



HOMESTEAD - SOUTH DADE

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Investigators call on Homestead to dump its city car

BY MONIQUE O. MADAN

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Ethics investigators are calling on Homestead to end the use of one particular city vehicle — a weathered white Tahoe that for years has been available to council members for government-related business, on top of the \$958 monthly stipend each receives to cover transportation needs.

After an eight-month investigation into whether Councilman Elvis Maldonado used the city car when he played golf, the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics concluded that because the city had no policies or procedures in place for use of the car, it could not prove whether Maldonado drove it to golf resorts or violated any ethics laws.

“There is no written policy, rules, time sheets or sign out sheets for the Tahoe,” said the ethics investigator, Nilda Olmo. “Due to the lack of accountability and inaccuracy of the city log, we were unable to substantiate the use of the Tahoe.”

The Ethics Commission opened the case shortly after the Miami Herald reported that Maldonado used the Tahoe to visit the Miccosukee Golf & Country Club in Kendall, the Melreese Country Club near Miami International Airport, and the Weston Hills Country Club in Broward.

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I AM REVIEWING THE RECOMMENDATIONS.

George Gretsas, Homestead city manager

The article detailed how Maldonado played golf at least five times in 2015 while he had possession of the Tahoe, according to his official calendar, Sunpass records, and two websites that Maldonado used to track his golf trips and stats, Shotzoom.com and Gamegolf.com. When Maldonado had the car, SunPass records showed the Tahoe using Turnpike exits minutes from golf courses where he routinely played, the article said.

The Tahoe and its expenses, including gas, tolls, insurance, car washes and maintenance, are all paid for by the city.

According to the close-out memo, Maldonado told investigators “he might have used the Tahoe more than the rest of the Council but the city log does not reflect an accurate count.” He added that just because someone “reserves the Tahoe, it doesn't mean you actually used the vehicle.”

Maldonado also said that city calendar entries can also change due to cancellations or schedule changes that show the Tahoe still in “reserved” status. He told investigators that all council members have access to its keys.

Maldonado did not respond to text messages from the Miami Herald.

“Based on my knowledge of the case, there are no policies in place that Commissioner Maldonado would have even violated,” Juan Carlos Planas, Maldonado's former attorney, said Tuesday.

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THE ETHICS COMMISSION’S OPINION OF THE PROBLEM AND OUR SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM MAY BE DIFFERENT.

Jeff Porter, Homestead Mayor

In her report, Olmo wrote: “Regarding the newspaper article, he stated that he does enjoy playing golf as a hobby and in fact did publish his score ... and that there is no evidence that he actually used the Tahoe while at the golf course or at any non-city sponsored event.” She added that because policies that regulate the vehicle do not exist, the city manager’s office should get rid of it.

After receiving a copy of the close-out memo from the Miami Herald on Wednesday, Homestead spokesman Zackery Good said “the city has no record of receiving the report from the ethics commission, has now received it from the Herald and will be reviewing the recommendations.”

Homestead Mayor Jeff Porter said the city should keep the vehicle and the council should discuss ways to track the Tahoe and keep elected officials accountable.

“If we want controlled access to a vehicle, we can certainly do that,” Porter said. “The ethics commission has an opinion but I don’t agree with getting rid of it. There’s a necessity sometimes to have an extra vehicle when going to city-related events, especially when we have more people than your vehicle can hold.”

\$958.33 MONTHLY AUTO ALLOWANCE FOR HOMESTEAD COUNCIL MEMBERS

Homestead elected officials get a \$958.33 monthly auto allowance, one of the highest in Miami-Dade County. City of Miami commissioners get \$900 a month; Miami-Dade County commissioners get up to \$800 a month to lease the car of their choice.

“There is a total lack of accountability regarding the use of the city-owned Tahoe,” Olmo said. “In light of the fact that council members are provided with a substantial monthly allowance to offset the cost of automobile usage for city purposes, it makes no sense to provide unlimited access to a free vehicle.”

“The lack of accountability also invites abuses of the city property. No amount of safeguards can be set in place to guarantee that the vehicle is not used for personal reasons by city officials or staff,” Olmo added.

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