

West Miami-Dade JULY 22, 2015

Ethics commission urges Farm Share to end its relationship with Sweetwater



Bags full of groceries wait to be distributed during an operation by the non-profit organization, Farm Share, at Tamiami Park in Sweetwater in June 2013. Local politicians often attend these events as volunteers, but there are complaints that they use the activity for electoral purposes. | **Allison Díaz** - For the Miami Herald

BY BRENDA MEDINA AND REBECA PICCARDO
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During every election cycle, residents of Sweetwater's Lil Abner Mobile Home Park are targeted by politicians who want to secure their votes through the distribution of food and other handouts.

That conclusion was reached by the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust, who interviewed several residents in an investigation held after the commission received a complaint during the controversial campaign to elect the new mayor in May.

According to an investigation report, the Ethics Commission recommended that the nonprofit organization Farm Share, which provides free food to low-income families, "terminate its relationship with the city and use local religious or non-profit organizations to provide food to needy residents to reduce the temptations of politicians to exploit this opportunity."

However, Sweetwater is not the only municipality in which local politicians work with Farm Share in the distribution of food. The practice is common among South Florida's public officials, including city officials, county employees and even state representatives, whose photos appear in brochures and advertising material for the charity organization. Some argue that elected officials could take advantage of food distribution activities to elevate their profiles within the community, especially during election season.

"It's shameful that local politicians are exploiting the nonprofit Farm Share food distribution program for use as a campaign tool," said Alex Dominguez, a candidate for Miami Commission district 3, in the 2017 elections.

"Misleading the poor and hungry is third-world politics at its best," added Dominguez, who was a candidate of the City of Miami Commission before running for the County's Property Appraiser position.

Several interview requests made to Farm Share for this article were not answered. According to information found on Farm Share's website farmshare.org, the organization, which has operated in Florida for 24 years, receives federal and state funds, and public officials who participate in the distribution of food do so on a voluntary basis.

According to the investigation's report, Farm Share's attorney Alan Rosenthal told the Commission on Ethics and Public Trust investigators that the organization is opposed to political or religious proselytism during its events.

"It's common for officials to be present during distributions. In fact, volunteers have asked people to leave the area because they've shown up at a food distribution event wearing a shirt with someone's name printed on it," reads the report obtained by el Nuevo Herald through a public information request.

Joseph Centorino, executive director of the commission, said elected officials are permitted to engage in legitimate government-sponsored activities, regardless of the time of year, which makes the possible exploitation of an official position a difficult area to police.

“Obviously, there should be a clear distinction between official functions and campaign activities, and there should be no visible campaign activity by an elected official at any government event in which he or she is involved,” Centorino stated in an email. “To avoid any appearances of impropriety, local officials should be consistent in scheduling official functions, avoiding an unusual flurry of government-sponsored events immediately before an election”.

Centorino explained that officials who commingle government activities with their political campaigns could be violating the county’s ethics rules.

A county ordinance about conflict of interest and ethics codes states in part that no [public official] “shall use or attempt to use his or her official position to secure special privileges or exemptions for himself or herself or others.”

The complaint in Sweetwater was presented by then candidate and now Mayor Orlando Lopez, who alleged that his opponent, then Mayor Jose M. Diaz was instructing volunteers to tell recipients of the so-called Farm Share “food bags,” that the food was coming from him.

Lopez also accused Diaz of conducting campaign activities from his municipal office, instructing employees to ask for campaign donations, and asking at least one employee to donate money to his campaign after giving her a raise. Commission investigators determined that there wasn’t enough evidence to prove that the allegations were true.

During the council meeting held on July 6th, the Sweetwater City Council approved an ordinance prohibiting elected officials to get involved in food distribution events. Council member Idania Llanio, who proposed the legislation, said that when residents receive a bag with food from a candidate or elected official “they then feel obligated to vote for that candidate.”

Council member Isolina Maroño, who has participated as a volunteer in the distribution of food in Sweetwater since before she began her term as an elected official and was recently assigned a position as the head of that activity, cast the only vote against the ordinance.

It’s unclear whether the city has started executing the new rule or not. Four days after the ordinance was approved, Sweetwater’s government announced that on July 11th, there would be a food distribution event in the Mas Canosa Community Center, with the participation of Farm Share, a state representative, Mayor Lopez and the city council.

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