

# No party: Castro event downsized

**After a public backlash, a city-organized Orange Bowl event to mark Fidel Castro's death will not include festive elements that were initially discussed.**

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Responding to an international media blitz and outrage from some members of the Cuban-American community, Miami city leaders Tuesday vowed to tone down a proposed large-scale, city-organized public event in the Orange Bowl when Fidel Castro dies.

And despite preliminary plans that included the possibility of musical acts and themed T-shirts, the city stressed that it had never -- ever -- intended to respond to a man's death by holding a party.

The goal was to provide a place for an informal, friendly get-together, officials said. "Our past experience has shown us that the local community has strong emotions tied to any significant issues relating to Fidel Castro," the city's Office of Communications wrote in an official statement on the subject. "The Orange Bowl has been designated by the county, as well as the city of Miami, as a possible site for people and community leaders to gather peacefully, if necessary.

"As such, no city tax dollars will be spent on this event other than to address public safety needs."

Miami Mayor Manny Diaz said the Orange Bowl has always been part of government plans to accommodate overflow crowds in the event of Castro's death. But Diaz said he was not consulted before a Jan. 23 meeting of a citizen committee tapped to plan the event.

At that meeting, there was talk of setting up performance stages, printing an uplifting theme on T-shirts and creating a media village for the slew of reporters expected to show up.

The possibility of securing Cuban-born Salsa musician Willy Chirino came up. "I'm not into parties," Diaz said in vowing that none of the controversial plans would come to fruition. "We're not going to hire Chirino."

With the exception of musicians who might donate their services, the underlying assumption during those planning committee discussions was always that the city would foot the bill. Because so many details surrounding the event were undetermined -- that meeting was the committee's first -- the city never calculated a price tag.

"This is obviously not a planned activity that we budgeted for," city public facilities director Lori Billberry said at that meeting.

But the very idea that Miami would mark the death of Castro with a celebratory event prompted ample criticism -- and coverage by the 24-hour cable news networks and international press following an article in Monday's Miami Herald.

"Miami Plans Castro Death Party in Orange Bowl," proclaimed Fox News Channel on Monday.

"When Castro dies, Miami will party like it's 1959," chimed in CNN.

Plenty of Miami Herald readers weren't pleased. They let the paper know via letters and e-mail.

"I am a Cuban American who was uprooted because of this man," wrote Rachel Lauzurique of Coral Gables. "I despise everything that he stands for and he should be tried for crimes against humanity by a court of his peers. However, I find it very offensive and disgusting to plan a party to celebrate anyone's death, even his."

The city now says musicians and T-shirts won't happen. Miami will provide the Orange Bowl as a gathering space. Nothing more.

Miami Commissioner Tomás Regalado, who spearheaded the creation of the committee, said journalists from Argentina, Chile and Colombia had contacted him about the controversy. "It's a major, major story for Latin America," Regalado said.

He said he believed Castro's death is worth celebrating, but he denied that the Orange Bowl event was dreamed up with the idea of a party *per se*.

"One guy on the citizen's committee said T-shirts," Regalado said, adding that the city had the final say. The official City Commission resolution creating the committee did not mention things such as music, Regalado said. That commission resolution passed quickly without much debate on Jan. 11, but Commissioner Joe Sanchez, whose district includes the Orange Bowl and surrounding Little Havana neighborhood, said the event idea drifted far from what he ever had in mind.

"We need to clarify a lot of things. Never at any time did this commission vote for a carnival," Sanchez said.

Planning committee member and former state Rep. Luis Morse said commissioners hadn't provided much in the way of direction. The panel will hold its second-ever meeting in the fifth-floor press box of the Orange Bowl at 5.30 p.m. today.

While supportive of musical performances and their potential to lure attendees, Morse said if the city wants a subdued Orange Bowl gathering, so be it.

"They are the ones who decide," he said.