

Multiple county maladies will linger after charter review

A team exploring county ills is to report next week, having proposed a government facelift but leaving multiple maladies festering.

By Miami-Dade charter, the next probe isn't due for five years – though only inertia or refusal to weigh major upgrades prevents the county commission from ordering a new look far sooner.

We've been detailing key recommendations of this county charter task force for several weeks. More are due this week.

Some of its proposals are welcome, none awful. The commission should put all – even those we reject – on the ballot unaltered to give citizens the final say, as is intended in charter reviews.

Next, the charter – sort of a county constitution – should get much deeper study very soon, far from commission influence. Commissioners this time appointed 13 of the 20-member team, chilling any dive into pressing issues that could best serve the public.

Issues unlikely to make the final cut, or even studies, of the current task force include:

■ Why don't we elect county com-



Michael Lewis

missioners at large, to limit parochialism and improve the quality of representation?

■ Isn't 13 commissioners too unwieldy?

■ Why is the county still handling intensely local issues that in a metropolis should be the purview of cities and towns? That would free the county to focus on big-picture needs.

■ Knowing that many elected leaders don't happen to be top-level administrators, should we split our present set-up with a single person handling the political function of mayor and the administrative job of manager?

■ Why are commissioners still influencing contracts that should be decided by professional administrators who will not be seeking campaign contributions?

■ Shouldn't we limit campaign spending as the ante for electing county officials spirals out of control?

■ Should we end individual commissioner control of hundreds of thousands of dollars of at-will spending of office funds that have become political jackpots?

■ Should we limit recall of officials to specified reasons to prevent willy-nilly blackmail threats over voting decisions?

■ Should the charter specify a format for naming those who review it and the conditions under which they operate to

prevent commissioners from stacking the deck to exclude issues they don't want touched?

The current task force, which received far too little time to deliberate broadly, nonetheless has attacked important questions. The biggest:

■ Its call for commission term limits would be a major – if not helpful – change.

Florida legislative term limits left no long-standing expertise in either chamber and set legislators from day one struggling for leadership posts rather than leadership in the state.

Still, popular support favors term limits to rid the county of long-term commissioners who, barring structural change, can win the votes of their narrow constituent groups forever.

But countywide election from individual districts could get far better results, retaining local representation but forcing broader thinking – and yielding broader thinkers.

■ The task force plan to build into the charter a petition process to incorporate localities is welcome and deserves voter approval, though a format to have towns and cities cover every inch of the county, as framers of the charter intended, would be even better.

■ A move to increase commission salaries from the present \$6,000 to the median county income is overdue –

though far too small a raise, since every other Florida county uses a state sliding scale that in Miami-Dade would yield \$92,097, more than double today's median.

No decent commissioner should receive only \$6,000, or even \$46,000, for a full-time job overseeing multi-billion-dollar spending. \$100,000 would be none too much.

If your commissioner isn't worth that, elect someone else – though few topnotch challengers could live on \$6,000 a year.

■ We favor a call to cement in the charter present protections of the urban development boundary. That boundary is not meant to hinder developers but to protect residents' future.

Once the charter task force finishes work, commissioners should forward the output to voters via the ballot unaltered. In the past, they've derailed even minor upgrades at will.

Voters, in turn, should carefully weigh proposals. Not everything the review task force suggests is right – but it's only right that voters get their say on every bit of it.

Commissioners who follow the past malpractice of keeping from the public the output of their handpicked charter team on grounds that the commission knows best deserve the recall threats that they cower from today.

Charter review team unveils list of citizen-oriented changes

BY LOU ORTIZ

Miami-Dade County's Charter Review Task Force says residents are calling for reform and the group is trying to do just that with a number of recommendations – from strengthening the citizens bill of rights to contentious issues such as incorporation.

Task force recommendations were to face a 6 p.m. hearing Wednesday in commission chambers at County Hall, when, besides receiving resident input, the group was to debate other potential amendments, including governance at Jackson Memorial Hospital and mayoral conflict of interest and procurement.

Under the Home Rule Charter, which was adopted in 1957 and allows voters to determine their form of government, the county commission must appoint a task force to review the charter every five years to decide whether it needs changes or revisions. If the commission agrees with task force recommendations, charter amendments go before voters as ballot questions for approval.

The commission formed the current 20-member task force in March, and it has until July 17 to present amendment recommendations to the commission.

A recommendation on incorporation would deny the commission from being "the sole authority to create new municipalities," according to task force docu-

ments. "The citizens wanting to incorporate should have a process in the charter that ultimately allows the voters of those areas the ability to vote it up or down."

The amendment would allow a resident petition process for incorporation that would require the signatures of 10% of voters in the area within 120 days from the petition's inception. Once the Clerk of Courts certified the signatures, the commission would have to complete a budget analysis in 60 days and then call an election within 120 days.

Another amendment tied to incorporation would allow a newly created municipality to renegotiate franchise fees and utility taxes when they expire.

"In order to make annexation a desirable and viable option for cities," the task force documents say, "there needs to be a least enough revenues generated for the cities to cover the costs of providing services to the annexed areas. The same applies to incorporated cities."

In the area of land development, the task force recommended that the ordinance requiring a two-thirds commission vote to move the Urban Development Boundary be put permanently in the charter.

The line was initially implied in 1975 in the county's first Comprehensive Development Master Plan and explicitly noted in the land use map in 1983. The line defines where development is al-

lowed and where it cannot go. The aim is to protect agricultural land, the Everglades and wetlands, among other things.

Development is prohibited roughly west of Southwest 172nd Avenue and into Southwest 157th Avenue. The development border extends to Eureka Drive in Cutler Ridge south to Southwest 137th Avenue in Homestead.

Past commission rumblings have said the boundary should not be etched in stone. And, the task force documents say the commission "could by ordinance change that [two-thirds] requirement."

Another task force recommendation would put teeth into enforcement of the Citizens Bill of Rights, which address a host of issues from access to information to prompt personal notice and reasons in connection with county or municipal decisions.

The county's Commission on Ethics and Public Trust, the watchdog of the rights, would be allowed to impose penalties, or residents could sue.

Other recommendations include:

■ A limit of two four-year terms per commissioner that would begin with the 2012 election. The commission has voted to place a similar ballot question before voters in November.

■ A salary increase for commissioners in 2016 tied to the median county income that would rise or fall based on that average.

■ A process to fill a mayoral or com-

mission vacancy.

■ A simpler petition process for recalls and referendums that would require signatures from only 4% of the electorate, eliminate the requirement for their notarization, and allow the petition language in Creole or Spanish, depending on the area.

■ An increase from one year to three in a bar on repealing or amending an ordinance enacted via petition.

■ A move to require the mayor to delegate policing authority and powers to the police director on the second Tuesday after election.

■ A shift of the intergovernmental affairs office from the commission to the mayor, whose duty is to carry out legislative policies.

"The past few years have been very difficult for the residents of Miami-Dade County," task force documents say. "They have been calling for reform. We must always strive to improve county government – to make it more responsive to the people we serve."

Different entities chose task force members. Each of the 13 county commissioners appointed one. The mayor made an appointment, along with each mayor of the county's four largest cities: Miami, Hialeah, Miami Gardens and Miami Beach. The Miami-Dade League of Cities appointed two.

The task force will hold its final public hearing June 26. It has thus far held five.

80 truckloads a day fill in Key Biscayne beaches

BY IVAN A. RODRIGUEZ

About 80 truckloads of sand

FILMING
IN MIAMI

These film permits were issued last week by the Miami-Dade County Mayor.