



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Ethics complaint about Beckham soccer complex in Miami spurs question: Who owns team?

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Soccer legend David Beckham celebrates his election victory to bring

By Charles Trainor Jr.

An ethics complaint about the lobbying behind David Beckham's effort to build a soccer stadium complex on a municipal golf course has stalled lease negotiations for two months of an already-tight timeline and raised questions about the people behind Miami's new Major League Soccer team.

Mainly: Who exactly is backing [Club Internacional de Fútbol de Miami](#)?

When they registered with the city, team officials and their lobbyists failed to include some legally required disclosures, including the ownership of the company that would hold the lease on the stadium property. A letter provided to the Herald Saturday, after this article was published online, states that corporation, Miami Freedom Park LLC, is wholly owned by Jorge Mas, MasTec chairman and an investor in Inter Miami. That corporation is separate from the investor group that will operate the soccer team.

On Nov. 6, 60 percent of [voters gave the city of Miami their blessing to negotiate a 99-year lease](#) with Beckham and his partners to build ["Miami Freedom Park," a soccer stadium and commercial complex on Melreese golf course](#). On Thursday, the city attorney [for the second time cautioned commissioners not to speak with team officials](#) because of a complaint that came to light the day after the referendum vote and is being investigated by the Miami-Dade ethics commission.

The rub is an issue with the forms filed for Miami Freedom Park LLC, according to an internal email obtained by the Herald. City Attorney Victoria Mendez sent the email to Miami's mayor and commissioners Thursday.

"The Commission on Ethics (COE) still feels the soccer team's lobbyist registration forms need to be filled out a certain way," Mendez wrote. "There is some disagreement on that. Please continue to refrain from speaking to soccer representatives until this is squared away with the COE."

A spokeswoman for the ethics commission declined to comment.

The problem appears to be team officials did not disclose who is invested in the company that would hold the lease of Melreese — a requirement under Miami's lobbying laws that helps the public better understand who is coming before the city to wield influence, seek approvals and make deals.

Attorney David Winker, who filed the ethics complaint, outlined the issue in a Dec. 5 letter to ethics commissioners. It states that the “lack of transparency” coincides with the perception that the city is acting more like a cheerleader for the deal than a negotiator protecting taxpayers’ interests.

“These are clear rules regarding what information those engaged in lobbying must disclose and how they must undertake their lobbying activities,” Winker wrote. “These rules are designed to ensure that the activities of lobbyists — the principals they represent, who the owners of those principals are, what they want, and who they are targeting — are fully and meaningfully disclosed.”

Mas did not respond to multiple requests for comment on Friday. On Saturday, his representatives refuted the suggestion they are not being transparent, pointing to emails sent to the city on Thursday that state Mas is the sole owner of Miami Freedom Park LLC, which incorporated in Delaware. The city requested a correction to an address on that disclosure, which was provided Friday, according to the emails.

Miguel De Grandy, an attorney representing Mas and several lobbyists on the ethics issue, said his clients were being treated unfairly because Miami does not enforce its own disclosure requirements for people who register as lobbyists.

“Why are we being singled out?” De Grandy said.



David Beckham and Miami MLS expansion ownership partner Jorge Mas address a crowd of over 100 people ahead of a public hearing on the Major League Soccer stadium proposal in July 2018.

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The question of the team's ownership is complicated by Major League Soccer's rules. Each team is operated by investors who own a share of the league. The league technically owns all teams and player contracts and grants investment groups the right to operate clubs.

Mas's 100 percent ownership of the company set up to lease public land does not shed light on the investment group backing Inter Miami — a group that owns a separate business entity, Miami Beckham United LLC. Miami Beckham United, which holds the rights to operate an MLS team in Miami, is owned by five investors.

Richard Perez, an attorney for Miami Beckham United, said the owners of that company are [Sprint chairman Marcelo Claure](#), who has a 37.5 percent stake in the team; Jorge Mas and his brother Jose, who have another 37.5 percent; [Masayoshi Son](#), SoftBank CEO, who owns 15 percent; and Beckham who owns 10 percent.

Perez said the interests are held through intermediary companies and trusts.

“It is important that in a civil society, these lobbying rules not be ignored or treated as a technicality or a ‘non-issue,’” Winker wrote. “Meaningful enforcement of these lobbying rules is critical in order to ensure public confidence in government decision-making.”

Several team representatives and lobbyists registered last year to represent Miami Beckham United, LLC. But many did not register to represent the new company, Miami Freedom Park LLC, until after the commission voted to place the item on the ballot. The discrepancy led Winker to file his complaint, though it appears the bigger sticking point for ethics officials is the lack of ownership disclosure.

Among the lobbyists who registered for either of the corporations associated with Beckham’s effort to launch a Miami MLS team: C.J. Gimenez, son of county Mayor Carlos Gimenez; Barbara Hardemon, aunt of Miami Commissioner Keon Hardemon; and Steven Marin, political consultant.



Rendering of proposed David Beckham soccer stadium and commercial complex at Melreese Golf Course.

Mas has insisted he's working under a tight timeline set by the league that requires him to have building permits for the stadium by November of this year. Even beyond any ethics hurdles, Mas will need to negotiate terms of a 99-year lease with the city and convince four of five city commissioners to vote for the lease. Commissioner Wilfredo "Willy" Gort, whose district includes Melreese, voted against holding the referendum. Commissioner Manolo Reyes has vehemently opposed the whole plan and process, pledging that he will remain a firm no.

Possibly down two votes already, Inter Miami officials might consider their political options going into an election year in Miami. Of the three commissioners whose terms end with this year's November elections, Gort is term-limited, leaving his seat wide open, and Reyes is up for re-election. Commissioner Ken Russell, who was [the swing vote to place the stadium question on the ballot](#), is also running to hold onto his seat.

Russell and the other commissioners who voted in favor of the referendum, Joe Carollo and Keon Hardemon, have all said they expect the team to give more benefits to the public, including more money and park space for the city, before they'll vote for a lease.

"They've got to come back with a lot more money," Carollo told the Herald.

Russell, [the new chairman of the commission](#), said he can only support a deal that adheres to the city's "no-net-loss" policy on park land, meaning the team must make up for the green space at Melreese that would be paved over by the proposed stadium, retail, office and hotel space. And according to Russell and administrators, road medians will not count — it's got to be true park space that even a child can easily recognize.

"It's got to pass the toddler test," Russell said.





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