



For Immediate Release: September 14, 2016
Contact: Joseph Centorino, Executive Director
(305) 350-0613 or centori@miamidade.gov

Ethics Commission supports proposed rule on education expenses

The Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust (COE) today endorsed – with a suggested clarification -- a proposed ordinance that would prohibit Miami-Dade County Commissioners from using their district office funds to pay for educational programs that lead to an academic degree. The proposal, sponsored by Commissioner Juan Zapata, stemmed from an investigation conducted by the COE in 2015 after Zapata used his office discretionary fund to pay more than \$30,000 for a Master's Program at Harvard University. Because there was no formal policy regarding the use of Commission office funds for educational purposes, the closing report (**PI 15-32**) included recommendations that are incorporated in the proposed ordinance. It would enable elected officials to attend and pay for conferences, seminars and other courses on specific topics related to their service from their discretionary office funds. But, any expense above \$5,000 would have to be approved by the entire Board of County Commissioners. If the ordinance is approved by the BCC, Commissioners who do academic coursework, including that which leads to an advanced academic degree, could apply for the same tuition reimbursement program offered to County employees, which reimburses half of the cost after the employee successfully completes the academic curriculum. Ethics Commissioners wanted to clarify that the proposal should clearly prohibit commissioners from using their office funds to pay for the half of the tuition, not reimbursed by the County.

The COE found Probable Cause, but voted to dismiss a complaint filed against Miami City Commissioner Ken Russell for allegedly violating the public records provision of the Citizens' Bill of Rights for failing to provide a requested list of small gifts he had received. As he entered office following his November election last year, the commissioner received several gifts. His staff noted and he reported the ones that were valued at more than \$100, as required by law. One part-time secretary was also supposed to track minor gifts – mostly consumable items that were shared around City Hall. However, that list apparently was inadvertently misplaced during Mr. Russell's staff transition. Because the violation was considered unintentional, the complaint (**C 16-17**) was dismissed and a Letter of Instruction will be issued to the first-term politician.

Alfred Santamaria, a candidate for County Mayor, was accused of violating election rules by giving away tickets to Miami Marlins baseball games without reporting them in finance reports, and also distributing an alleged treatment for the Zika virus and then producing campaign ads about it containing false statements. A local attorney filed the complaint (**C 16-30**) against Santamaria, who lost his race in the August primary. However, because the allegations concern state election laws and issues that are not part of Miami-Dade's Ethical Campaign Practices Ordinance, the Ethics Commission has no jurisdiction over them and dismissed the case as Not Legally Sufficient.

It was announced during today's meeting that more than 180 people have registered so far to volunteer as speakers during the 5th annual **Ethical Governance Day**. On **Thursday, October 20, 2016**, the Ethics Commission hopes to place civic leaders and activists in every 12th grade government and economics class in Miami-Dade senior high schools to

share with students the importance of civic activism. The Ethics Commission will provide suggested talking points, but speakers are encouraged to share their own experiences. Those interested in participating can learn more at ethics.miamidade.gov.

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.

###