

Bribery attempts in Miami Beach drop, but they still happen, ethics survey shows



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Twenty-two percent of Miami Beach public employees surveyed by Miami-Dade government ethics officials say they've been offered a bribe at some point in their career — highlighting a pitfall of working in a sexy, high-rolling atmosphere where a great deal of money flows through the city.

For a city that has battled corruption within its ranks, the number marks a welcome decrease from results of the same survey taken four years ago, when Miami Beach was grappling with the aftermath of serious corruption scandals. In 2012, seven fire inspectors and code compliance officers were caught taking bribes from an Ocean Drive nightclub. Later that year, a former procurement director was charged with rigging public bids.

Back then, 27 percent of employees reported having been offered a bribe, and just 33 percent felt there were appropriate protections for whistleblowers.

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“We still have some ways to go, absolutely,” said Jimmy Morales, the Beach’s city manager. “But we’ve made a lot of progress.”

A summary of the results, released by the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust on Wednesday, said the numbers suggest that the “incidence of bribery may be declining” because of increased awareness of ethics rules and, perhaps, because potential bribers may think Beach employees are less receptive.

Joe Centorino, director of the ethics commission, said he was encouraged by the feedback that shows employees are generally happier, feel better trained and empowered to report ethical violations. Among the positives: a 16 percent increase in the number of workers who said their co-workers had high morale.

Centorino, a former state prosecutor, commended the Beach for bringing in ethics commission staff to set up the training program and participating in the survey, which has not been conducted in other cities.

BEFORE HE RESIGNED IN SUMMER 2012, FORMER CITY MANAGER JORGE GONZALEZ ASKED THE ETHICS COMMISSION TO CONDUCT INTENSE TRAINING IN CITY HALL.

The increased emphasis on ethics came out of a plan left behind by former city manager Jorge Gonzalez, who resigned in the summer of 2012 in the wake of the corruption arrests. He is now the manager in Bal Harbour.

On Wednesday, Gonzalez said the results were encouraging from a management perspective but that it places the onus on law enforcement to prosecute those who offer bribes.

He said nothing will change “if the worst thing that can happen is the guy you bribe goes to jail” while no action is taken against the person offering the bribe.

Mayor Philip Levine, who was elected to office in 2013 and promised to work with Morales to clean up City Hall, told the Miami Herald that he was pleased with the positives in the survey numbers because it reflected changes the city has the power to make.

“I think we saw a tremendous change of culture,” he said. “And we’re not in the business of changing the culture of the public. What we can do is change the culture of the staff of Miami Beach.”

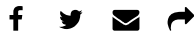
Morales has hired new staffers to lead city departments, including departments that were surveyed. The city has operated with no corruption arrests but not without incident.

The plundering of a city bank account to the tune of \$3.6 million, a theft uncovered in December that led to shakeups in the finance department, remains unresolved and under investigation.

Levine said the problem of private entities attempting to offer bribes to public employees is amplified in an environment like the Beach, and South Florida in general, where wealth abounds, real-estate investment booms and new development projects are filtered through the approval process in City Hall.

“We’re in Miami Beach,” he said. “This is not Pensacola.”

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