

Miami-Dade county Charter changes

Miami-Dade voters, hungry for change, adopt term limits for commissioners

A public still hungry for reform adopted all 10 Miami-Dade charter changes on the ballot, including term limits for commissioners.

By Charles Rabin

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The 14th time was the charm for County Hall reformers who forced term limits on Miami-Dade commissioners — some of whom have clung onto their district seats for almost two decades.

Voters who flooded the polls Tuesday also said they wanted to make it tougher for developers to build on the county's far western edge, and to make it easier for citizens to carve out new Miami-Dade cities.

With 100 percent of precincts reporting, all 10 of the county's proposed charter changes were adopted — reflecting a continued rejection of the status quo that swept two elected leaders from office through a recall last year.

“I voted ‘yes’ on term limits,” said Maria Lleonart, a 51-year-old Miami housewife. “These people get too comfortable in there and we’ve got to get them out.”

For the first time in five decades, voters were offered the opportunity to set term limits for commissioners without any strings attached. Commissioners would now be allowed only two four-year terms, excluding terms of service prior to 2012.

Commissioner Lynda Bell, who co-sponsored the term-limit item with Commissioner Rebeca Sosa, called it “the most substantive change we’ve had in the recent history of charter amendments.”

Bell, one of the newest commissioners on the dais, said voters made it clear when she campaigned two years ago that “they wanted term limits, and they wanted eight years.”

Thirteen times previously, the term-limit proposal was attached to pay increases or other benefits the public couldn't stomach. The same question attached to a pay raise failed just last January.

Commissioners changed their approach this time, however, after voters — with the help of auto tycoon Norman Braman — overwhelmingly chose last year to recall County Mayor Carlos Alvarez and long-time Commissioner Natacha Seijas from office. Braman had threatened to campaign for charter change this time if the term-limit question wasn't placed on the ballot all by itself.

The change won approval from flight attendant Aldo De Leonardis, who said commissioners who represent districts for more than a decade tend to “get a little bit too comfortable.”

Outside Trinity Cathedral Church in downtown Miami, voter Susan Cohn also said the choice was obvious. “Otherwise, it leads to corruption and abuse of power,” she said.

If there was a theme to Tuesday's charter votes, it was confusion. Though all the questions were getting the thumbs up, they were voted on by far fewer people than the number who cast votes for the presidential candidates.

Most people interviewed said they couldn't differentiate between the 10 county items and the state's 11 lengthy constitutional amendments, which were printed without word limits.

Some voters just gave up. Others had little interest in voting for anything but the president.

“I'm hoping once I read the ballot I will remember. It's really difficult to make these decisions,” Eric Hood, 46, said before voting as he waited outside the Trinity Cathedral Church on North Bayshore Drive. “I'm here to vote for president and I'll read the rest. If it doesn't make sense to me, I'll leave it blank.”

Miami attorney Jorge Luis Lopez, who sat on a charter-review committee in 2008, said he expected tens of thousands of worn out voters to “to skip or write no” on the county-charter questions, though he wasn't willing to place all the blame on the legislators and county commissioners who created the overwhelming ballot.

“At some point someone has to tell voters to stop saying it's so tough, and to take some responsibility,” Lopez said.

Despite the confusion, voters were on the way to passing an item that makes it easier to incorporate new cities, by requiring the signatures of only 20 percent of residents in the area, and forcing commissioners to vote on the issue. In the past, signatures of 25 percent of the residents were required, and commissioners often shelved the proposals instead of voting on them.

Voters also were supporting requiring a “super majority” vote of two-thirds of commissioners to approve any development outside the county's Urban Development Boundary, the imaginary line on the county's western edge. Though commissioners have followed that practice in the past, it was not embedded in the charter.

“I think we need a two-thirds vote of the commissioners for checks and balances,” said Lleonart, the Miami housewife.

Also in the positive column, with all the precincts reporting:

- A planned expansion and renovation of Key Biscayne’s popular Sony Open tournament facilities at the Crandon Park Tennis Center. The county would have to issue \$50 million in bonds that would be paid off with tournament revenue. The question required a two-thirds vote to pass.

“My first thought is, ‘Wow!’ ” said Adam Barrett, director and senior vice president of IMG, which runs the tournament. “Any time you get over 66 percent of the vote, it’s a surprise.”

- Giving the county’s Commission on Ethics & Public Trust the authority to enforce the Citizens’ Bill of Rights.

- Technical changes to the charter, extending the time period for an election to be held from 45 to 90 days if an official leaves office, and giving the commission chairperson the authority over procurement decisions if the mayor leaves office.

A pair of nonbinding questions were also passing muster with voters. One was to increase the property tax rate to set up a Pets’ Trust, designed to keep 20,000 cats and dogs from being euthanized each year. Another would prohibit the county from hiring companies that “actively” do business with designated state sponsors of terrorism, such as Cuba.

The myriad decisions took their toll on haggard voters — like Norlyn Rubio, of Miami Lakes — who stood in long lines and had to read through a book-like ballot.

“I voted on so many things I don’t even know,” he said. “The ballot was very long and very complicated. I think they should keep it simple for the people who are not very familiar.”

Miami Herald staff writers Martha Brannigan, Howard Cohen, Lidia Dinkova, Nadege Green, Theo Karantsalis, and Jenny Staletovich contributed to this report.