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North Miami councilwoman admits getting special treatment for her mother

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10/08/2014 1:05 PM | Updated: 10/08/2014 4:47 PM



Marie Erlande Steril is a North Miami council member. NONE/CITY OF NORTH MIAMI

The Miami-Dade County ethics commission voted Wednesday to settle the case of a North Miami City Council member who used her position to get upgrades to her mother's city-subsidized home renovation.

Council member Marie Steril will have to pay more than \$5,000 over the next five years after reaching the settlement and pleading no contest to charges that she violated the county conflict of interest and code of ethics ordinance.

The settlement indicates that Steril “understand[s] that she admits to a violation.” Her attorney in the case, Michelle Delancy, said Steril could not afford to fight the case any longer.

“It was in her financial best interest to settle, and she did,” Delancy said. “They made us an offer we couldn’t refuse.”

Steril will pay an upfront fine of \$250 and then pay an additional \$250 for the cost of the commission’s investigation. She will then pay back \$4,950 to North Miami, through the ethics commission, over the next 60 months. The monthly restitution fee to the city will be about \$87 per month.

Joseph Centorino, the commission’s executive director, said he hopes the settlement gets the message across to elected officials in North Miami and throughout the county.

“There’s an important statement made that you can’t use your office to get some special privileges or special deal,” Centorino said. “You’re held to the same standard as any other citizen.”

The commission found probable cause of Steril’s violation in March. In 2011 her mother, Marie Charles-Brutus, received renovations on a two-bedroom, two-bathroom townhouse that she had moved into through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Neighborhood Stabilization Program. The city was given \$2.8 million to renovate and sell foreclosed homes to first-time home buyers.

The investigation found that Steril asked the city staff to give her mother high-end counter tops and appliances that were worth more than \$7,700. Other residents in North Miami’s program, who offered to pay for similar renovations themselves, were told that was not possible.

The city also had to pay HUD \$154,800 in 2012 for Steril’s mother’s receiving the home through the program because the city should have disclosed that she had family ties to an elected official and obtained an opinion from the city attorney, according to HUD rules.

As part of the settlement, Steril will also receive a letter of public reprimand.

“We encourage people to think before they act and to reach out to us for an opinion,” Centorino said. “If they don’t ask, either they’re unaware of the rules or they’re trying to hide something.”