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Miami-Dade commissioners to consider charter questions, including term limits, electing county's top cop

By Patricia Mazzei
pmazzei@MiamiHerald.com

Should Miami-Dade voters elect the county's top cop and elections supervisor?

That question is at the heart of a new batch of proposed charter amendments that county commissioners will consider during a special meeting Thursday.

They may also take back their decision from earlier this year to ask voters if they want to impose two, four-year term limits for commissioners.

The board agreed 8-5 in March to place the term-limits amendment on the Nov. 6 ballot, quelling criticism from activists including Norman Braman that commissioners were reluctant to back county reform.

But Commissioner Dennis Moss, who voted against the amendment in March, has asked his colleagues to reconsider that decision on Thursday.

Instead, Moss, who resoundingly defeated a Braman-backed opponent in last week's election, wants the board to discuss an amendment setting term limits while also prohibiting outside employment and raising commissioners' salaries to about \$92,000, a number set by state formula.

"I believe that in the past, that we've kind of been responding to intimidation in reference to the issue of term limits," he said. "If you're going to have term limits, you have to have a reasonable salary tied to it. ... That just makes logical sense."

As of Wednesday afternoon, Moss had garnered support from six commissioners — one short of the required seven — to revisit the item.

Voters rejected a similar amendment in January that would have tied term limits to paying commissioners the \$92,000-a-year salary. The defeat marked the 13th time in five decades that the electorate has said "no" to a proposed salary hike.

After that, Commissioners Lynda Bell and Rebeca Sosa moved to get term limits on the ballot without any salary or employment conditions.

A separate charter question, put forth by a charter review task force, proposes paying commissioners a salary equal to the county's median income, beginning in 2016. The 2010 median income was around \$46,000.

Fourteen other questions backed by the task force are also on Thursday's agenda, including a contentious proposal to create new cities with only minimal commission input. Three commissioners have proposed alternatives to the task force's plan. One would restore the commission's power; another would pave the way for the county to incorporate all neighborhoods that are not already in cities.

Commissioners created the task force in March, appointing 20 members to draft charter proposals. The group has faced criticism for cramming its meetings into a short time period — with all 20 task force members rarely in attendance — and for too strongly favoring pro-cityhood activists. Last month, commissioners delayed a schedule vote on the charter questions, saying they had not had enough time to digest the proposals.

Separately on Thursday, Commission Chairman Joe Martinez has proposed two charter amendments to turn the appointed police director and elections supervisor into elected positions, as they are in every other county in the state. Miami-Dade, governed by a strong mayor with a home-rule charter that gives it unique powers, has kept those positions as appointed department heads.

Martinez, a former police officer who lost his county mayoral bid against incumbent Carlos Gimenez last week, said he doesn't intend to run for sheriff.

"No, I really don't," he said. But he left the door slightly ajar: "There's a possibility I'll run for president in four years," he quipped.

Martinez said Thursday's meeting is intended to cover any and all ideas for ballot questions.

"Because this is the only chance we have, we're throwing everything out there," he said. "It's everything on charter review — and everything else."

Commissioner Esteban Bovo, for example, is pushing a non-binding ballot question asking voters if the county should prohibit hiring of companies that "actively" do business "with state sponsors of terrorism."

The question is similar to a Florida law approved earlier this year making it illegal for the state and local governments to hire companies with business ties to Cuba and Syria. A Miami federal judge ruled the law unconstitutional; the state has appealed that ruling.

Bovo, who chastised the county attorney for suggesting early on that the state law would not pass constitutional muster, said he wants to gauge public support for the policy.

"To have people give their opinion or at least voice their opinion via the vote, I think it will actually help the county, long-term, set a direction," he said.

For her part, Commissioner Barbara Jordan is sponsoring a straw ballot question asking voters if they would support the issuance of capital-improvement bonds to benefit the Jackson public health system "and the expansion of primary care clinics."

Jordan could not be reached for comment. Carlos Migoya, Jackson's president and CEO, said the hospital needs big-ticket upgrades, but did not explicitly endorse Jordan's proposal.

"It's always reassuring when elected leaders acknowledge the progress Jackson has made

in the last year and want to take steps toward solving some of the longer-term problems," he said. "It is obvious that Jackson has huge capital needs after so many years of deferred maintenance — the question is what is the right vehicle and when is the right time to address those needs."

Miami Herald staff writers John Dorschner and Charles Rabin contributed to this report.

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