

FEATURED

DORSEY'S COMEBACK

City begins \$1.3 million remake of historic site

Janiah Adams Jan 31, 2018



City leaders, relatives of D.A. Dorsey and Overtown residents lift dirt in ceremony for launch of the library renovation project.

Jonathan Martell

Nearly 13 years after Miami named the D.A. Dorsey Memorial Library a historic site, leaders are putting shovels to the ground to restore the dilapidated building.

During that time the city faced public outcry from the Overtown community and even a lawsuit filed in 2016 for the city's neglect of the building and funding from Miami city commissioners and the Omni CRA.

The library rests in Overtown, which is in Commission Chairman Keon Hardemon's district. However, that area is within the boundaries of the Omni CRA, which is overseen by Commissioner Ken Russell.



On Jan. 17, the city held a ceremonial groundbreaking to hail the \$1.3 million project, which could take about six months to complete. Miami Mayor Francis Suarez attended, along with Russell, Hardemon, Overtown residents attended, as well as relatives of D.A. Dorsey, the Black man whose name adorns the structure.

The Miami Omni Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) and Russell, the District 2 commissioner, put in most of the funds, with the county paying the remaining balance.

Jason Walker, executive director of the Omni CRA said they have received pressure from the community to get this done.

“There’s been community outrage for years, but this was before I got here and before Commissioner Russell,” Walker said. “There was a lot of pressure on the city officials for decades, I would say, to do something about the building and the deteriorating conditions.”

Walker said it’s part of the CRA’s mission to do historic preservation.

“It’s a historic building, so that’s part of our mission to do historic preservation, and we found the money in our budget to cover it, and now it’s up to the community and the city to figure out the use once it’s open,” he said.

Russell said the core of the structure will be a library, but it will also be a community resource. He said how it comes active with the community “remains to be seen.”

“It’s a debt long owed to the community,” Russell said. “There has not been enough investment in that area. To let this area deteriorate is pure negligence. That’s how it was when I came into office two years ago.”

The city licensed E.L.C.I. Construction Group Inc. to oversee the restoration of the building.

George Villadiego, the site’s supervisor, said the construction team is rebuilding the structure the way it was in the 1940s.

“We will give it a new roof, new windows,” Villadiego said.

The only parts of the structures they will keep are the walls and the arc over the door, he said.

“It will be a special door, more heavy-duty,” he said. “Inside will be completely new.”

Villadiego said he did not know how long it would take to complete. He estimated about five months.

Enid Pinkney, the founding president and CEO of the Historic Hampton House, said she’s glad the restoration is taking place.

“I used to go there as a kid and I’m 86 years old,” Pinkney said.

Pinkney was born and raised in Miami and used the library to read and study. Through her childhood, she’s watched people come in and out of it as it stood in its pristine condition. Now, through her adulthood, she’s watched the walls become painted with graffiti, the roof cave in and the overall condition of the building decay as the years went along.

"I learned a lot of things there," Pinkney said. "They had books. I continued my reading there and used the facility. A lot of people went, it was a staple for the community."

The library is named after Dana Albert "D.A." Dorsey who was the first Black millionaire in Miami. He donated the land just 15 days before he died, and it became the second library open to local Blacks. It opened in 1941.

Elliot Jones, a Miami activist, filed a lawsuit against the city of Miami in 2016 for neglect of the structure. His attorney, Faudlin Pierre, said they are both excited that something is finally getting done about it.

"It probably hasn't caught attention to the vast majority of the community, and how important this was, but I think when it's all said and done, it will go down as one of the hallmark monuments of Black Miami," Pierre said. "Miami, in general, doesn't appreciate history as it should because we're always renovating, remodeling something new and flashy and something new comes along. But I think if we start to appreciate the historic treasures that we have, then we can become one of those fine cities."

Jones sits on the board of the Historic Hampton House with Pinkney and said he has heard good things from other women in the community about the new project.

"A lot of the older people that I've talked to on the Lemon City Community Trust, which oversees some of the Black cemeteries, they're very proud that this is happening because a lot of these organizations are headed by older women who have held this fight for many years," Jones said.

Jones said he hopes this will shine light on other structures that highlight Black Miami.

"People who live in that community are happy because it was an eyesore," he said. "It can give some sense of pride. [Dorsey] was a phenomenal man, and he took great lengths to help his people and his community and our small part here can help to do the same."

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