

The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Aug. 18, 2009

Bickering flares up at Doral Council meeting

By YUDY PINEIRO
ypineiro@MiamiHerald.com

The bickering between council members got so bad at last week's Doral City Council meeting that for the first time the council did not complete the agenda.

That forced Mayor Juan Carlos Bermudez to call a special meeting to deal with pressing issues that were not addressed: a health benefits contract for employees and plans for a police facility.

Although the political infighting has been taking place behind the scenes for about a year, council members did not worry until now about it disrupting city business.

"There seems to be a trend over the last several meetings where some almost have a plan to slow things down," Councilman Robert Van Name said. "Clearly, there are agendas. Is it political? I think some would say it is. But I don't know what the end game is."

It all began at the start of the meeting when Councilman Pete Cabrera and Councilwoman Sandra Ruiz -- in one voting camp -- pulled a majority of the 15 items from the consent agenda, which tend to be administrative issues that require little, if any, discussion.

Ruiz pointed out she had pulled the items because she did not have enough time to review the information, having received the full packet of documents on Saturday.

But the real debate ensued when Cabrera proposed the council spend \$2,500 to join the Doral Chamber of Commerce only moments after its president, Manny Sarmiento, stood up at the lectern chastising Bermudez for allegedly ignoring its presence at a networking function outside the city.

Some council members felt offended by the proposal because of Sarmiento's speech against the mayor, but Ruiz said she was supportive, adding "maybe there's a reason Mr. Sarmiento came at us like that."

Bermudez simply told the council it would get too messy if the city started endorsing organizations because there are more than a dozen within the boundaries. The Doral Business Council is the only organization endorsed by the city.

The tension did not end there.

During a discussion about placing cameras in two city parks to catch thieves, Bermudez questioned directors about why he didn't receive answers to his questions.

Herel File

Cabrera then jumped in saying he felt he was being picked on by city staff and accused them of being under strict orders not to talk to him at all.

"I can't even talk to a director," he said, likening the city to a dictatorship. "Between the manager and the clerk's office, you guys are obviously getting different treatment than I because I can't even talk to anybody."

Ruiz then asked the council to postpone a decision on the \$125,000 contract, the cost of the cameras and installation. When the motion died, Ruiz walked out of the chambers without voting on the contract.

Van Name then asked: "Does the law allow you to pick up, take your ball and go home? I don't find it proper that someone should get up after having discussion on an item."

Before the council attempted to cast a vote again, City Manager Yvonne Soler-McKinley asked Bermudez for permission to say something. She asked directors to stand up and respond to the following: "Have I ever told you not to speak to anybody on the council?"

Saying he wouldn't sit there and be ridiculed, Cabrera stood up and walked out. After the 3-0 vote approving the contract, Ruiz and Cabrera returned to the chambers and Cabrera talked for about three minutes, saying he felt city business was inappropriately handled.

As the clock approached the 11 p.m. cutoff time, Bermudez asked the council to only make a motion to continue the meeting if it could finish city business without fighting. Councilwoman Sandra Ruiz made a motion, but nobody seconded it.

"This will never happen again," Bermudez said when he had to stop the meeting with at least seven items remaining.

© 2009 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>