for the medical school's partners such as Jackson Health System, Baptist Health South Florida and Mount Sinai Medical Center.

"We perceive ourselves as a conduit to provide business opportunities and medical care to the community," he said, so the airport-based medical center feels like a fit.

The proposed project is in the conceptual stages now and could change during negotiations with the county aviation department, and once in-depth planning takes off.

But envisioned now are five high-tech outpatient centers: primary care, women's health and wellness, imaging and diagnostics, sports medicine and rehabilitation, and ambulatory surgery.

Setting up shop at the airport has two overarching strategic advantages, Dr. Valverde said.

First, "there is going to be massive transportation to that area of the city," he said, as the Miami Intermodal Center rising adjacent to the airport is to have a Tri-Rail and Metrorail connection as well as a people mover link to the airport itself.

"That is a strategic location for massive connectivity for South Florida," he said, bringing a customer-service component to a community infamous for a lack of connective public

transportation. “There's great quality of medical care in Miami. So we're just trying to centralize it.”

The other element of the anticipated one-two punch: a medical tourism draw.

Folks already travel to Miami for health care, Dr. Valverde said.

But now, that involves flying in, renting a car, driving to a hotel and driving to a doctor's office or hospital.

“The concept here is much more customer-service oriented,” he said.

Patients could land and take the people mover to the university's Medical City, and could also stay at the planned Airport City hotel.

“We're trying to transform the way medical care is provided to the Latin American and international market,” Dr. Valverde said, adding that “the Medical City concept is that once people travel through here they begin to identify Miami as a medical destination.”

And the medical center should provide just what the county aviation department is looking for, he added — income.

“This is a recession-proof business. It's a significant source of revenue.”

Facing \$500 million in added debt service and operations costs beginning in 2015, aviation officials have been brainstorming what they call out-of-the-box ways to generate non-aeronautical revenue.

The purpose of what the department calls its public-private partnership investment program “is to maximize revenue from properties that are dormant, in other words, whether it's empty buildings or land, to convert that land to a revenue-producing asset using private-sector dollars to do so,” said Miguel Southwell, deputy director of business retention and development.

The to-be-negotiated deal for the parcels at the airport's entrance could bring rent payments and revenue sharing, he said.

He noted also that the proposed project could change during negotiations.

“The airport has a vision of what it wants,” Mr. Southwell said.

The request for proposals suggested two new hotels, a pet spa and a service plaza.

But the proposed Airport City project should serve all parties well, said Odebrecht Project Executive Dean F. Radeloff.

It's envisioned now as including not only the Medical City, but also an energy center to provide round-the-clock energy supply to the airport; a revamp of the existing airport hotel; a new 400-room Pullman Hotel complete with conference space; a "central station" of retail, a lounge for cruise passengers and a MIA Mover transit stop; and a 1,900-space garage with a "green roof" featuring park-like amenities.

The price now is estimated at about \$665 million, with the medical city accounting for about \$240 million.

The final product, true prices and a timeline should become clearer during negotiations and a "step-by-step development process," Mr. Radeloff said, but the idea now is for Airport City to be up and running in 2014.

"There could be elements that change," he said, "but we won't know that until we sit down and negotiate and go through the appropriate feasibility."