

# The Miami Times

## Liberty Square rehab given to Related Urban

County commissioners unanimously voted for the developer group

Carolyn Guniss | 7/13/2016, 2 p.m.



Pictured from left, Mayor Carlos Gimenez, Kareem Brantley, Jorge Perez and Albert Milo celebrate the county commission's decision to appoint Related Urban Development Group as the developer for the Liberty Square Rising Project. PHOTO BY CAROLYN GUNISS

County commissioners last Wednesday unanimously selected developer Related Urban Development Group to demolish and develop Liberty Square Rising, but not before a spirited discussion that resulted in several amendments to the agreement.

"It is a historic day for the community, for both communities because I think it is time for that neighborhood to change, and changes for the better," said Jorge Perez, founder of The Related Group, parent of Related Urban. "We provide not just housing but economic opportunity. It is good for the county, because you can't have areas where you have so much of the haves and the have nots ... the discrepancy is what makes Miami one of the poorest cities... the difference between the very rich and the very poor and this is going to shorten that gap."

Liberty Square Rising, which was announced February 2015, is a plan to raze and rebuild the Liberty Square public housing project and build housing at Lincoln Gardens in Brownsville. It is the county's largest undertaking of a public housing revamp, valued at \$307 million. Liberty Square is bound by Northwest 62nd and Northwest 67th streets and Northwest 15th and Northwest 12th avenues. Lincoln Gardens is located at 4701 NW 24th Ct., Miami. The developments will be a mix of residential, retail and commercial with public housing, rentals and homes for sale. Liberty Square, the larger of the two developments, is known as the Pork 'n Beans. Built in the late 1930s, it is the first public housing project for Black people in the Southern United States.

Audrey Edmonson, the commissioner who oversees District 3 where Liberty Square and Lincoln Gardens sit, made an impassioned speech about how she was left out of the process even though she had initiated the talks about redeveloping the neighborhood.

She said she didn't like the way Related Urban treated her community, bringing in "third party" people to deal with them. She made specific reference to former Miami Commissioner Michelle Spence Jones, who has been seen in Liberty Square in recent weeks. Jones has said she is there to offer the women training and mentorship. Edmonson said Spence Jones was there because she was paid. Jones had been living in Atlanta until recently.

"I don't like that you have brought people from other states to my community," Edmonson said referring to Related Urban.

Before the vote, Edmonson introduced several amendments to the agreement the developer and the county had already reached.

Added is the imposition of liquidated damages; small business development monitoring; expansion of the newly announced Liberty City Prosperity Initiative to include Brownsville; submitting quarterly reports to the commission and to Edmonson; working with the city and the county to get a shuttle service; and for the developer to seek Black contractors for the project.

"What's next is that we hold Related's feet to the fire that they deliver everything that they promised," said Mayor Carlos Gimenez after the vote.

The road to winning the contract to redevelop the housing project has been a long one.

Related Urban won the most votes from a selection committee for a best and final offer in February. Before that, Atlantic Pacific originally received the highest scores from the selection committee, a group that scored six developers. During the first vote, Sara Smith from Liberty Square gave higher than normal scores to Atlantic Pacific. Then the mayor called for a best and final offer between the top two vote-getters, Atlantic Pacific and Related Urban. On the second go-around, Related Urban picked up enough votes to be the front-runner. County staff asked for and received approval to negotiate with Related Urban. Based on the result of the negotiations, the mayor recommended Related Urban as the developer for the project.

The negotiations hammered out some of the details of Liberty Square Rising, which are now a part of a master development agreement. The county and Related Urban will enter into a 75-year ground lease, since the county owns the land at Liberty Square and Lincoln Gardens. The county is expected to spend \$46 million and will receive a financial benefit from Related Urban of \$48 million.

Ground could break at the end of the year. The first phase of development will be Liberty Square. Empty units at Liberty Square will be rehabbed and current residents will move from their apartments into the rehab apartments. Once their apartments are renovated, residents can move back to the new units.

Related Urban will build a total of 1,572 homes. Between Liberty Square and Lincoln Gardens there will be 757 public housing units, an additional 12 units over what was negotiated in the best and final offer in February. The new homes will be larger than the current. A one-bedroom unit will be 650 square feet; current units are 578 square feet. A five-bedroom apartment will be 1,500 square feet, bigger than the 1,225 square feet it is currently. Each apartment will come equipped with energy-star appliances, including washer and dryer.

Related Urban has selected Kareem T. Brantley as its equity partner, project manager and co-developer. He will get 5 percent of the developer's fee.

As part of the agreement, 50 percent of construction and post construction jobs have to go to minorities; a 20,000-30,000-square-foot community center with free WiFi must be built at Liberty Square and a 5000-square-foot one at Lincoln Gardens; \$1 million renovation of Bannerman Park; and a 40,000-square-foot grocery store. There will be onsite college degree programs through Florida Memorial University, South Florida's only Historically Black College or University.