

## New Election, Old Problems

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor  
May 2019

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### May 14 vote could shake up the city -- and what then?



North Miami's May 14 election's bears down with a June 4 runoff likely, brace for murder as usual.

Five out of six seats are in play, with three, including the city clerk's, wide open, meaning incumbent-free. Four of those elections have at least three candidates, raising the chances of a runoff. Only the race between 20-year incumbent Scott Galvin and challenger Vanessa Pierre promises a clear result May 14.

A throw-the-bums-out sentiment runs high as the election lurches from the vegetarian to the carnivorous phase. Political attack dogs for hire, at \$5000 a month, are hunting for meat, with nasty mailings, robo calls, Creole radio shade throwing, and character assassination in full swing. Pray for thick skins and short memories.

The city is at a crossroads and events are moving quickly, with lots of money and interests at work, both in plain sight and under the radar. Money problems, aging infrastructure, rising water tables and saltwater intrusion, and the fate of city management are colliding with pet projects, community celebrations, trips, and community centers.

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Distrust is palpable. Many voters see a city that throws great parties, blows its budgets, hires too many unqualified friends and family, responds too slowly when sewage seeps into the living room or the street floods, lives with a culture of entitlement, and cannot distinguish needs from wants. Last May's 72% to 28% failure of the bungled \$120 million bond issue pounded that home like a jackhammer.

The twin Tyrannosaurs in the room are the city's money, or possible lack of it, and its 60-year-old water and sewer systems, now going through accelerating whack-a-mole repairs, which city manager Larry Spring is trying to conclusively address.

Still, it is plausible, if not likely, that incumbents of one sort or another will occupy all five council seats.

Suppose that Scott Galvin keeps northeast District 1 against Vanessa Pierre, and that Alix Desulme holds west District 4 against campaign operative Nacivre "Charlie" Charles (who missed the April 18 candidates' forum) and educator and businessman Claude Rivette.

Then say that city clerk Michael Etienne takes central District 3 against businesswoman and personnel board chair Mary Estime-Irvin, security company owner Wancito Francius, and ex-Councilman Jean Marcellus.

Then imagine that District 3 Councilman Philippe Bien-Aime gets elected mayor over challengers Mac-Kinley Lauriston, recent county commission chief of staff; former doctor Hector Medina; and tai chi instructor Danielle Beauvais.

That leaves southeast District 2 Carol Keys serving out her final two years.

Does that mean more of the same? Let's hope not.

That restlessness has spurred insurgent candidacies, such as the mayoral bid from Lauriston, a

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fiscal hawk and MPA who has gained strong traction on the east side; the brash, self-funded, candidacy from Etienne, who is feuding with Spring and wants to fire him; and from Rivette, who suggests the city is not listening to the cries of its residents for cleaner, safer, well-paved streets.

One could stipulate that each council member and departing Mayor Smith Joseph are individually honorable, hardworking, reasonably civil on the dais, and believe they are acting in the best interest of the city. The dais is far more collegial than in the early 2010s, when council members exchanged insults.

Spring, who took the job three years ago, answers questions with fluency and sophistication, and teams well with city attorney Jeff Cazeau, who retains the council's confidence even if Spring and deputy city manager Arthur Sorey III face increasing scrutiny.

Then, too, there the city's piggy bank ex machina: SoLeMia, the massive \$4 billion project developed by the Soffer and LeFrak real estate dynasties and brought into being under most of those sitting on the dais. The city almost considered shaking money out of that bank in late April, but drew back.

A quick look at the numbers may provide one reason. Visit the Citizens Transparency Portal, and the city's numbers look red and redder. Total April 2019 fiscal year-to-date revenues: \$58.7 million. Expenses: \$77.9 million. Deficit: \$19.2 million. April 2018 year-to-date deficit: \$12.5 million.

Check the reserves, and they seem to shift from one fund to another, prompting more questions than answers. Leave the portal, and it feels a bit like walking away from a three-card monte game.

A city manager could say that the city is waiting for money to come in; the trendline deceives, and citizens and even elected officials don't know how to read it; and that a larger picture tells the truer story. But the prism's bright part is well obscured.

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That brings us to the most reliable arbiter: the city's annual audited CAFR (Certificate of Achievement and Excellence in Financial Reporting) report submitted to the state every March 31 for the fiscal year ended September 30. The city has yet to release it at this writing. Last year it did so in late April.

Why can't the city release it before the May 14 election, or at least well before the June 4 runoff, so people can make a more informed decision at the ballot box and candidates can address the issues on surer footing?

Failing to release the CAFR could prompt some loaded questions:

- Is it crazy to declare a fiscal emergency and go under virtual state receivership, as ex-county manager Merrett Stierheim posited to the *BT* last fall after an admittedly cursory review of evidence from assistant budget director Terry Henley's firing?
- Henley's personnel board hearings, chaired by District 3 candidate Estime Irvin, were suddenly put on hold after January 24, following Sorey's lamentable performance and Henley's credible one. Word is that the hearings are to resume in September. So what's that about?
- Would a Chapter 9, Title 11 bankruptcy restructuring be worth considering?
- Must SoLeMia save the day to meet payroll?

That may be far-fetched, but on April 18, SoLeMia circulated plans for a community meeting April 22, the day before the April 23 council meeting, the last such meeting before the election. The developers wanted to exercise their option to buy 20 acres from the city for \$400,000 an acre, or \$8 million, and swap five acres closer to the Costco for a bit more, and bump the total figure up closer to \$13 million.

After word rippled among the city's nine homeowner associations, the whole thing stank of an

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11th-hour, bargain-basement stunt before a sterner or less-informed council took office. It was quickly yanked amid the outcry.

We wish the winners rest and renewal, for summer will be eventful as they figure out how to make the city meet payroll, replenish its reserves, and serve its businesses and residents.

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