

Opa-locka is in meltdown. What's the state waiting for?

HIGHLIGHTS

Opa-locka's current leaders cannot fix what's wrong in that city

The Scott administration should adopt Gov. Chiles' oversight board solution

Locally, Centorino plans to step in to help rebuild community engagement

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Opa-locka commissioner facing corruption charges killed 0:36



1 of 2



Opa-locka Commissioner Terence Pinder willfully, deliberately propelled his car into a banyan tree at 70 miles per hour and died. It was a tragic suicide, as is the one that the city itself is carrying out, but in tortured slow motion.

That's why it's imperative that the state step in. The Scott administration, for some reason, has not done so, despite FBI investigations, requests from Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez and County Commissioner Barbara Jordan, the city's chronic inability to pay its bills, and, as of last week, Mr. Pinder's stunning death.

The city of Opa-locka, its governance — and more important — its residents for decades have been ill-served, exploited and victimized by an interminable series of elected officials and administrators. Not all of them, of course, have been deficient. But enough to leave the poor city continually crippled, unable to stride forward under progressive leadership.

Mr. Pinder seemed to have tried to present himself as an elected official who wanted to bring the city out from under the shadow of corruption and fiscal abuse. But he ended his life the day before he himself was to surrender to authorities to face bribery charges. It wasn't his first time in trouble. In 2006, he was arrested in a credit-card scandal; in 2007, he was charged in a lobbyist kickback scheme and gave up his commission seat before being reelected — preaching reform — in 2014.

The story of Opa-locka's misbegotten governmental past is well-documented. Only state intervention can change the city's narrative. At this point, it's way, way beyond most of the city's elected officials' ability — and, perhaps, even their willingness — to do so. This is the city, after all, in which Mayor Myra Taylor, upon learning that the city was millions of dollars in debt, insisted on killing the messenger, so to speak, by voting with a commission majority — Mr. Pinder the exception — to fire then-City Manager Steve Shiver, who last year rightly alerted the state.

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Rather than re-invent the wheel here, the Scott administration has a most effective model that it should emulate — immediately. In 1996, when the city of Miami's finances were going down the tubes, Gov. Lawton Chiles appointed a nonpartisan group of community leaders who also had deep financial know-how. They made up the Financial Oversight Board, working in concert with one mission: restoring the city's financial well-being.

One mission, but many effective tools: “We were empowered with the ability to make all the needed adjustments to ensure that we returned the city to financial health,” banker Adolfo Henriques, who was an Oversight Board member, told the Editorial Board on Monday. “We had

the ability to ensure the right fiscal processes, the right fiscal discipline was instilled and followed.”

It wasn't a literal state takeover. The board made tough recommendations, but the City Commission remained in charge. “And if the elected officials were not cooperating with us,” Mr. Henriques said, Gov. Chiles made it clear that, “He would take the appropriate action.”

On a local level, Joseph Centorino, executive director of the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust, says that his office wants to play a role in Opa-locka's recovery. “We can reach out to the community and be part of the solution,” he told the Editorial Board. “Law enforcement has to do what it has to do. But we can help build community leadership,” he said. “It's not an easy thing to do. People have to start trying. The community has lost faith and trust. We will make an effort to start that.”

Kudos to Mr. Centorino for making the resources of his office available. Although this won't produce a quick fix, both residents and city officials should make the most of this offer.

As for the state's sluggishness, Gov. Scott should recognize the severity of Opa-locka's slo-mo self-destruction and take appropriate action. We recommend following Gov. Chiles' successful model.

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