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NM Official settles ethics complaint

The Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust (COE) today approved a negotiated settlement with North Miami Councilwoman Marie Steril who admitted to an ethics charge that she exploited her official position by demanding that her mother receive upgrades denied to other buyers when she bought a home through a federally-funded program run by the city. The complaint (**C 14-19**) found that in 2009, Councilwoman Steril asked the manager of North Miami's Community Planning and Development department to find a small house for her mother through the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, intended for residents who need assistance in buying a home. While the home was being renovated in March of 2011, Steril insisted that the countertops and appliances in the kitchen be replaced with higher quality products and a change order was issued. Other homebuyers sought similar changes and offered to pay the difference, but were told they had to abide by the bid specifications for the home renovations. As part of the agreement, Steril will pay nearly \$5,000 in restitution to the City of North Miami. She also agreed to pay \$500 in investigative costs to the Ethics Commission and accept a Letter of Reprimand.

The Ethics Commission approved a Letter of Instruction to former Dade Medical College President Ernesto Perez, who last month settled a complaint (**C 14-24**) that he lobbied officials in Homestead and Coral Gables from 2011 to 2013 on behalf of his school without first registering as a lobbyist. The Letter notes that the Conflict of Interest and Code of Ethics Ordinance specifically includes the "principal" of a company who acts as a lobbyist when seeking to influence government action, and states that "ignorance of the law is no excuse." As part of the negotiated agreement, Perez pled No Contest to two counts of unregistered lobbying and paid a fine of \$1,500 plus costs of \$500.

A finding of No Probable Cause was found to a complaint (**C 14-32**) charging exploitation of official position by a Miami Gardens politician by a candidate for his seat. Francis David Rago accused City Councilman Erhabor Ighodaro of rescheduling an annual march, known as Operations Stand Against Violence It's Our Responsibility (SAVIOR) from December to August to benefit his campaign for reelection. But, the investigation found that a committee coordinating the event -- a joint effort of the city and Mt. Zion AME Church -- decided to hold the 6th annual march to coincide with the start of the school year and that the Councilman was not involved in setting the date. The complaint was dismissed.

A complaint (**C 14-34**) filed against the Mayor of Miami Springs for making disparaging remarks about citizens who spoke against a proposed aquatic center at a council meeting last month was found Not Legally Sufficient. The complainant alleged that Mayor Zavier Garcia used his position to besmirch the character of at least one of the speakers. However, the Ethics Commission determined that the mayor did not violate the Citizens' Bill of Rights or the Code of Ethics Ordinance, so the complaint was dismissed.

The COE learned that, with the cooperation of the offices of the Public Defender and State Attorney, speakers will address detainees in local juvenile detention facilities as part of Ethical Governance Day 2014. Approximately 200 people have registered to volunteer so far, but more are needed to put a community leader in every 12th grade

government and economics class in Miami-Dade Public Schools. The event will include a special award to a public school teacher who has done exceptional classroom work to encourage civic involvement by his or her students. Yesterday, the Board of County Commissioners approved a resolution declaring October 29th as Ethical Governance Day and encouraged participation. For more information, go to ethics.miamidade.gov or call 305-579-2594.

The Ethics Commission was created in 1996 as an independent agency with advisory and quasi-judicial powers. It is composed of five members, serving staggered terms of four years each. Through a program of education, outreach and enforcement, the Commission seeks to empower the community and bolster public trust.

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Attached photo of Ethics Commission. From left: Juan Carlos Bermudez; Judith Bernier; Nelson Bellido, Chair; Marcia Narine; and Judge Lawrence Schwartz, Vice Chair.