



Posted on Wed, Dec. 04, 2002

Elections chief search to begin

Leahy has held post since 1981

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County Manager Steve Shiver said Tuesday that a national search lasting four to six months will be conducted to find a replacement for Miami-Dade's outgoing elections chief, David Leahy, who abruptly resigned this week.

"I think a national search is important given the sensitivity of the position and the history of the department," Shiver said. ``It's important that we ensure to the people of Miami-Dade County the search will be open and all those who feel they are qualified apply."

Leahy will continue to run the department until a successor is found, but he made it clear he doesn't want to be in the hot seat at the time of the 2004 presidential vote. He has held the post since 1981.

Shiver said the county's next elections boss should be well versed in state and federal election law, attuned to the "cultural sensitivities" of a multiethnic community and have a proven track record as an elections official.

"We don't have any names yet," Shiver said, adding that it would be premature to speculate about candidates before a search committee has even been formed.

One name that Shiver has encountered already is that of Gisela Salas, one of Leahy's top deputies.

'The TV media has been asking me, `Is it Gisela? Is it Gisela?' And you know what, she has the right to apply, too."

Salas is on vacation and could not be reached Tuesday. Leahy declined to comment about her qualifications because he will be chairing the county's selection committee.

Shiver said he plans to invite a representative of the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition to sit on the panel. Leaders of the coalition of civic and activist groups, many of which were critical of Leahy's performance, said they welcomed Shiver's offer.

"Whoever it is, we're going to scrutinize that person very much," said Max Rameau, a coalition member and community activist. ``We can't just replace this cog, we have to revamp the entire system."

DECISION HAILED

Another coalition member, ACLU of Florida Executive Director Howard Simon, hailed the decision to look beyond Miami-Dade's borders.

"I think with the problems we have had since November 2000 and the revolution that has taken place in the elections process, a national search is required," Simon said.

Police Director Carlos Alvarez, who oversaw the logistics of the Nov. 5 general election and has been widely praised for his role, was out of town Tuesday. But one of his top aides said it is unlikely that Alvarez would be interested in the supervisor's position.

"You couldn't melt him down and pour him into that job," said Robert Parker, an assistant police director. ``Law enforcement is his strong suit. It's what he enjoys."

One highly regarded Florida elections official is Pasco County's elected elections supervisor Kurt Browning, who serves as legislative chairman for the Florida Association of Elections Supervisors.

HEAVENS, NO

But asked Tuesday if he might be interested in the Miami-Dade opening, Browning's response was immediate and emphatic: ``Heavens, no. I enjoy elective office. This is my home. This is my community. I think it's going to take a special person to fill David's shoes."

Browning said few counties in Florida or elsewhere match Miami-Dade for size and complexity. One notable exception, he said, is Los Angeles County, whose top election official, Conny McCormick, has an even bigger task. She could not be reached for comment.

Besides Salas, the names of at least two other Miami-Dade officials also surfaced Tuesday as possible replacements for Leahy.

One is Sharon Mitchell, assistant director for administration at the county's Water and Sewer Department. Mitchell was Salas' predecessor and left the elections department in the early 1990s.

She was summoned to return to elections work, albeit temporarily, after the chaotic Sept. 10 primary, doing voter outreach and education among black voters, many of whom felt disenfranchised during the 2000 election and the September primary.

PLAYED A ROLE

"She did play a role in righting the ship after the primary," said the county's communications director, Juan Mendieta.

Contacted through Mendieta, Mitchell declined comment.

Another potential candidate is Milton Collins, the deputy elections supervisor in charge of voter registration.

Collins said he was "still in shock" over Leahy's resignation but that he would consider applying for the supervisor's post.

"I've been in the trenches 11 years, and I definitely don't want to discount it if there's an opportunity out there," Collins said.

Collins, who also is black, said he was the first elections officials in the field demonstrating the new iVotronic touch-screen machines, as early as February.

Faye Davis, a firefighter and black community activist, said one thing that should not be an issue in the selection of Miami-Dade's next elections chief is race.

"I don't care about race," Davis said. ``I want somebody who knows the elections process. We don't need another Miriam Oliphant."

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