

MIAMI TODAY

Miami Today is an independent voice of the community, published weekly at 710 Brickell Avenue, Miami, Florida 33131. Telephone (305) 358-2663

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.

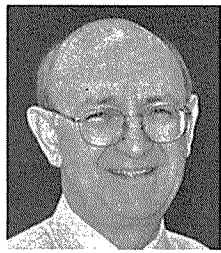
We've been detailing key recommendations of this county charter task force for several weeks. More are due this week.

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-



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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.

Support innovation, technology, venture capital to add jobs

Does Miami need jobs? Does Iranian President "I'm-A-Dinner-Jacket" need a frontal lobotomy? The answers are screamingly obvious.

While there is little we can do to force a medical procedure on the ferret-face puppet of the mad mullahs, we in South Florida can and must address and help solve our serious employment problem.

The ongoing recession – yes, it has not yet ended – has elevated South Florida's unemployment rate to levels to 9.6%, above the national average of over 8% – and double digits among blacks, Hispanics and teenagers. Since 2008, we have lost more jobs than any major city except Phoenix.

Yes, we desperately need jobs – and we need them now. But we also need to ask: What *kind* of jobs?

The basic structure of jobs in South Florida is roughly categorized as follows: *Crummy* – housekeepers, day laborers, janitors; *OK* – retail salesperson, receptionist, bookkeeper; *Pretty Good* – small business owner, insurance agent, IT specialist; *Professional* – teacher, attorney, accountant, physician; and *Big Time* – real estate developer, fund manager, professional athlete.

Within that structure, the three-legged stool of private sector employment in the county consists of international trade; tourism and hospitality; and retail services. The three things these have in common are low skills, low wages and high turnover.

What are we to do? It is common knowledge and highlighted in the Beacon Council's One Community, One Goal Report that while our current economic composition and labor structure will allow us to get by, it will not enable us to get *ahead*.

To be sure, our climate and geographical location are tremendous assets, but they are also liabilities. We are "type cast" by the rest of the country – make that the *world* – as a fun-in-the-sun destination with little else.

At the same time we will always attract lesser-skilled population segments – both foreign (due to family reunification, ethnic affinity groups) and domestically (weather and opportunities in the low end services industry).

To break out of this mold is difficult. One cannot transform an unskilled worker on the burrito assembly line at Taco Bell into a software programmer.

And despite the noblest efforts of public school Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, the foundation of workforce development – education – is poor. (As reported last month, 9,000 Florida third-graders flunked the FCAT reading exam).

On the other end of the spectrum, many of our best and brightest high school and college graduates leave, and they do not return, for they find far more challenging, stimulating and lucrative opportunities elsewhere, with a critical mass of like-minded people and networks.

Bleak though the situation appears, there are many bright rays shining through the clouds. South Florida is making progress in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship and helping to attract (and retain) the very knowledge-based industries that we need to improve our economic fortunes and create

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high-value jobs.

Our local economic development and business organizations, county mayor's office, companies such as IBM, universities, foundations (Knight in particular), and groups such as the South Florida Technology Alliance, MIT Enterprise Forum and Lean Start Up Machine are creating an ecosystem in Greater Miami that will yield huge dividends in years to come.

Our unique connection to Latin America and the Caribbean is an enormous asset in attracting innovative firms and harnessing venture capital. Florida International University's America's Venture Capital Conference, now in its third year, is a highly visible, high-impact catalyst that embodies the potential South Florida has as a knowledge-based enclave for innovation, with the good jobs and positive spillover effects our economy so sorely needs.

The Avalanche Consulting report commissioned by the Beacon Council for One Community, One Goal provides reasons for optimism, as well, citing education leaders engaged with the business community; a significant number of technical

degrees; a high concentration of regional medical workers; a strong expansion of higher education R&D; and highly rated university programs in science, technology and related fields.

Knowledge-based communities like the Research Triangle, Austin and the Bay Area did not pop up over night. Moreover, their prime focus was on economic and talent development, not jobs. The jobs in large numbers come later, only after a critical mass of enterprises in the same sector is established.

In the meantime, the most prudent course for our community is to pursue a dual strategy of improving the infrastructure, including education, workforce and transportation; and cultivating an ecosystem to support innovation, technology, venture capital and all knowledge-based industries.

This strategy is not only a winning one – it's the only one.



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MIAMI TODAY

miamitodaynews.com

FOUNDED JUNE 2, 1983

VOLUME XXX No. 4

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MIAMI TODAY (ISSN: 0889-2296) is published weekly for \$125 per year; airmail: to Europe \$190 per year, the Americas \$140 per year. Published by Today Enterprises Inc., 710 Brickell Avenue, Miami, Florida 33131-2810, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Miami, FL. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to MIAMI TODAY, 710 BRICKELL AVE, MIAMI, FL 33131-2810.

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