

# Investigators knocked commissioners for VIP treatment at MIA. Then came the funding threat.



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Miami-Dade Commissioner Rebeca Sosa was furious to see her sister's name in a county ethics report last month critical of elected officials using VIP services at Miami International Airport, including the occasional security bypass for a relative.

This week, Sosa grilled the county's ethics director on why Miami-Dade should continue fully funding his watchdog agency in light of an investigation she found to be a waste of money since it found no evidence of any policy violations at the county-owned airport.

"We have to approve the budget of every department," Sosa told Ethics Commission director Joe Centorino during a Monday meeting with fellow commissioners Audrey Edmonson and Sally Heyman. "How will I feel to approve the budget of a department when you are telling me that department had investigators for more than a year investigating a rule that doesn't exist?"

The County Commission retains authority over the Ethics Commission's \$2 million yearly budget, but the 13-person watchdog agency is governed by an independent board appointed by outside organizations. In an interview Thursday, Centorino said he's used to criticism from elected officials but that the tenor of Monday's meeting left him concerned.

"This had a tone of hostility, and really, retaliation for us having done our job," the former prosecutor said. "To retaliate against the commission for taking action, that's very concerning."

Centorino's tongue-lashing stemmed from a Feb. 8 draft report detailing how the county's elected officials utilize MIA's Protocol Office, which was established to whisk foreign dignitaries through security and Customs. The report labeled the VIP escorts "unnecessary courtesies" for elected officials, even when traveling on government business, and "likely to be offensive to the traveling and taxpaying public."

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Commissioner Rebeca Sosa to Ethics Commission director Joe Centorino

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Centorino later amended the report to urge special consideration for Mayor Carlos Gimenez's schedule as Miami-Dade's chief executive after a call from a county lawyer. Commissioners complained the report cast suspicion without citing any rules being broken, since the county has no policy barring elected officials from requesting the escorts.

Sosa took particular offense at the report noting she had requested escorts for three trips by sister Guadalupe Diaz, who the commissioner said was traveling at a time when their mother was facing critical surgery.

The three commissioners assembled in a conference room Monday morning for a session governed by Florida's open-meeting laws, which prohibits private conversations between lawmakers. The Miami Herald obtained an audio recording of the meeting from the county clerk.

Monday's session was advertised on the county calendar as a discussion on "guidelines for legislation, protocol procedures, structure of appointments" and other topics. The Ethics Commission wasn't mentioned, and Centorino arrived midway through after county commissioners summoned him.

"Is Centorino coming?" Heyman asked. "What's his ETA?"

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Ethics Director Joe Centorino

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The report cited Heyman as a frequent user of the Protocol escorts for official county trips, including her role as a leader in national local-government associations. She questioned what authority Centorino had to launch investigations not tied to an official complaint.

"I was under investigation," Heyman said. "And it bothered me to discover the nature of the investigation and how it was initiated." The Protocol report said the probe began in late 2015, "when a traveler waiting on a long security checkpoint line ... noticed a Miami-Dade County Commissioner being escorted past ..."

"I want to know who started the investigation," Edmonson said during the meeting. Turning to investigator Robert Steinback, the report's author and a former Miami Herald columnist, she asked: "You're the one who spotted us in the airport?" Steinback said no, and Edmonson replied: "Well, somebody did."

Heyman, a lawyer, said she found "the self-initiated" investigation by the Ethics Commission to be "inappropriate," since that should be the purview of the county's inspector general. "The Ethics Commission never had the authority to do what they did in the first place," Heyman said. "I'd like to know how much money they got paid, and how busy they are."

Voters approved establishing the Ethics Commission in 1996. Centorino said there has never been a question that ethics staff has the right to launch investigations based on concerns of possible impropriety. "Unless someone is going to change the way we operate since our inception," he told the commissioners, "we have the right to initiate investigations."

Heyman replied: "Based on what? A whim?"

In an interview, Sosa said her comments should not be taken as a threat to remove funding from the Ethics Commission. "I expressed my desire to respect their independence," she said. "They should have the tools they need to do their job."



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