

Miami bill of rights passes under the radar

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Voters created a new bill of rights in Miami, a new elective office in Miami-Dade County and a new government center in North Bay Village among a smattering of referendums and charter changes on Tuesday's ballot.

The bill of rights, which received little attention before the election, promotes a wide range of noble-sounding goals, from freedom of speech and religion to environmental protection. It also contains a clause that bans the city, directly or indirectly, from discriminating based on race, sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. City employees who violate the code could lose their jobs, and other residents could file civil lawsuits.

Some supporters said they deliberately kept a low profile over the past few weeks, keen to avoid a showdown over legal protections tied to sexual identity. The sponsor, City Commissioner Marc Sarnoff, said he does not have enough money or staff to mount a public-awareness campaign -- a job he said should have been done by the city government.

PRO AND CON

Voters on Tuesday eagerly supported the measure.

"I'm all for a bill of rights," said voter Valerie Giraud, 40, who voted yes for the proposal after seeing it for the first time in the voting booth. "Nobody wants to be discriminated against."

While its under-the-radar status might have kept the charter change from facing organized opposition, it also left some voters feeling unsure of what they were voting on.

"It scares me, because I have no idea about it. . . . I left it blank," said voter Agustin Gonzalez, 27. He worried the change might cause some existing citizen rights to be taken away.

In county government, voters decided to take control of the recently high-profile job of property appraiser, making the position elective instead of appointed by the county mayor.

Setting property values, which help determine property taxes, is a highly regulated system in Florida, and opponents worried that political campaigns would lead to unfulfillable promises of lower assessments.

But county commissioners, who placed the question on the ballot at the behest of a task force reviewing the county charter, said their constituents were clamoring for the change, especially because all other Florida counties elect their appraiser.

"This position would be open and public, not hidden away in the bureaucracy of county government," Commissioner Natacha Seijas said during a November vote.

A less-scrutinized county referendum also passed, setting earlier dates for candidates to qualify to run for office. The three-week change -- which echoes an identical move at the state level -- gives election officials enough time to print paper ballots as Miami-Dade moves from touch-screen to optical-scan voting systems.

OTHER MUNICIPALITIES

Three smaller cities also had ballot questions:

- Miami Beach voters approved a proposal to down-zone hospital-zoned sites so they match the zoning of the surrounding neighborhood when those properties no longer serve as hospitals.

- North Bay Village voters approved four ballot items, all parts of a plan to issue \$19.3 million in bonds and swap land in order to build a new City Hall and public safety complex, new parks and improvements to the John F. Kennedy Causeway.

• Coral Gables voters rejected a plan to eliminate the trial board, which was created to hear employee grievances on disciplinary actions. While the question did not elicit great passion, many voters said they were simply more comfortable having the review panel in place.

Miami Herald staff writers Gail Epstein, Elaine de Valle and Tania Valdemoro contributed to this report.

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