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Charter reform? It can only get done with new Miami-Dade commissioners

BY NORMAN BRAMAN

I had hoped that the Miami-Dade County Commission, including all commissioners now running for reelection, would have heeded the reform message sent by 88 percent of the voters who recalled Mayor Carlos Alvarez and Commissioner Natacha Seijas. Unfortunately, post-recall actions show otherwise.

For years we have needed meaningful charter and governmental reform. To that end, after the recall I suggested a "Covenant With The People Of Miami-Dade County For Reform of County Government" that included:

- A limit of two terms (four years each) from the date of initial election coupled with a real ban on outside employment.
- A 10-year ban on lobbying activities after serving on the County Commission.
- A reasonable salary.
- A requirement to hold elections for mayor and commissioners concurrently with national and state elections.
- Allowing charter-reform committees to place proposals directly on the ballot.
- Other reforms that could be enacted by commission ordinance, such as downsizing the county government, capping pensions, streamlining the top-heavy bureaucracy, prohibiting lobbyists from lobbying the county on behalf of private clients while simultaneously being paid by the county to lobby for it.
- Repealing the ordinance the commission passed that made it much more difficult and expensive for the people to petition their government or to recall officials.

Instead, the majority of commissioners placed on the 2010 ballot a two-term limit starting in 2012, coupled with a \$92,000 salary and a poorly worded ban on outside employment. Commissioners are loathe to end their tenures even though many have served for more than two terms. The voters had no problem rejecting this proposal, clearly reiterating their desire for making commissioners ineligible for reelection after serving eight years.

I concluded, therefore, that meaningful charter and governmental reform would not be accomplished unless current commissioners were replaced. Those up for reelection next month already have served seven (Audrey Edmonson), eight (Barbara Jordan), 14 (Bruno Barreiro) and 19 (Dennis Moss) years, during which time we have seen many scandals,

gross mismanagement and corruption but no “meaningful charter reform” affecting the commission. (The strong-mayor charter revision and elimination of the manager position prevailed.)

Among other things, they have been driven around in police-chauffeured government-owned cars while pocketing \$600 monthly car allowances; have the ability to dole out money at their own discretion from \$800,000 “slush funds;” were able to provide a new \$634 million baseball stadium to the rich, privately owned Marlins; and have maintained final approval and control over awarding all county contracts. I could go on, but you get the picture.

Mayor Carlos Gimenez has worked hard to effect operational changes in the 18 months he has been in office, but he needs new thinking on the County Commission to bring about further reforms. Miami Gardens Mayor Shirley Gibson, District 1; Liberty City’s Belafonte TACOLCY Center CEO Alison Austin, District 3; state Rep. Luis Garcia, District 5; and Miami-Dade Farm Bureau President Alice Pena, District 9, are committed to helping the mayor make meaningful charter and other governmental reforms. This prospect is what propels me to spend my money to change Miami-Dade now, while lobbyists, unions, lawyers, and other special interests, as usual, are contributing big bucks to all of the incumbents from whom they seek and obtain county largess.

My purpose is to provide these four districts with real campaign choices and to see that these campaigns are played on a financially more level playing field — which the incumbents have decried. All four districts retain the right to elect “their own representatives.” That right cannot be taken away. Similarly, I have a right to hope and expect that new commissioners will be smarter, more public-minded, more fiscally responsible and more accountable to the public.

It is time we stopped complaining and change Miami-Dade now.

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