

When Castro dies, the party's on

The city of Miami plans to respond to Fidel Castro's death -- whenever that may be -- with a celebration at the Orange Bowl.

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One day, very possibly one day soon, ailing Cuban leader Fidel Castro will die -- and a nascent committee sponsored by the city of Miami wants to be ready.

So it's planning a party.

The event, still in the very early planning stage, would be held in Little Havana's Orange Bowl stadium -- and might include commemorative T-shirts, a catchy slogan and bands that will make your hips shake.

The stadium is a bittersweet landmark in South Florida's Cuban-American experience. After the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco, more than 35,000 exiles gathered there to hear President John F. Kennedy promise a free Cuba.

Decades later, the bowl served as a camp for Mariel refugees.

City Commissioner Tomás Regalado, a Cuban American, came up with the idea of using the venue for an event timed to Castro's demise.

"He represents everything bad that has happened to the people of Cuba for 48 years," Regalado said of Castro. "There is something to celebrate, regardless of what happens next. . . . We get rid of the guy."

Despite that statement, Regalado, along with other organizers, prefers to think of it as a celebration of the end of communism -- whether or not that is triggered by Castro's death -- as opposed to a large-scale tap-dancing session on someone's grave. Regalado compares it to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The city created the citizens committee that is planning the event earlier this month. When the still-unnamed panel met for the first time last week, Castro's death was nowhere to be found on the meeting agenda. The meeting was officially -- and ambiguously -- advertised under the title, "Committee Meeting for an Event at the Orange Bowl."

Its purpose, according to the city's website: "Discuss an event at the Orange Bowl in case expected events occur in Cuba."

EVENT'S THEME

At that meeting, committee member and former state Rep. Luis Morse stressed the need for an uplifting, forward-looking theme for the party -- one not preoccupied with a human being's passing. The committee discussed including such a theme on T-shirts that would be made by private vendors for the event.

Plenty of details have to be sorted out: What musicians would perform? The city hopes entertainers will donate their services. How long will the event last? Hours? Days? And how much will it cost?

Performance stages require time to be set up, and a security guard company has already told Miami officials it requires 24 hours' notice before being able to work the stadium. A gap of a day or two between Castro's death and the Orange Bowl event is possible.

And before printing themed T-shirts, Miami has to actually decide what the theme *is*. It's still working on that one.

"That has to be done with a lot of sensitivity," Morse said. "Somebody needs to be a very good wordsmith."

The stadium plan, though in its infancy, already has drawn criticism from callers on Spanish-language radio who complain Miami is dictating to Cuban Americans where they should experience one of the most intensely dramatic moments of their lives.

Regalado stresses that folks will still be free to spend their time on Calle Ocho -- the cultural heart of Little Havana and a location viewed more fondly by many exiles -- or anywhere else for that matter.

"This is not a mandatory site," he said of the Orange Bowl. "Just a place for people to gather."

Ramón Saúl Sánchez, leader of the Miami-based Democracy Movement organization, worries about how a party would be perceived by those outside the exile community. He stressed that Castro's death will prompt a whole range of emotions among Cubans -- not just joy.

CRITIC OF PARTY

"The notion of a big party, I think, should be removed from all this," Sánchez said. "Although everybody will be very happy that the dictator cannot continue to oppress us himself, I think everybody is still very sad because there are still prisons full of prisoners, many people executed, and families divided."

Rather than partying, Sánchez would rather see the post-Castro focus be on improving conditions for those still on the island. If an Orange Bowl event must happen, Sánchez would like to see it in the form of a "protest concert" heavy on positive messages.

Regalado, meanwhile, envisions the stadium -- as opposed to Versailles restaurant or some other tried-and-true landmark -- becoming the operations hub for the hordes of media expected to descend upon Miami: images of a thumping, pulsating, euphoric Orange Bowl beamed to televisions across the globe.

"It's helping a community celebrate," he said. "We can't stop the celebrations. We just want to help."