

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY FEBRUARY 3, 2016 6:35 PM

After a quiet re-up for MDX chair, a brief fight at Miami-Dade commission

HIGHLIGHTS

Last-minute agenda item handed another four-year term to toll board’s chairman

After it passed, one commissioner asked for a revote to have a debate

Said chairman: “You’re never going to be popular when you’re dealing with tolls”



BY DOUGLAS HANKS
dhanks@miamiherald.com

This week, Miami-Dade commissioners quietly handed the chairman of the county’s unpopular toll board another four-year term — prompting a brief fight over the rushed decision.

Commissioner Bruno Barreiro added a last-minute item to Tuesday’s commission agenda to reappoint Louis Martinez to his seat on the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority a few days before his current term expires. While the MDX board elects its own chairman, the expiring seat meant Martinez would have to surrender the gavel and leave the board if he wasn’t reappointed.

While board re-appointments rarely attract attract notice, MDX may be the most controversial panel in the county. It sets toll rates for five of the region’s busiest highways, including the Dolphin and Snapper Creek expressways, and maintains the thoroughfares for the state and county.

In late 2014, MDX board members approved a dramatic expansion of tolling on the 836, prompting a backlash from motorists, anti-MDX petitions, and a trend of MDX becoming a favorite punching bag of elected officials. Martinez voted against the toll expansion, and Barreiro said he proposed the reappointment as a way to keep him board chairman.

“He’s done a great job,” Barreiro said.

Adding a commission item so late that it misses the agenda is not the norm, and it kept the potential reappointment from the public record until the last possible moment. A county clerk walked Barreiro’s item, Resolution 14A2, into the commission chamber’s press room shortly after the meeting started. The item wasn’t on the electronic agenda posted about a week before the meeting, or even on the printed agenda distributed that morning.

Members of the public have the right to speak for or against resolutions before commissioners vote on them, and Chairman Jean Monestime gave the modest audience before him that chance before Martinez’s reappointment was approved.

“If anyone wishes to speak on 14A2, please come forward,” Monestime said to spectators that mostly consisted of county administrators and lobbyists. “That’s the resolution for the reappointment of the board member to the MDX.”

No one approached the microphone, and only about 45 seconds passed between the time Monestime brought the item to the table and announced it had passed without objections.

But hours later, Commissioner Daniella Levine Cava asked to revisit the decision.

“It came at the last minute. I didn’t have the chance to review it,” she said. “I think this is a matter of grave importance to us. I think we should have discussion about it.”

Levine Cava moved to have the vote reconsidered by the 13-member board, but her motion failed for lack of a second. “I never met with this gentleman,” she said. “This is the MDX. We’re very concerned about it. I think we should have had the option to discuss the options.”

Commissioners are slated to fill two other MDX seats this year: an open seat caused by a resignation, and the one currently held by construction executive Arthur Meyer. The commission appoints seven seats, and Florida’s governor names six. The chairmanship has been the subject of its own fight, with Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez pushing for a change in state law to give him the seat.

On Wednesday, Martinez, a lawyer, said he was looking forward to another four years on the toll board, despite the constant flak.

“It’s tough to do what MDX does. You’re never going to be popular when you’re dealing with tolls,” he said. “But when you do it honestly and fairly, you should be proud of that.”



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