



## MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

## In a Florida first, Medley council could have a married couple serving together

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It's a small world in the already-small industrial town of Medley. Three candidates are competing for two open seats on Medley's Town Council — and if candidate Karina Pacheco wins a seat, she and her husband, vice-mayor Iván Pacheco, will hold two of the five votes that determine how Medley is run.

If Karina wins a council seat, the Pachecos could make Florida history by becoming the first known spouses to serve simultaneously on the same council or commission. In 2017, married couple Martin and Kathie Marquez each ran unsuccessfully for the Miami Springs council.

“The only thing I can say is, I have all the qualifications,” Pacheco said in an interview. “I have my own personality, and he has his own.”

Florida’s anti-nepotism law “does not prohibit a husband and wife from simultaneously serving on the same town council,” a 1989 advisory by Bob Butterworth, state attorney general at the time, said. But spouses, like any other individuals elected to public office, cannot privately discuss public business under the state’s open-meetings law.

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Pacheco is unconcerned. “I did my research,” she said. “I know what I can do, and what I can’t.”

As of the end of August, Pacheco had received \$9,400 in campaign contributions, more than double the amount raised by the other two candidates. About half the contributions came from local businesses in Medley, Hialeah and Hialeah Gardens.

Candidate Lily Stefano claims that Mayor Roberto Martell has endorsed Pacheco, but Pacheco declined to name specific supporters. “I have the support of the people that really know me,” she said. She would not confirm nor deny whether she has the mayor’s support, and Martell could not be reached for comment.

Martell's wife signed Pacheco's nomination petition, as did Susana Guasch, the mayor's executive assistant and a former councilmember, and code compliance director Jose Guasch.

A Sunshine violation is typically difficult to prove, said Barbara Petersen, president of the Tallahassee-based Florida First Amendment Foundation. But anyone can request the email and text correspondence of elected officials to check whether they are upholding the law. Only one official — former state senator W.D. Childers — has ever been jailed for violating the open meetings law. Officials charged with violating the Sunshine law are suspended from office pending the outcome of the case.

If both Pachecos serve on the Town Council, "They just have to be hyper-alert," Petersen said. "I don't think it's something people take lightly."

The Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust, the independent agency that investigates and issues opinions on ethical quandaries, has no record of the Pachecos seeking guidance on their potential joint service, according to executive director Jose Arrojo.

Last year, responding to a request for guidance from Miami Springs council candidate Martin Marquez, the ethics commission issued an informal opinion on spouses serving together on a municipal council.

"The Sunshine Law would apply to both of you and would prohibit private conversations between you regarding matters that would foreseeably come before the board for some type of action," the commission wrote to Marquez. But both Marquezes lost by wide margins.

By day, Medley boasts more than 60,000 workers in its myriad warehouses. But when those workers clock out, the population of this town just west of Miami International Airport shrinks to 1,100, most of whom live in the town's three trailer parks.

The small population has much to gain from the daily ebb and flow: Medley earns the majority of its revenue from commercial taxes. The town uses the money to provide social services like hot meals for the elderly, who make up about a third of the town's population, according to census data.

With the vivid contrast between Medley during the workday and at night, town officials must balance catering to the business community — whose taxes pay for a high share of residents' benefits — with serving the small number of individuals who live there.

## THE CANDIDATES

Three candidates, including an incumbent, are vying for two seats on the Town Council. Edgar Ayala, a councilmember since 2012, is running for reelection. The other open seat belongs to councilman Jack Morrow, who is not running. Medley has no political districts, so the two candidates who receive the most votes will win the seats. The elections are nonpartisan.

The winning candidates will serve a four-year term and earn an annual salary of \$53,202.18.

- **Edgar Ayala**, 49, left Honduras for the United States in 1993 and has lived in Medley ever since. Ayala made three unsuccessful runs for council, then won a two-year term in a special election in 2012. If elected to a third term, Ayala told the Miami Herald that he will continue Medley's social services for children and the elderly, like a program that helps pay for kids to join sports teams in other cities.

Ayala said he will promote investment in Medley, citing the estimated \$33 million Northwest 87th Avenue roadway project.

"I feel proud of the job I've been doing," Ayala said.

The former Sears air-conditioning technician is working towards an associate's degree in political science at Miami Dade College. He doesn't view himself as a regular politician, he said, because he is honest and transparent. "Just call me, and I'm going to tell you what's going on in our city," Ayala said. "I believe that is my signature."

- **Karina Pacheco** studied education at the Universidad de Guayaquil in Ecuador and works in a private learning center with first graders. The 42-year-old said she is running to remain close with Medley residents and work more directly with them. "I want to be close to them when they ask for my help, like I have been doing for all these years," she told the Herald. "My residents are like my family."

Pacheco declined to offer specific proposals for what she would do as councilwoman, saying the council makes decisions together and she does not want to make any promises she cannot keep. She said she will support projects of interest to Medley residents and the employees and businesses who are a driving force of the town.

“Everyone and anyone can make a difference,” she said. “You just need to put your heart out there to make the difference in the civic life of one’s community.”

- **Lily Stefano**, 54, is executive director of the nonprofit Santana Moss Foundation, named for the NFL star who started the charity to help local South Florida communities. In 2014, Medley contracted with the Moss Foundation for help applying for social service benefits and grants. Mayor Roberto Martell canceled the contract in 2015, but Stefano has continued to provide Medley residents with supplementary food through the foundation. She also distributed windows, doors and tiles to help residents fix up their homes.

Stefano studied art and advertising at International Fine Arts College and worked as a fashion photographer, then helped celebrities and professional athletes — including Moss — with brand marketing and management. She said she fell in love with Medley when her charity work brought her to the town four years ago. “This is where I could make a difference and see the difference right away,” she said.

Stefano ran for mayor in 2016 but lost to Martell, who had unsuccessfully sued to remove Stefano from the ballot, claiming she did not move to Medley in time to qualify as a candidate. Now, Stefano says she is running for a council seat to continue and expand Medley’s social services, particularly those for the elderly. She suggests a community center that will give hot meals to senior citizens.

“This town is diminishing their programs — they pop up during election time,” she said. “We should not use these programs to convince the residents that we’re doing something.” She also wants to provide Medley’s business community with a forum to voice opinions and concerns to the government.

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