

Boater Safety and Bay Education Task Force Meeting

Date: July 10, 2025 - 9:00 AM

Office of Environmental Risk & Resilience

1. WELCOME AND ATTENDANCE

Mayor Daniella Levine Cava thanked members for their leadership and commitment to protecting both residents and Biscayne Bay. The Task Force was created out of tragic loss, inspired by the advocacy of the Fernandez family and the Lucy Fernandez Foundation, and aims to turn that pain into purpose. Members were reminded of the Bay's vital role in Miami-Dade's economy, environment, and community life, as well as the devastating consequences of unsafe boating. Bringing together diverse community voices, the Task Force is charged with developing actionable recommendations to improve safety, education, and responsible recreation. This work marks an important step toward building a safer future on the water and a stronger legacy for Biscayne Bay.

Andy and Melissa Fernandez welcomed Task Force members and shared similar sentiments as the Mayor. They expressed boating used to be predictable and safe and that a better boater is better for the industry. Melissa explained the newly passed HB289 Lucy's Law.

TASK FORCE MEMBER INTRODUCTION

COUNTY ATTORNEY'S OFFICE INTRODUCTION

2. ELECTION OF CHAIR

Nancy Jackson facilitated, Andy Fernandez elected Chair of the Task Force unanimously.

3. ETHICS TRAINING

Robert Thompson, Miami-Dade County Commission on Ethics

Key Ethics Rules:

- No *quid pro quo*: Decisions must never be influenced by favors or exchanges.
- Fundraising: Permitted only through charitable organizations, not for personal or political gain.
- Gift acceptance: Members must complete the required gift acceptance form before accepting any gift related to their role.
- Voting conflicts: If an issue may personally affect you, you are obligated to disclose it. Conflicts must be announced publicly in advance, and you should leave the room during the discussion or vote. A conflict disclosure form must also be filed.
- Lobbying: County staff are responsible for vetting lobbyists; members should not engage in lobbying on behalf of outside interests.

Governance Framework:

- Miami-Dade County operates under its Home Rule Charter, which establishes how the County is governed and how boards and task forces function.
- Local municipalities often have stronger rules than state law, so members should always be mindful of local requirements.

Resources and Support:

- For questions, members are encouraged to ask before acting- when in doubt, seek guidance.
- Contact the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust:
 - Phone: 305-579-2594 or Director's line 305-350-0613
 - Email: ethics@miamidade.gov (messages go directly to Director's inbox)

By following these guidelines, task force members help uphold the highest standards of integrity while shaping policies that protect and serve the community.

4. SUNSHINE TRAINING

CJ Wahl and Christian Fernandez-Andes, County Attorney's Office

Members of a Miami-Dade County task force, are guided by Florida's **Government-in-the-Sunshine Law** which ensures that the public has access to government decision-making. This means that the work of the task force must be carried out with openness, transparency, and accountability at all times.

Key Sunshine Requirements:

- Open to the public: All meetings must be publicly noticed and open for anyone to attend. Members cannot meet privately to discuss task force business outside of these official meetings.
- Full participation: Any discussions, deliberations, or decisions about the task force's work must take place in the open meeting – no side conversations, phone calls, emails, or texts between members.
- Public records: Materials related to the task force (including notes, emails, or text messages about task force business) are considered public records and may be requested by the public.
- Transparency in voting: All votes must be taken in public, with the results clearly recorded.
- Conflicts of interest: If you have a personal or financial interest in an item being discussed, you must announce the conflict publicly before discussion, file a disclosure form, and refrain from voting.

What This Means for You:

- Always conduct task force business only in official meetings.
- Avoid private conversations about task force matters with fellow members outside of the Sunshine meeting.
- Remember that your communications may become part of the public record.
- When in doubt about a conflict or procedure, ask for guidance from County staff or the Commission on Ethics and Public Trust.

By following these rules, the task force helps build trust with the community and ensures that its recommendations are developed fairly, openly, and in the best interest of the public.

5. REVIEW WORKPLAN

Meeting Schedule

- July - Kickoff
- September – Boater Education
 - Topics to cover: marine insurance, education requirements, hands-on training, partnerships with schools, Coast Guard auxiliary, and County/ City Marinas.

- Key discussion points:
- Explore insurance incentives for safe boaters
- Expand education through schools (MDPSD) and volunteer groups like the Coast Guard Auxiliary
- Address shortage of qualified instructors and emphasize hands-on, practical training.
- Review and update existing boater safety curricula (NASBLA-approved, FWC-developed)
- Consider requiring certification for renting slips, boat ramps, or other County services.
- Public awareness campaigns to target populations that don't currently receive training.
- Engage industry stakeholders (boating and insurance sectors) to strengthen safety standards.
- Identify challenges at the state level and determine local actions Miami-Dade can take.
- October – Law Enforcement
- November – Waterways Management

Other Themes and Logistics

- Potential to invite experts or industry leaders to present at future meetings.
- Opportunities to partner with community organizations like the Key Biscayne Foundation.
- Long-term deliverable could include recommending that the task force become permanent, meeting several times a year to advise the Board of County Commissioners (BCC).

Decision-Making and Reporting

- Task force decisions will be made by consensus and formal voting.
- Meeting minutes will be provided in advance to help prepare for discussion.
- Each pillar (e.g., Boater Education, Law Enforcement) will have two task force members assigned to lead its section of the final report.
- All materials and updates will be posted publicly on the task force website.

Report Development Process

- Drafting must occur within Sunshine meeting rules; drafts cannot be circulated among task force members privately.
- Members may review agenda packets and supplemental materials ahead of time.
- Work plan will be reviewed regularly, with October recommendations previewed at the September meeting, etc.

Next Steps

- Prepare for September's focus on Boater education by identifying experts, gathering curriculum examples, and exploring insurance/education partnerships.
- Continue refining the work plan and laying the groundwork for final recommendations.

REASONABLE OPPORTUNITY TO BE HEARD:

- **Jim O'Connor – Zero Drownings Miami-Dade** – Shared updates on the initiative to prevent childhood drowning by providing free swimming lessons and water safety education. The program, launched through a County Board resolution with support from partners including Miami-Dade Public Schools, the Children's Trust, the American Red

Cross, United Way, and the Miami Foundation, completed its first year reaching 2,300 kindergarten students across 63 schools. Students received two weeks of swim lessons and water safety presentations, while parents and caregivers completed a 15-minute online safety course available in three languages, including Haitian Creole. The goal is to expand to 10,000 students annually, supported by funding for transportation and access to municipal or private pools. With drowning as the leading cause of death for children ages 1-14, and a top cause of boating fatalities (75% involving victims not wearing life jackets), the program aims to save lives by building water safety awareness early. Their new website, ZeroDrowningMiamiDade.org, launches at the end of August and may serve as a resource alongside boating safety initiatives.

- **Doris Acosta – North Bay Village Commissioner** – As an avid paddleboarder, she expressed support for the Task Force’s work and concern about unsafe “party boat” activity, noting that teenagers are often more responsible on the water than many adults. She highlighted local investments in marine patrol- currently spending about \$70,000 per month with hopes of adding another officer in North Bay Village- and described her efforts to promote safety through a paddleboarding club that educates participants on boating rules, navigation markers, and visibility on the water. Ms. Acosta emphasized the value of youth programs, offered assistance as a city official, and expressed willingness to testify in Tallahassee. She thanked the Fernandez family and the Task Force for their leadership and example.
- **Melissa Fernandez – Lucy Fernandez Foundation** – As a parent who lost their daughter in a boating accident, Melissa shared the personal weight of their family’s grief and the urgent need for change in the boating industry and culture. She emphasized that most accidents are caused by adults making reckless decisions, not children, and criticized outdated laws and resistance within the industry. Melissa urged the Task Force to be honest about the barriers, be bold in recommending solutions, and mindful that their work will have a direct impact on saving lives.

For more information and updates on the Boater Safety and Biscayne Bay Education Task Force, visit: <https://www.miamidade.gov/global/economy/resilience/boater-safety-bay-education.page>