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Former Mayoral Candidate Admits to Campaign Finance Violations

Former Miami mayoral candidate Jeffrey A. Benjamin pled guilty today to three counts of violating state campaign finance laws. He agreed to a year's probation, the payment of restitution to campaign vendors and community service. The newcomer to Miami politics finished second to incumbent Mayor Tomas Regalado in the November 2013 election with nearly 10 percent of the vote.

The charges, all first-degree misdemeanors, followed a year-long investigation initiated by the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust, working in conjunction with the Miami-Dade County State Attorney's Office Public Corruption Task Force. Benjamin agreed to pay the agencies \$1,000 each for investigative costs. Adjudication of the charges will be withheld if Benjamin complies with the terms of a plea agreement with state prosecutors.

"Election laws exist for the purpose of protecting the public from this type of activity," said Ethics Commission Executive Director Joseph Centorino. "Any candidate who intentionally ignores the requirements for managing a political campaign has no business being a candidate – never mind an elected official," Centorino added.

The charges stemmed in part from Benjamin's failure to open a proper bank account for his mayoral campaign. In a document he filed with the Miami City Clerk's Office in September 2013, Benjamin listed Bank of America as his "primary campaign depository" when no such account existed, a violation of Florida Statutes. In a voluntary statement he gave to investigators in October 2013, Benjamin stated that he used PayPal to receive contributions and to make expenditures on behalf of his campaign. Lying on the form filed with the Clerk's Office regarding the designation of a campaign account and campaign treasurer is also a violation of Florida election law.

Benjamin told investigators he received instructions from the clerk's office about how to open a campaign account and report related transactions. But he acknowledged he did not carefully read the materials because he found doing so to be "a pain in the butt."

Benjamin further violated Florida Statutes by authorizing campaign expenditures without having sufficient funds. In both instances, Benjamin failed to pay the vendors – The Box Advertising, for a mobile electronic billboard, and PK Graphics.com, that produced 10,000 palm cards to distribute at polling places.

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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