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SUN LIFE STADIUM

Dolphins' big guns stay silent in stadium battle

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Dolphins' big guns stay silent in stadium battle

■ Six weeks before the planned referendum on the Miami Dolphins' stadium renovation, the franchise's superstar co-owners and elite alumni are keeping a low profile.

BY ADAM H. BEASLEY
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In the rush of optimism after Steve Ross bought the Dolphins, he rounded up a glitzy cast of minority owners — including Marc Anthony, Emilio Estefan, the Williams sisters and Fergie — as a way to gin up a buzz around the franchise.

But at a critical moment for the organization, when every last vote is needed to pass a referendum for improving Sun Life Stadium with tax dollars, those luminaries have been noticeably out of the picture.

So too are the icons of the Dolphins' glorious past, the Don Shulas, Dan Marino and Larry Cson-

kas who made Miami's football team a national brand and an object of civic pride.

With six weeks remaining before a possible vote on the plan, the Dolphins have no immediate plans to trot out their megawatt assets.

"We wanted to be respectful [in] utilizing star power to get our message across," said Dolphins CEO Mike Dee, the team's point man on the project. "This is, at the end of the day, really about economics."

There's another factor, of course. If you make rolling-in-dough superstars the face of your pitch to raise hotel taxes, Joe Citi-

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zen just might respond: "You're loaded. Pay for the stadium improvements yourselves!"

Dee left some room for a star turn in pushing a proposal that polls show is so far widely panned by Miami-Dade voters, who could have the final say on the idea.

But as the Dolphins gear up for a costly referendum campaign, there's no sign they'll have their A-list owners pounding the pavement.

"I don't think you'll see Marc Anthony singing a jingle, 'Come vote on May 14,'" Dee joked.

It remains to be seen what kind of appetite these celebrities would have for mixing it up with Norman Braman and other entrenched opponents, even if asked.

Just last month, Estefan told The Miami Herald he planned to sit out the public stadium fight.

"I told Steve I don't want to campaign... I would never ask for money personally," Estefan said in February. "As a citizen, I can tell you, improving the stadium would be a great thing."

And yet, Dee said Wednesday that Estefan "has been very helpful on a number of fronts," when it comes to the stadium plan.

"He's very well respected and he's got good perspective on what the community will accept and what the community won't," Dee said. "He's very well received in business and political circles. He's been a great resource to us."

Serena Williams, a Palm Beach County resident, is the No. 1 women's tennis player in the world. She's also been a part-owner of the Dolphins since 2009. Over the past two weeks, she's competed in Key Biscayne's Sony Open, speaking with local reporters almost every other day. However, the Dolphins didn't push her to use that forum to advance their cause.

She spoke in favor of the renovations Thursday night, but only when prompted by a member of the South Florida media.

"We definitely want the Super Bowl in Miami," Williams said. "We know we have to make some changes in the stadium in order to have it back."

Such endorsements — done in a coordinated, and better publicized way — can sway votes, said Tadd Schwartz, a Miami publicist.

But the most effective resource they have — the godfather of football in South Florida — is Don Shula, said Sissy DeMaria, who runs a local public relations firm. Shula is the winningest coach in NFL history and is widely beloved, nearly two decades after his retirement. His support would be "enormously" helpful to Miami's cause, DeMaria said.

Shula told The Miami Herald earlier this month that he hadn't been asked to be part of Miami's bid to host Super Bowl L, and he hasn't yet appeared in any ads on behalf of the stadium plan, which he backs. Even in retirement, Shula still has a role — albeit largely symbolic — as the franchise's vice chairman.

The Dolphins have tapped Marino and fellow Hall of Famer Bob Griese — along with star defensive end Jason Taylor — to co-chair the effort to bring to South Florida the 50th Super Bowl, which the team says is unattainable without nearly

\$400 million in stadium fixes. Marino wasn't made available for comment this week.

"We're not at a campaign stage yet, necessarily," Dee said. "We're still hammering out our deal, hammering out the legislative process. So perhaps when we get to the referendum [being] confirmed for a date and an announcement, we'll get to a full-fledged campaign, I'm sure you'll see some of those faces around. We thought it was premature to do that now."

This will help on the margins, Schwartz said. But for the Dolphins to really move public opinion, voters need to hear directly from Ross, who owns more than 90 percent of the team.

"Outside of people who follow sports, nobody knew who Mike Dee was before this," Schwartz said. "They're making this pitch for millions and millions of dollars. If I'm going to throw my support behind the Dolphins, I want to hear from the man himself."

Miami Herald staff writers Douglas Hanks and Susan Miller Degnan contributed to this report.