

News Clip

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Subject: **Tourism leaders laud Airport City cruise lounge plan as opportunity**

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Tourism leaders laud Airport City cruise lounge plan as opportunity

BY RISA POLANSKY

Though it's long been an industry goal to direct cruise passengers to local attractions before and after voyages, tourism leaders don't see a proposal to offer a cruisers' lounge at Miami International Airport as a potential hostage situation.

Rather, they're thrilled at the prospect of added airport amenities that would keep visitors comfortable and entertained – and potentially entice them back later.

"Yes, we would love the tourist who comes on a cruise to leave the cruise ship and come to Miami Beach... but what we'd really like to do is to use the airport to motivate people to come back and stay here," said Elsie Sterling Howard, chair of the Miami Beach Visitor and Convention Authority.

What some see as a potential contributor: Airport City, a concept construction giant Odebrecht is pitching to airport officials in response to a call for a developer to transform four parcels at the airport's entrance.

Airport City is far from final. Aviation and Odebrecht officials are to begin negotiations next week, and the concept could change over the coming months.

But for now, it calls for a \$665 million complex tailored to both travelers and residents, including a Florida International University medical compound of outpatient treatment centers; 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 idea is to bring in money



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Elsie Sterling Howard

and breathe life into underused airport land.

Airport improvements are always welcome, Ms. Howard said.

"The more comfortable and happier we make the traveler, the more likely they are to come back here," she said. "It just augments their experience."

Rolando Aedo, senior vice president of marketing and tourism for the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, said the same.

"We see it as an opportunity."

He acknowledged the long-time push to capture cruisers and to encourage travel agents and passengers to think of Miami not as a "homeport" but as a destination.

But the proposed Airport City and its cruise lounge concept could be an opening to do that, he said. The idea would be "to use this as a venue to showcase

to those cruisers" what Miami has to offer, perhaps through brochures, displays and the like.

Ms. Howard agreed.

"It's not for that trip that we're trying to promote to people," she said. "It's the next trip."

There are two opportunities with passengers who fly through Miami International, Ms. Howard said: to engage those whose layover doesn't allow time to leave the airport, and to entice those who have the time to come out and play.

"That's really the differential," she said. "We want people to come to Miami and stay here, and I think we have to be realistic about what the traveler needs."

It's important to offer opportunity "so people who have time want to leave the airport," she said. But "several hours does not a visit make."

Often, once someone has a plane ticket, there's not much to do but try to entice that traveler back another time, Ms. Howard said.

So "once someone's on their way home, we want them to be as comfortable as possible."

And, Mr. Aedo said, a visitor's airport experience could help dictate their next trip – meaning something like an Airport City complete with cruisers' lounge could serve as an attractor.

"I see this as an extension of the airport's commitment to customer service," he said. "Customer service is going to be a key hallmark in deciding which airports to use and which ports to cruise out of."

He anticipates the bureau will be at the table during airport land development talks to discuss "how we can communicate the full breadth of what Miami has to offer."