

# Opa-locka on the path to ethical government?



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It would be easy for most of us to distance ourselves from the crisis in Opa-locka.



This is not the first time we have witnessed corruption at the heart of a local government; a financial debacle wrought by irresponsible public officials held unaccountable for years; a complete erosion of community confidence in political leadership.

Send the scoundrels off to jail. Let the state pick apart the fiscal mess. The unlucky innocents — the residents hurt by the scandal — will just have to fend for themselves. Most of us can comfortably look the other way.

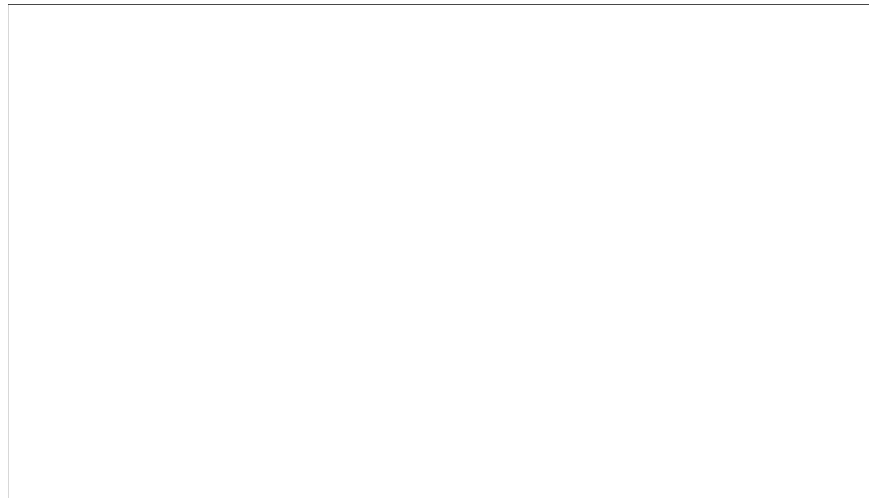
The only difference in Opa-locka this time is the extent of the damage — the state taking control of a city led to the verge of bankruptcy by officials and underlings who repeatedly ignored clear warnings of a fiscal disaster.

A commissioner dead by apparent suicide the day before his arrest on corruption charges; a city manager convicted and imprisoned; the assistant public works director, the son of the sitting mayor and, on Monday, a former commissioner pleading guilty to federal criminal charges.

And the still-ongoing and most far-reaching FBI investigation in years into municipal corruption in Miami-Dade County; plus an SEC fraud probe into the city's bond deal to acquire its own city hall.

There is no roadmap for recovery in Opa-locka. Criminal prosecutors perform an important function in ridding us of corrupt officials, but cannot heal a deeply wounded civic culture that promotes and protects them. To outsiders, the city has appeared at times to have had a criminal organization masquerading as a government.

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Law enforcement can sweep the floor of a decayed structure, but cannot save it from collapse. The state recovery board, composed of solid professionals, may erect temporary support to stave off final ruin, but in the end must leave one of the poorest cities in the country to figure out its future.

For a start, Opa-locka needs an energetic civic re-engagement program that includes youth, voters, civic activists and public servants. A focus on the citizens' basic right to raise the ethical standards of its government could begin to rebuild the civic trust and local oversight needed for Opa-locka to avoid another breakdown.

What is needed is a sustained effort to move the dial on citizen engagement by city residents and raise the ethical expectations of public service from within the city government.

We hope this effort began last November when the Miami-Dade Ethics Commission staff enlisted Katy Sorenson, with the support of the Opa-locka Community Development Corporation (CDC), to revive a program she created through her Good Government Initiative. She led a daylong Citizens' Academy, targeted to Opa-locka, for a group of the city's most promising civic activists. Connections made among that core group need to be reinforced and spread until it reaches the critical mass needed to complete the tough work ahead.

A next step is an ethics immersion program for all city employees — something that the current City Commission unbelievably voted against last year, before being coaxed into accepting it. The special sessions, scheduled for this month, will be conducted by Ethics Commission staff.

Last summer, Ethics Commission staff hosted a group of Opa-locka high schoolers in a unique summer internship project on citizenship and ethical government, supported by the County, The Children's Trust, and Miami-Dade Public Schools. We hope to continue that program and also try to connect with younger students in the city's elementary schools in upcoming outreach efforts.

We have spoken with the CDC, Miami Foundation, State Attorney's Office, and U.S. Attorney's Office about coordinating some of their community outreach efforts in this effort.

Individual city commissioners will be offered a special session in government ethics and leadership responsibility. If they will permit us, we will provide them with an ethics "buddy," a nonpartisan leadership mentor for guidance and inspiration.

No community should be consigned to having a corrupt government, even those saddled with poverty. And no county should feel satisfied with itself as long as one of its cities is in such distress.

The Miami-Dade Ethics Commission is committed to beginning the healing process, but there is more than enough room for other county agencies and municipal governments, nonprofits, civic clubs and clergy to step up. Like it or not, Opa-locka is us.

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