

Posted on Sun, Oct. 24, 2010

Consider changing School Board set-up

Discontent over certain decisions by the Miami-Dade County Commission has caused some to question whether it is time to change the configuration of the commission's single-member districts and reduce the size to fewer than its current 13 members.

These concerns can be applied to the School Board as well. The County Commission and School Board are the two countywide governments in Miami-Dade. The School Board's configuration was changed to single-member districts in 1996 so that minorities would be represented on the large, countywide body.

As a Hispanic, perhaps I benefited from the change, having been elected to the School Board in 1998. However, recent trends are concerning. When I was first elected, three of the nine School Board members (Holmes Braddock, Betsy Kaplan and Mickey Krop) originally had served countywide. Their mind-set was large-scale, and they took pains to teach new board members how we represent the entire school district, not just the area from where we were elected. Sadly, this message has become diluted as the temptation to "look out for your district" grows on the board.

The potential, and sometimes current, problem with single-member districts is that the elected officials put their concerns, including their reelection and districts, above the well-being of the entire government entity. In the case of the school district, it also means that a superintendent can play to the interests of a certain area in order to get a vote from the board member who represents that area.

The School Board, like the County Commission, may benefit from a mix of single-member districts and positions elected countywide. Hispanics and African Americans are no longer strict minorities in this county, and a new system could guarantee their representation along with at-large board members. Further, we need to look at the efficiency of a nine-member School Board. Would seven members come up with decisions just as well? We would certainly save in administrative costs by making the board smaller. Given that we must look at government redistricting after this year's 2010 Census, this would be a good time to discuss these issues and possibilities.

Unfortunately, these changes would not guarantee more honest politicians. They would, however, allow for more decisions to be made with the entire scope of the county in mind. Some Broward County School Board members recently have gotten into trouble with the law, even though the county has a hybrid system of representation. This should not discourage an honest discussion about how to improve our School Board governance before single-member "fiefdoms" become more of a problem for us.

– MARTA PEREZ, member, Miami-Dade School Board, District 8, Miami



Posted on Fri, Oct. 29, 2010

Charter change or bust

Finally! A crackle of energy among the usually vegged-out voters of Miami-Dade. And all it took was a county budget that slapped most homesteaded property owners with a tax rate increase while giving county employees raises as the economy continues to flatline. That's enough to jolt even the most somnolent into wide-eyed wakefulness.

It's past time to harness that frustration and tackle the central challenge facing the county: charter reform. But who will lead the charge?

Businessman Norman Braman has already taken up a crusade to recall Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez. Mr. Braman was able to gather more than enough signatures to put the item on the ballot -- 90,000 -- in less than three weeks. That says a lot about voters' anger.

We disagreed with Mr. Alvarez and the commission majority on the budget. But we also disagree with Mr. Braman on the recall. We believe a recall should be for malfeasance in office, not for taking an unpopular stand. Mr. Braman, to his credit, also is calling for changes to the county's charter as his "ultimate goal." He re-iterated that position this week when announcing the 90,000 signatures.

A grassroots political action committee, Miami Voice, also is mounting a long-shot campaign to remove five county commissioners from office who voted for the budget. Both efforts stem from the same civic-minded impulse: to fix a county government that has become numb to its constituents' needs.

They're on to something but not exactly on the right course. The county's political structure is broken beyond repair. It needs an overhaul. The core issue -- revising the county charter to allow for more responsive representation -- won't get any real traction until community leaders take it on.

Among the needed reforms:

- Change the way commissioners are elected, from all single-member districts to a mix of single-member and at-large seats. Single-member districts help ensure minority participation in government. At-large seats help make sure that the interests of the county as a whole are looked after. Miami-Dade needs both.
- Reduce the number of commissioners. Thirteen is too many. Ten or fewer would be better.
- Term limits in exchange for a living wage. Polls have shown county residents want term limits. Commissioners want a big raise. Given their \$6,000 annual salary, that seems

reasonable. How about a trade? A fulltime commissioner's pay with *no* outside employment and term limits.

Mr. Braman is right to add at least one more point to this list: eliminating impediments to citizen initiatives. Current requirements, including a single signature per sheet of paper, are meant to quash grassroots efforts. That's plain wrong.

Miami-Dade is struggling to come back from the recession with a growing arts scene, a more vibrant downtown core and condos filling up. But a charter that doesn't change with the times can cripple attempts to continue to grow into a world-class community with good-paying jobs and efficient public services.

Voters are ready for charter change. Let's not squander this historic moment.