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16 ways to leave the county

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After a whirlwind of meetings this summer, Miami-Dade County's charter review task force has delivered 16 recommendations to county commissioners to put before the voters in November.

Some proposals, like removing the individual-notarization requirement from voter petitions and requiring term limits for commissioners, are on target.

Others proposals, like a pay raise for commissioners, now earning a 1950s-era salary of $6,000 a year, to the county's median income, about $45,000 a year, are intriguing.

Yet others, like a last-minute change to exempt certain cities — Miami, Miami Beach, North Miami, North Miami Beach, Pinecrest, South Miami and Sunny Isles Beach — from a new measure that would put some teeth into the county's laws on transparency-in-government, make a mockery of the charter's Citizens' Bill of Rights.

This latest charter-review process seems to have been hijacked by pro-municipality proponents without adequate review of the consequences to good governance and transparency. The most explosive proposal — a fast-as-lightning incorporation measure — would leave taxpayers in any new proposed city without a clue as to any minimum population size requirement or the cost of new government services. Worse yet, the incorporation proposal, as drafted, could wreck the county's bond rating and potentially leave county taxpayers in a lurch, without safeguards to cover payments pledged on projects from sewer systems to performing arts centers.

When commissioners consider this latest task force report on Tuesday, they should pass key reforms that voters have been clamoring for, like term limits (and a ban on commissioners working for any entity that does business with the county) and scrap the incorporation measure.

No doubt the task force majority's zeal for incorporation was a reaction to the years of county stalling and outright hostility toward frustrated county residents wanting to start their own cities in hopes of getting better services. But the proposal, led by current or former mayors of various new cities, including Pinecrest and Doral, leaves too many questions unanswered for voters. For instance:

• Why isn't the fiscal note (the cost of providing services to a new city) required before commissioners, and, particularly, voters decide on any incorporation?

• Why drop the number of signatures required to present an incorporation proposal to the county commission to 10 percent of voters of a potential new city? That sets up an uneven

playing field for people wanting to be annexed into existing cities, because that requirement remains at 25 percent of voters signing annexation petitions.

• What size city? As it stands under the incorporation proposal there's no minimum population requirement to create a new city.

Under the proposed rules, the commission "may only reject the petition upon the determination that the proposed incorporation will not have contiguous boundaries or will leave an unincorporated enclave area within its boundaries." That essentially turns the county commission into a rubber stamp for new cities without considering commissioners' duty to protect county taxpayers. Right now, new cities like Miami Gardens have agreements with the county to pay their share for such services as fire, libraries and other projects, but the new rules have no such common-sense requirements.

The task force also tried to set some rules for who's in charge if a mayor is recalled or can't finish his term. It taps the clerk of courts to serve as interim mayor if the county commission chair or vice chair are unable (or unwilling, if they want to run for that office) to step in. Wrong call. That sets up all sorts of conflicts for the clerk of courts, who also is being asked by this task force to step in to decide county contract bid waivers if the mayor has a conflict. Whoa. The clerk already acts as a hearing examiner on bid protests. He can't do both.

Another knuckle-headed proposal would strip the mayor of his veto power on budget items if it's part of an impasse in collective bargaining. That's not in keeping with the "strong mayor" government that voters approved.

Commissioners should step back from this precipice of shortsighted recommendations and focus on what most voters have been rallying for: Imposing a limit of eight years (two consecutive terms) on commissioners, easing the petition requirements and requiring that all county residents, whether they live within city boundaries or not, have the right to take their complaints on rule-breaking to the ethics commission.

Those are the building blocks of good governance. Let's start there.

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Charter proposal not fair to unincorporated areas

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After attending several charter task force meetings, I was disappointed to see how few appointees actually showed up. Those that did had radically one-sided views. They never really accepted any input from the audience and almost all of them were residents of cities who didn't have the foggiest idea of what life was like in the unincorporated areas of Miami-Dade County.

The decisions this charter task force rendered were completely without real study, research or analysis. One can see it in the very rushed product they delivered with no time for the public to absorb. They were showing the public that they supposedly created something bold and fresh, but it's hard to escape the feeling they were just pushing their own agendas.

One example: incorporation. Residents who attended the meetings said they did not want their voting rights diluted by removing the 25 percent requirement for signatures and watering it down to 10 percent to start incorporation movements. The task force's mission, it seems, was to weaken the protections afforded residents of unincorporated areas. Of the 20 members of the task force, 18 were from cities. They really don't have the right to dictate what the rules should be for unincorporated area governments because unincoporated residents can't dictate the rules for city government.

Unincoporated Miami-Dade — UMSA, in government shorthand — has the lowest property tax rate compared to almost all cities. UMSA residents also pay less in car insurance, homeowner's insurance, cell phones, land lines, FPL bills, etc., because they don't have fees/surcharges added to their bills.

UMSA's business owners don't have to deal with obtaining two occupational licenses (local business tax). The UMSA business owner just gets one from the county, thus not having to pass on higher costs to the residents in the area. UMSA's homeowners don't have to go to two building departments to get plans approved; they just have to go to the county. But a city's residents/business owners first have to get the county to sign off (per a 2008 law) and then get the final permits from the city's building department. Twice the work, time and money.

Almost all the residents of Miami-Dade County use the resources of the county — police, fire, Water & Sewer, Solid Waste and the public library system. So what advantage does incorporation bring to residents? Self-determination. That means you get a new group of politicians determining what things are appropriate for you and your property.

You must then deal with issues like the great pick-up-truck-in-front-of-your-house

dilemma. To park or not to park? The very necessary and rushed need for bike paths throughout all crowded streets, the side-walking of every green swale area, the motto of a newly minted city, perhaps with a name like the City of Tot Lots or the City of the Most Singles!

Then your politicians will also determine what salaries they want to get paid. The mayor, council members, clerks, code enforcement, unions, city attorneys and more personnel will be needed for that City of Gold (for them). They will start with a token amount and then gradually vote themselves generous pensions, expense accounts, travel accounts, etc. Don't forget the lobbyists — they will be on the payroll, too.

UMSA does not have to deal with much of that stuff. No duplication of services. The county answers to UMSA and vice-versa.

The task force failed to look at any of these issues from UMSA's perspective. They also failed to look at annexation properly. Once a city has its borders, it should not have the right to expand and gobble up money from UMSA. The city folks wanted a city, then they need to stay within their parameters and survive on their own finances.

The proposal by the Charter Task Force is not good for cities, either. Residents of cities have on various occasions said No to annexing other areas, but their city councils have not always listened.

After reading the ballot language on this incorporation issue and the other ballot items, voters will have to decide. But without the background information, it is impossible to make an informed choice. After intense study, my own decision on incorporation is definitely a big No!

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