

Amid protests in Cuba, DeSantis announces \$25 million proposal to revamp Freedom Tower

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Gov. Ron DeSantis announced a \$25 million proposal for the 2022 legislative session to make structural repairs to the Freedom Tower during a press conference at the Miami historic tower on Nov. 15, 2021. BY WPLG VIA THE FLORIDA CHANNEL

Behind a podium boasting “Patria y vida” at the Freedom Tower in downtown Miami on Monday morning, Gov. Ron DeSantis announced a \$25 million request to make structural repairs to the historic tower.

The budget request will be part of DeSantis’ multi-billion dollar proposal for the 2022 legislative session, and is subject to approval by state lawmakers.

The nearly century-old Freedom Tower, which was built in 1925 as the headquarters for the Miami News, served as the central location for processing and documenting Cuban refugees fleeing to Miami during the Cold War. The building now serves as offices and museum space for Miami Dade College.

“We should all, as free people, want to see the day when we have a free Cuba,” DeSantis said during the announcement, which coincided with planned opposition protests on the island.

The cost for repairs to the Freedom Tower was estimated by engineers, Miami Dade College President Madeline Pumariega said, and will take two or three years to complete. The money, if approved by lawmakers, would pay for structural repairs like waterproofing and shoring of the parking garage, the restoration of historic architecture, a new security system and other additions to make the building more accessible to people with physical disabilities.

For decades, the building has been a central gathering area for rallies and protests in Miami, including those in solidarity with Cubans protesting on the island.

“The Freedom Tower will be 100 years old in 2025,” Pumariega told the Miami Herald. “We want to make sure we celebrate it and that it’s open to the public, not full of scaffolding and unable to show the history of Cuba here.”

FOCUS ON FEDERAL POLICY

In his announcement, DeSantis also slammed the Biden administration for not doing more in Cuba, and underscored that “the state of Florida stands with everybody who is taking to the streets, everybody who is protesting.”

“We have an opportunity as a country to make common cause with people who are fighting for freedom on the island of Cuba,” he said. “So far, the response has been pathetic. ... We need the Biden administration to step up to the plate and get to the right side here. We will be watching.”

The announcement came on the same day as a possible opposition march in Cuba that the government has said it will not allow because it claims it is part of a U.S. interventionist plan. Authorities Sunday aggressively tried to quash plans, conducting widespread police interrogations, detentions and so-called acts of repudiation.

In attendance Monday were several elected officials, including U.S. Rep. Carlos Gimenez, newly elected Hialeah Mayor Esteban “Steve” Bovo, Doral Mayor Juan Carlos Bermudez and Miami Commissioner Joe Carollo, as well as Pumariega and the school’s Board of Trustees.

Gimenez told the Herald that letters to the Biden administration urging action in Cuba had gone unanswered and that he hoped Biden would uphold and expand on the economic sanctions put into place when Donald Trump was president.

He said there is a lot of legislation he “would like to do” but without a majority of Republicans in Congress, he isn’t confident there would be the votes.

Earlier this month, 40 Democrats voted against a resolution supporting Cubans who protested against their government and condemning the regime’s violent response, which was sponsored by Florida Democrat U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz.

“We have never seen a time like this in the last 60 years,” Gimenez said. “We need to grab hold of this and bring the change that the people of Cuba demand.”

ELECTION SEASON HAS BEGUN

DeSantis, who recently announced his run for reelection, has spent time making inroads with Cuban-American voters since he first ran in 2018.

In 2018, DeSantis won an estimated 66% of the Cuban-American vote in Miami-Dade County, according to one analysis. So far he does not face a serious Republican primary candidate. Congressman and former Gov. Charlie Crist, Agriculture Commissioner Nicole “Nikki Fried,” Miami state Sen. Annette Taddeo and at least eight lesser known candidates are competing in the Democratic primary to face DeSantis in November 2022.

DeSantis has campaigned in South Florida with Cuban-exile organizations like the Inspire America Foundation and Brigade 2506, which represents veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Lt. Gov. Jeanette Núñez, is Cuban American.

In February, Bay of Pigs veterans were among the first to be vaccinated against COVID-19 as part of DeSantis’ push to vaccinate homebound seniors. In July, he said he wanted Florida companies to provide internet access to residents in Cuba. That month, he was a featured guest at a GOP town hall hosted by Fox News’ prime-time host Sean Hannity, which was broadcast live from Versailles Restaurant in Miami’s Little Havana against a backdrop of Cuban flags.

Despite speculation of a presidential run and millions raised into his political committee at fundraisers across the country, DeSantis told reporters in September that he’s not considering a run in 2024.

El Nuevo Herald staff writer Nora Gámez Torres contributed to this report.

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