



# Miami Herald

Account



RACHEL HANDLEY

# Miami's political godfather Joe Carollo, unfazed by \$63M beating, can't wait for next fight

BY LINDA ROBERTSON

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During a festive Friday night at Domino Park Plaza in Little Havana, on a stage decorated with red and gold balloons, singer Diveana — the Madonna of merengue — performed a bouncy encore with her band, swinging her hips and blowing kisses to the crowd. Joe Carollo danced beside her.

Carollo, not a graceful man in movement or manner, looked even more ungainly in his baggy gray pants and monogrammed city of Miami windbreaker next to a smooth, sexy professional in latex leggings.

But Carollo didn't care. His skin is tempered like a boxer's.

His distinctive monotone, used to harangue and belittle those who challenge him, lifted into song. His lips, typically clamped in a rigid line, curled into a smile.

Imagine that. Commissioner Joe Carollo, for a long time the most powerful politician in Miami, aka "Crazy Joe," happy.



His footwork was heavy but playful. When he wore orthopedic boots as a kid, and got mad at his cousins, he kicked their shins until they were black and blue.



City of Miami Commissioner Joe Carollo dances on stage with Venezuelan singer Diveana, her band, his wife Marjorie and others during the Viernes Pequeña Havana festival in Miami's Domino Park Plaza.

BY LINDA ROBERTSON

Looking down on his realm — a city infested by corruption scandals multiplying like mold spores — Carollo embraced the applause. Socked with a \$63.5 million judgment in June and portrayed in November's election as a cockroach to be squashed, Carollo was undismayed.

“See? Am I the monster depicted by my enemies?” he asked.

It is rare to find Carollo in a state of joy. Conflict is his *cafecito*. Bad blood nourishes him.

**Note:** Commenting is temporarily unavailable as we work on making improvements. Looking for another way to share your perspective on this article? Consider submitting a [letter to the editor](#). Thank you for your patience and understanding during this transition.

“He thrives on turmoil,” said the second of Carollo’s three ex-wives, Mari Ledon. Carollo was charged with simple battery and spent a night in jail as mayor when he threw a tea container that hit her in the head in 2001. “His passion is destroying people.”

Now in his fourth decade as godfather of Miami’s serial political drama, Carollo, 68, is destroying the city, too, say his critics, whom he calls “haters.”

At the end of a stormy year even by Miami standards, Miami is in crisis. Mayor Francis Suarez is under FBI investigation for allegedly accepting payments from a developer who needed help with a stalled project in Coconut Grove. Ex-Commissioner Alex Díaz de la Portilla was arrested and charged with taking bribes. City Attorney Victoria Méndez and her husband are accused in a civil lawsuit of exploiting an elderly man in a house-flipping scheme.



Commissioner Joe Carollo, right, attends a meeting at Miami City Hall in Coconut Grove on Friday, Jan. 17, 2020. MATIAS J. OCNER [mocner@miamiherald.com](mailto:mocner@miamiherald.com)



Most ominous, the city faces two lawsuits similar to the one Carollo lost in the most resounding defeat of his career. The two Little Havana businessmen who sued Carollo claim two dozen city officials followed Carollo's orders in a vendetta to ruin them. They're seeking \$85 million in damages. The city has paid \$2 million in attorneys' fees for Carollo, who plans to appeal.

Eight weeks of testimony at Carollo's trial showed how he rules the city by wielding fear of retribution like a machete. You cross Carollo, he crosses you out.

He is, once again, directing the show at City Hall. Suarez has been an absentee mayor, out of town for weeks at a time, running a longshot presidential campaign that flopped and recruiting clients in the Middle East for his law firm. Díaz de la Portilla, Carollo's former ally, charged with accepting \$245,000 in bribes, lost November's election to Miguel Gabela, who vows to clean up city government. Gabela's first resolution at his first commission meeting was to fire Méndez. It was deferred.



#### SHAKEDOWN CITY

## Absentee Mayor

Miami's Francis Suarez blurs line between public duty, pursuit of wealth

Carollo has survived because he's never been charged with using his office to get rich. He's greedy for power, not money, his accusers say.

"The people who call me a bully are the true bullies, laughing in the face of residents, trying to get away with illegal things until I caught them," Carollo said. "Their problem is they can't buy me."

Business owners Bill Fuller and Martin Pinilla beat Carollo in federal court by proving he deployed city officials from the building, legal, code enforcement, fire and police departments in a harassment campaign to shut down their popular Ball & Chain club, and unplug the green neon sign that's been a beacon of Little Havana's renaissance.







Miami Commissioner Joe Carollo is seen leaving federal court in Fort Lauderdale with his wife and two of his attorneys. Public records recently obtained by the Miami Herald show that Miami taxpayers have been footing the commissioner's legal costs and so far have been billed almost \$2 million. Pedro Portal [pportal@miamiherald.com](mailto:pportal@miamiherald.com)

Carollo has also turned Miami's signature downtown bayfront park into a battlefield, calling its neighbors "old farts and rich elitists" as he fills it with kitschy animal statues, exercise equipment and, in his next riposte, six pickleball courts on its emerald lawn.

Even Carollo would admit he's reviled, yet he endures. He knows he has all the love — and votes — he needs from the loyal *abuelas* of his power base. He understands them because he, too, is an exile, uprooted from his hometown of Caibarién, Cuba, and sent to Miami on an Operation Pedro Pan flight in 1961.

"He delivers for us, we deliver for him," said Maria Campos, 86, who emigrated from Cuba in 1971. She is tenant leader at a housing complex for the elderly where Carollo will be handing out thousands of *lechón* dinners for Christmas.



Maria Campos, association president at Robert King High Towers, shows pictures of politicians who have visited the complex for the elderly. Miami Commissioner Joe Carollo can count on loyal voters, Campos said. Pedro Portal

*pportal@miamiherald.com*

The two-time mayor may run again in 2025. But his most valuable foil, Fidel Castro, is dead, replaced by a new wave of unintimidated citizens determined to oust him as a barrier to the city's maturation.

Two rookie commissioners elected in a mini revolt could upset the balance of power on the five-member commission, where the magic number of votes needed for ruling the Magic City is three. Carollo has already engaged in a shouting match on the dais with Gabela, who refused to back down. And, the recently redrawn district map, denounced by voters, could be rejected; it's the subject of a racial gerrymandering lawsuit. The new district lines enabled Carollo to move back into his North Coconut Grove home, and by residing there he can protect it from confiscation by Fuller and Pinilla in their attempts to collect damages.

"Joe Carollo is a broken man who has broken our city and almost every single relationship in his life," said Fernand Amandi, a pollster and lifelong Miamian. "Taxpayers are an afterthought who have paid the price. Miami exists as a cartel, only to enrich or entrench the power of its leaders."

It is a time of reckoning for Carollo and Miami. Seas are rising. Neighborhoods, including Little Havana, flood during routine rainstorms. Brutal heat, traffic, housing costs and property insurance rates are making Miami unlivable. Sounds apocalyptic. Maybe it will take an apocalypse to unseat Carollo, who first won in 1979.





After losing a November 1997 runoff to Xavier Suarez, father of the current mayor, Joe Carollo speaks to reporters while surrounded by somber supporters at his campaign headquarters. David Bergman *Herald Staff*

“Joe is on his ninth life,” said Miami filmmaker and fierce Carollo critic Billy Corben.  
“The Carollo cycle will not repeat.”

Carollo relishes such obituaries. What really made him grin as he stood in the epicenter of his district was the sight of Domino Park Plaza’s 25-foot Christmas tree, rising above the Little Havana festival he commandeered from Fuller, and the steeple-like marquee of the Tower Theater he seized from the “film snobs” who ran it — pointing like two giant, illuminated middle fingers at the Ball & Chain club directly across Eighth Street.

“No matter what my opponents think or say or do, what frustrates them is that I’m always the last man standing,” he said.

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## Joe Carollo

### **BREATHING FIRE**

Angry, vengeful, paranoid, a remorseless bully: These are trademark Carollo traits, according to city employees, two of his daughters, citizens who have argued with him and former allies double-crossed by him.

He was challenged to a duel by the late Jorge Mas Canosa. He betrayed Mayor Maurice Ferre on live TV. He referred to Miami's first Black city manager as an "Oreo cookie" and joked that Commissioner Ken Russell's haircut looked like North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's haircut; Russell is Japanese American. A receptionist testified he coerced her into falsely accusing two aides of sexual harassment. He humiliated ex-Police Chief Art Acevedo at a seven-hour public meeting by showing an old video of Acevedo doing an Elvis Presley impersonation at a Texas fundraiser, zooming in on Acevedo's crotch and declaring that such gyrating in a tight white jumpsuit was grounds for firing.

Acevedo, who had the gall — or guts, depending on your side of things — to say Miami government is a criminal enterprise run by the "Miami mafia" is suing for wrongful termination. Moments after Carollo engineered the vote to fire Acevedo, he played the theme from the Godfather movies on his cellphone. "Miami Mafia" was coined by Castro to malign exiles. Carollo delighted in it as proof he was a thorn in Castro's side, and hung a picture in his office of his face photo-shopped over Marlon Brando's face on "The Godfather" poster.



Asked if he has any regrets about his tempestuous career — a tirade he could take back, a firing he could undo, an obsession that went too far — Carollo is defiant.

“I do not regret not being a coward,” he said. “When people awaken the dragon in me, I breathe fire.”

Carollo's current arch rival is Fuller, co-owner of Ball & Chain and a dozen other Little Havana properties in the heart of Carollo's District 3. During his feud with Fuller, Carollo took over the 20-year-old *Viernes Culturales* festival, deriding it as a “flea market,” and made it his own, renaming it *Viernes Pequeña Havana*. Lest you forget, Carollo put his picture on signs promoting the Friday night party. Fuller wept on the witness stand when he described Carollo's efforts to wipe him out.

“I do not regret not being a coward.  
When people awaken the dragon in me, I  
breathe fire.”

Joe Carollo

Carollo and the city bombarded Fuller with code violation citations, according to the lawsuit. City officials showed up at all hours, assailing Fuller's properties 185 times, even raiding his 2017 office Christmas party. Permits were denied, closing businesses or halting renovation projects. Demolition orders were issued. It was suffocation by red tape, Fuller said, mentioning the night Carollo spied on valet parkers in a church lot and when confronted said he was there to consult with the priest. At 12:15 a.m.

Fuller says Carollo's attack has cost him more than \$28 million.

Carollo says Fuller and Pinilla are "crooks" who evaded building and safety regulations, disrupted residents' daily lives with loud music and construction chaos, and cheated the city out of thousands of dollars in fees. He claimed, without proof, they were partially funded by Venezuelan investors, *enchufados* who were cronies of socialist strongman Hugo Chávez and successor Nicolás Maduro. Carollo made similar accusations when he turned on the Doral city officials who hired him as city manager in 2013.

"I've been committed to the revival of Little Havana for 20 years. I'm not some gringo outsider criminal," Fuller said, telling how his grandfather owned a lumber mill in Cuba, his mother is Cuban and his uncle was executed by a Castro firing squad. "It's worse than a shame, it's pathological that instead of collaborating with us, Joe set out to destroy us and the diamonds of his own district."



Bill Fuller filed a federal lawsuit against Miami Commissioner Joe Carollo, in which Fuller claimed he was the target of political retaliation for supporting one of Carollo's opponents in the 2017 municipal election.



Carollo also took over the historic Tower Theater from Miami Dade College, declaring that the art cinema and home of the Miami Film Festival only served an audience of “10 to 15 elitists.” He offered the building to the Bay of Pigs Brigade 2506 veterans for a museum. They didn’t want it. So Carollo has implemented new programming that he believes will sell more tickets: Celia Cruz Forever, an exhibit featuring all things “*Azucar!*” and Cuban-American comedy acts.

It’s part of his effort to prevent the “de-Latinization” of Little Havana, a concern he expressed to former City Manager Emilio González when they were walking down Calle Ocho and Carollo told him to remove a mural that had “too many Black people,” González testified.

When Carollo walked by the mural last Sunday, he said he has no problem with it or Black people, that Gonzalez and others who testified against him are “liars spewing lies to smear and defame me — it’s a cheap shot to call me racist.” Later, he stopped at Jackson Soul Food in Overtown for his favorite meal, fried catfish, complimented the cook, chatted with a young Black woman, gave her his phone number and encouraged her to call so he could get her a job on his staff.

It’s easy to lampoon Carollo. Put a big top over City Hall. Sell tickets to the theater of the absurd in chambers. Call it a banana republic run by dictator wannabes. In fact, during the Elián González tug-of-war in 2000, when Carollo was mayor and appearing nightly on Geraldo Rivera’s program and Radio Mambí, protesters brought crates of bananas to City Hall. Carollo’s retort: “We don’t grow bananas commercially in Miami; we import them. “



Miami Commissioner Joe Carollo speaks on Friday, July 23, 2021, at the Bay of Pigs Monument during a march called by the Kiwanis Club of Little Havana along Southwest Eighth Street to show solidarity and support for Cubans on the island. Pedro Portal [pportal@miamiherald.com](mailto:pportal@miamiherald.com)



Spanish-language-radio host and former mayor and commissioner Tomás Regalado says Carollo has damaged local democracy.

“The worst consequence is voter apathy,” Regalado said, citing 12% turnout in last month’s election. “The people of Miami are so fatigued they have given up on Miami.”

Cynical citizens don’t vote or run for office because nothing ever changes, ensuring that nothing will change, he said.

“I think Carollo has made Miami worse by holding it back,” said David Winker, a lawyer known for representing citizens in grass roots vs. Goliath cases. Winker was involved in an unsuccessful 2020 effort to recall Carollo. During COVID, Winker worked from his Shenandoah house and the city fined him for practicing law from home without a business tax license.



# Assault on Corruption

The Miami Herald  
Sunday, November 16, 1986

# U.S. takes on South Florida probes

## FBI squads uncovering conspiracies

CORRUPT / from 1A

Joe Carollo.  
But various sources say the federal anti-corruption effort is moving into other, as yet undisclosed areas, as the Miami FBI office shifts from making individual cases — the prosecution of Sunrise Mayor John Lomelo or Key West Deputy Police Chief Raymond Casamayor — to more complicated attacks on entrenched criminal conspiracies.

### Aggressive focus

"We've been able to identify the things we should be working on and focus on them aggressively," said U.S. Attorney Leon Kellner.

Investigators are looking at:  
• Long-established relationships dating back to the late 1970s between major drug traffickers and narcotics detectives who worked in tandem to set up arrests of competing traffickers and share drug profits.

Sources described it as a "self-perpetuating system of corruption" that worked to everyone's advantage: Police made arrests and got rich while the favored drug organizations flourished.

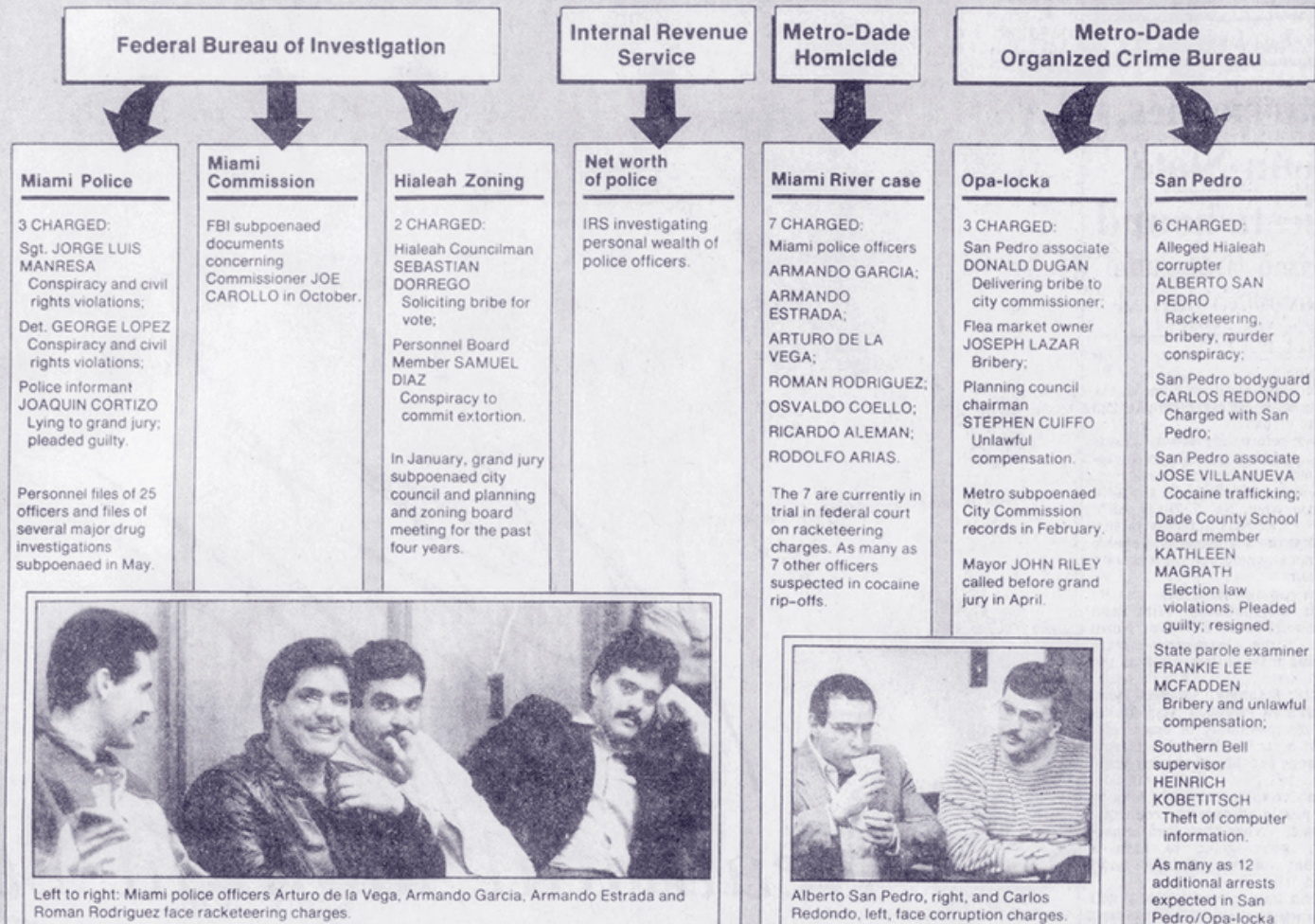
• A series of major state drug prosecutions that failed. Investigators want to know if the collapse of these cases was the result of human error or because of flaws "built-in" as part of a scheme to shake down the defendants.

Several major drug traffickers involved in these controversial cases have been questioned by federal investigators and some have alleged numerous drug pay-offs.

• Blatant "thuggery" by police officers who stole huge loads of cocaine from traffickers or extorted money from drug suspects with

## AN OVERVIEW OF DADE COUNTY'S CORRUPTION PROBES

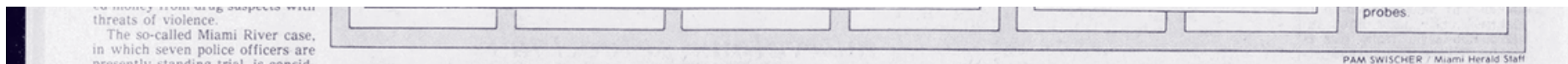
The chart depicts the known ongoing probes of police and political corruption in Dade County. Prosecutors and FBI agents say the current investigations represent a historic unified effort to examine allegations of longstanding corruption.



Left to right: Miami police officers Arturo de la Vega, Armando Garcia, Armando Estrada and Roman Rodriguez face racketeering charges.



Alberto San Pedro, right, and Carlos Redondo, left, face corruption charges.



Miami Herald coverage of the FBI's corruption probes into Miami politicians during the mid-1980s. *Newspapers.com*

Plenty of cities have dirty histories. But Miami's political culture is different, Winker says. Not only does Miami not operate according to principles taught in civics class, but nobody tries to hide it.

"It's not a government for the people. It's a government for the commissioners to get whatever they want," he said.

Carollo counters that he has raised half a billion dollars in revenue since 1999. That's why the city should pay his legal fees or any damage awards against him, he says.

"No elected official has come close to what I've done," he said. "If anyone has paid his way, it's me."

Carollo's personal ventures haven't always been profitable. Two restaurants failed, including Shogun Joe's, an Asian fusion spot. He also owned Genesis Security, a stone crab importing company and a medical supply firm. Carollo has worked as a political consultant, earns a \$58,000 city salary and estimates his net worth at \$2,345,023.







Joe Carollo, then Doral city manager, displayed some papers as evidence as he talked for more than hour during a press conference in which he accused council members of corruption and secret deals to fire him. This occurred in April 2014. Pedro Portal *El Nuevo Herald*

Carollo's colleagues count on him to be a tough negotiator, he said, driving by the Cuba Under the Stars show he brought to Bayfront Park (his picture is on promotional signs). He cited how he increased the Ultra music festival's contract from \$600,000 to \$2 million. He says he didn't allow the city to get fleeced on the Freedom Park mall and soccer stadium deal the way his predecessors got fleeced on the Marlins ballpark that will cost taxpayers \$3 billion.

"I know a lot of people, I know numbers, I know the rules," he said. "When I was at Doral, I out-negotiated Donald Trump. He didn't have permits for a pedestrian bridge. We stopped it cold. Trump tried to call me for 30 days. He said, 'Joe, I could have gotten ahold of Obama quicker than you.' I said, 'Donald, you have to get a permit.' He got one."

## **EXILED AND ESTRANGED**

Carollo has been in and out of office for so long it's hard to remember Miami without him.

He first arrived from Cuba as a 6-year-old boy, frightened and alone. His Rosebud: A bag of toy soldiers he clutched on the plane. Somewhere along the way, as he was moved from shelter to foster care, he lost the soldiers. He was separated from his parents for six months.

“It was traumatic to feel abandoned, to not know when you’d see your mom and dad again,” said Carollo. He believes his exile experience as a child enabled him to connect with Elián González, who was 6 when fishermen found him adrift on an inner tube off the coast of Fort Lauderdale and brought him to shore. His mother had disappeared during the journey from Cuba. “Six months felt like six years.”

Carollo grew up on Chicago’s North Side. He attended St. Jerome’s, where he met Mayor Richard Daley, “a major influence on me and my aspirations.” He was an altar boy and captain of the crossing guard. He remembers Sister Delphine playing Notre Dame fight songs on her piano. She slapped every kid in the class except him.

The family moved to Miami and Carollo played running back and linebacker at Miami High.

He graduated at 17, earned a degree at Miami Dade College, joined the county police force at 18 and worked as a public service aide. He was reprimanded for placing a cartoon satirizing the Ku Klux Klan in Black officers’ lockers and warned to “subdue his high degree of natural aggression.”

ating delays now suffered by enough inspectors assigned to operate the 17 inspection stations in the airport's main facility. However, it noted that in one hour these facilities keep pace with the expected growth in air traffic. And in 1981, when the facility is fully

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Joe Carollo Is Embraced by Supporter After Victory ... he took 61.7 per cent of vote in Miami runoff

# Carollo Wins Miami Seat — At 24, the Youngest Ever

By ERIC RIEDER

Joe Carollo, a 24-year-old ex-Metro policeman, won a seat on Miami's City Commission on Tuesday, becoming the youngest man ever to hold the job. It was Carollo's second try for a commission post. He lost narrowly to incumbent Theodore Gibson two years ago. On Tuesday, he won a decisive victory over private school owner Demetrio Perez, carrying 61.7 per cent of the vote in an election that drew only 13 per cent of

the city's 124,359 voters to the polls. Carollo's victory was also a win for Miami Mayor Maurice Ferre, who had advised the candidate closely in the week following last Tuesday's election. Carollo, who was born in Cuba, but does not speak Spanish very well, becomes the third Latin member of the five-member commission. In the campaign, he appealed for the Latin vote, but also stressed his ties to the city's non-Latin community. On Tuesday, he sought to em-

phasize those ties. "Yes, we have a Latin majority," Carollo said, "but that doesn't change anything. I'll represent the whole city of Miami, not any one group." Joining Carollo in the commission's a Latin majority are the Puerto Rican-born Ferre and Cuban-born Commissioner Armando Lacasa, both of whom won handily in last week's election. Also re-elected overwhelmingly

Turn to Page 7D Col. 1

## Cat Feat Gives Pause

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"I of the elects mayo est ci count the ci But over, "W tie 8 year short shows "Th dema votes. Ben issue i in gov electo past v dirty I The legats been their Hodge nted h allege "Th campu real," campu demoli with t

— even on the sea. A brightly light- way during a weekend boat parade in Boynton Beach. Avenue at 75th Street; at St. Paul Lutheran Church, 10700 SW 56th St., at 10 a.m.; and at the Church-by-the-Sea, 501 96th St., Bal Harbour, at 11 a.m.

# Latin Alliance Fizzles on Miami's Commission

By ERIC RIEDER

Miami Mayor Maurice Ferre and Commissioner Armando Lacasa worked enthusiastically last month to help elect 24-year-old Joe Carollo to the City Commission. They were successful. Carollo became the third Latin member of the commission — the city's first with a Hispanic majority. But Ferre was not pleased with Carollo after the new commission's first meeting. "The guy is out of control," Ferre griped. "The first commission meeting he votes against me six times."

One month after taking office, Miami's Latin-controlled five-member commission appears embroiled in fierce internal wrangling. Said Carollo: "If there is a political alliance, I sure haven't heard about it."

ALTHOUGH some City Hall watchers say the split can be mended, the prospect of strong Latin unity on major issues has not yet materialized. "If we had an alliance, what happened at the first meeting would never have happened," said Lacasa.

Before the new commission took office, there was good reason to expect unity among the three. Lacasa and Ferre carefully coordinated their election campaigns. Once elected to office, they joined in aiding Carollo in a runoff election a week later.

But after the election Carollo quickly emerged as an unpredictable figure on the commission. And in recent weeks the relationship between Lacasa and Ferre has appeared strained as well.

The Cuban-born Lacasa bristled last month when Ferre publicly cast him as politically dependent on Little Havana.

AND LAST week Lacasa called for major changes in plans for an amusement park on Watson Island — a project Ferre describes as one of his top priorities.

"He [Ferre] may jump through the ceiling when he hears," Lacasa laughingly told a reporter. "That would kill the project."

Ferre responded when told of Lacasa's proposal. "But Lacasa is quick to add that his views more often than not have coincided with Ferre's. Since taking office in January 1979, Lacasa has voted with Ferre on most major issues. "We have an identity of purpose," said Lacasa.



CAROLLO

"If there is a political alliance, I sure haven't heard about it."

— Joe Carollo



FERRE

"If we had an alliance, what happened at the first meeting would never have happened."

— Armando Lacasa



LACASA

"He has wonderful intentions and I have great respect for him," Ferre said of Lacasa.

WHATEVER their ultimate significance, the conflicts underscore a point already known to close followers of Miami politics: Ferre, Lacasa and Carollo are very different men, each responding to his own political constituency and perception of a city official's role.

Ferre, 44, the scion of a Puerto Rican family business empire, is a cosmopolitan with a predilection for pinstripes. He serves on a White House advisory board on ambassadorial appointments and goes to Washington every few weeks to lobby for grants. He moves as easily among bankers and corporate executives as among the people of Little Havana's Calle Ocho.

The 43-year-old Lacasa, appointed to the commission last January with Ferre's support, is a lawyer who as chairman of the Little Havana Community Development Board and ran a job-training program for Hispanics. He shares Ferre's vision of Miami as an international center, but he lacks the mayor's national ties and his total fluency in English.

CAROLLO, BORN in Cuba but raised in Illinois, sees himself as a genuine grass-roots politician. A former Metro policeman and George Wallace supporter who had no organizational base, he won his commission race despite being heavily outspun by his opponents.

The commissioners' different priorities and constituencies were reflected in the dispute last month over Carollo's resolution declaring "unwelcome" Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley, a guest at a Miami Conference on the Caribbean financed in part by the city.

Manley's socialist policies and overtures toward Fidel Castro have made him unpopular among Miami's conservative Cuban population.

Ferre was appalled at Carollo's proposal. The commission, he said, "is not the forum to establish foreign policy of the United States."

But Lacasa still didn't appear at the conference, to the chagrin of the mayor. Ferre later publicly vented his frustrations.

States has a major commitment to the arts," said Ferre. "Are we going to continue to think like a small town?"

Carollo also voted with Gibson against the commission's tentative approval of a lease with a private firm to operate the city's Dinner Key Marina. Ferre and Lacasa, with Plummer, voted to approve it.

Despite the conflicts, however, people close to the commissioners are not prepared to say there never will be a strong alliance.

"A REAL card," Ferre said of Carollo. "A 24-year-old zealot."

Ferre said he was also disappointed in Lacasa's nonappearance. But Ferre excused him by saying Lacasa is much more dependent on Little Havana than he.

Lacasa was stung. He said election returns showed he was more than just a "barrio politician."

Ferre tried to make amends, but about three weeks later Lacasa suddenly split with the mayor on his Watson Island amusement park project.

Lacasa said part of the planned theme park should be shifted to nearby Bicentennial Park in downtown Miami. He pointedly observed that he hadn't discussed his idea with Ferre before disclosing it.

Although Ferre and Lacasa have split on some issues, they continue to work together on many others — sometimes against Carollo.

At his first meeting, Carollo joined Theodore Gibson, the only black commissioner, and J.J. Plummer, the commission's self-styled conservative, in shelving the Fusion Dance Co.'s bid to take over Bayfront Auditorium and turn it into a dance facility.

FERRE vigorously supported the idea, and Lacasa stuck with him. "Every major city in the United

## 2 Victims Were in DEA Probe

FROM PAGE 1B

dump," McGee said he had taken his neighbor to court after Barandarian built a fence on McGee's property.

The shades were drawn and the lights were on Sunday morning at the Hialeah house in which Padrone lived.

Neighbors said two men and two women lived in the house and that one of the women had been led away in tears Sunday morning. No one answered the door Sunday.

The house's former owner, Aurora Leon, said she and her husband sold the house to Padrone last spring for a down payment and as-

sumption of its \$38,000 mortgage. She could not remember the amount of the down payment.

RESIDENTS AT other homes in the Hialeah neighborhood said the home was the scene of late-night comings and goings by men and women who frequently carried attache cases, but none of the residents knew Padrone or the three others they said lived in the house.

Padrone's next-door neighbor, Robert Frame, said his neighbors were "mysterious people" who "had a lot of night life."

"The old owners told us they [the new residents] were in the jewelry business, but I doubt that," Frame said.

Who? Ed is on the ball. Sports Editor of The Miami Herald. POPE SACROS.



Carollo was a security guard when he first ran for commissioner in 1977. He lost to the Rev. Theodore Gibson, a civil rights activist, then two years later at age 24 defeated Demetrio Perez to become the city's youngest commissioner ever. At his very first meeting, Carollo was described by Ferre as "out of control."

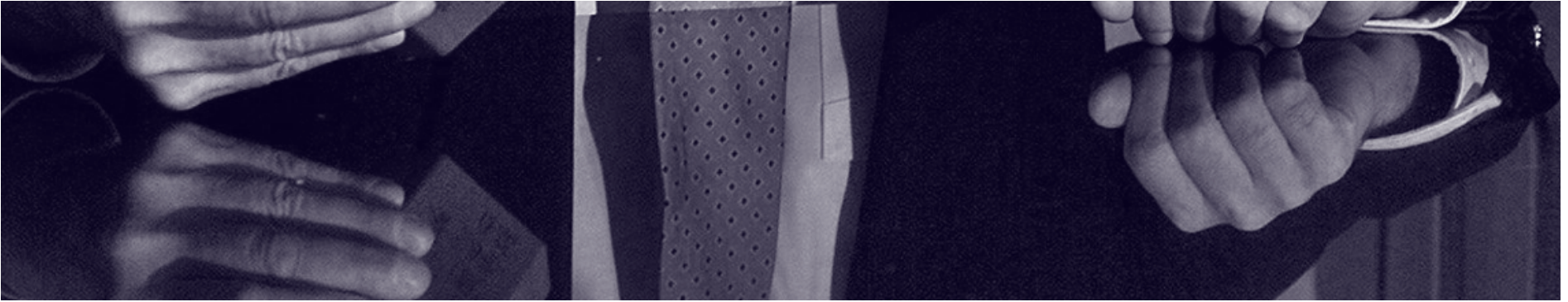
"When we met, I thought he had a bright political future. We were both idealists, coming from communist Cuba," said ex-wife Mari Ledon. "Then he, well, he deteriorated."

Carollo served as mayor twice, the first time in 1996 after Steve Clark died, and again in 1998 after losing to Xavier Suarez, father of the current mayor, and suing to overturn a fraud-marred election. Absentee ballots were falsified, and a man named Manuel Yip, who had been dead for four years, cast a vote.

"People forget my role in correcting injustices," Carollo said.







Carollo, then Miami's mayor, speaks in the office of his lawyer after his arrest on a misdemeanor battery charge. It was 2001 and was accused of striking his estranged wife with a terra cotta tea canister. *Al Diaz/Herald staff*

Carollo prefers to keep his personal life private. He has a son and daughter by his first wife, and six grandchildren — nine including his wife Marjorie's grandchildren. His third marriage lasted 83 days. He adores Marjorie.

His second marriage was to Mari Ledon. Their daughters were painfully direct when they spoke about their severed relationships with Carollo.

Caroline Carollo, 34, a Miami attorney, has had no contact with her father since 2008. Her sister Kelley, 32, hasn't seen or talked to him since 2003.

"We used to get a birthday phone call, two days late, but that stopped," said Kelley, an interior designer in New York City. "I was emotionally attuned as a child, I'm told, and I remember I used to cry when he held me. He was not likable and I just sensed it."

Her memories: "Him yelling, throwing tantrums, being unpleasant," she said. Asked if there's another side of Carollo beyond his cantankerous public image, Kelley



paused.

“No,” she said. “He’s a controlling, chauvinistic man who has to dominate and make others suffer.

“What have I learned from my father? To seek the exact opposite of him in a partner.”

“He’s a controlling, chauvinistic man who has to dominate others... What have I learned from my father? To seek the exact opposite of him in a partner.”

Kelley Carollo, daughter of Joe Carollo

Caroline said the most important lesson she’s learned from him is, “It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.”

Carollo said Ledon “poisoned” his daughters against him during a bitter divorce.

“The scars I have, the nights I’ve cried,” he said.

## BALL & CHAIN

On a recent tour of his district with a reporter, Carollo wove adeptly through its neighborhoods, greeting constituents, pointing out parks he's created or improved, lots where he wants to build affordable housing and a street where he came to the rescue of residents frustrated by the county's refusal to close it to dangerous cut-through traffic. Carollo put up barricades, assigned police patrols and won two years of peace until the county forced him to go away.

Along the Miami River, Carollo showed off Jose Martí Park, a magnet for families in one of the poorest sections of his district. He stopped to talk with a man pushing his daughters in a stroller who is worried about speeding cars. Carollo shared his phone number and assured him they'll solve the problem.

On Flagler Street, Carollo pointed out where homeless people congregate. He talked with a group of men lying on the sidewalk on a recent night at 1 a.m.

In a city meeting earlier that day, Carollo had challenged a staffer's assessment that the city was doing a good job with the homeless and asked the employee to accompany him that night — also inviting City Manager Art Noriega so Carollo wouldn't "be accused of giving orders or any BS."

Carollo spoke to an elderly man in a wheelchair. "He's Cuban and this is what the Cuban regime does — dumps its people in the retirement house of Miami. I can see he has mental problems.

“I can tell this gentleman is high on drugs,” Carollo said of a man singing “Row, row, row your boat.” “I feel bad. But you’ve got to find a balance between being humane and your obligation to make communities safe.”





Carollo, then mayor, sits next to the operator of a bulldozer in 1997 as the city tears down an alleged crack house at 1421 NE Miami Ct. A. Enrique Valentin *el Nuevo Herald*

Carollo gestured toward the Leonesa Fritanga diner, recalling how friendly the neighborhood used to be “when you had old folks ordering steak sandwiches and mamey milkshakes, telling stories.”

“Miami will become a city strictly for the rich and famous. It’s already a Casablanca of embezzled uber-wealth and luxury condos,” he said. “I care. I fight.”

Carollo constantly circled back to Southwest Eighth Street and the three-block section humming with people visiting cigar shops, guayabera shops, fedora shops, cafes, galleries, *ventanitas*. Tourists ate *arroz con pollo* at El Pub, “where the Cuba of yesterday lives today,” and snapped photos inside Domino Park of players slapping tiles on tables with an emphatic flourish.

“It’s still Cuban but also Little Nicaragua, Little Caracas,” Carollo said.

Carollo kept pausing in front of Ball & Chain, where costumed showgirls wiggle and beckon at the front door, bands perform nonstop and patrons dance to the salsa beat. Fuller brought it back from the dead and made it a catalyst for the neighborhood.

“That’s what the prince of Little Havana would have you believe, but the people of this community who can’t sleep at night have been shackled by this ball and chain and the city has been put in financial jeopardy by the commotions Mr. Fuller has caused,” Carollo said, lips tightening. He asserts that, until he scrutinized Fuller, the city turned a blind eye as Fuller and Pinilla built what Carollo calls “the Eighth Street Boys’ empire” without permits or licenses.



“Ball & Chain did not make Little Havana. Little Havana made itself,” Carollo said.





Celebrating Ball & Chain's court victory, a dancer steps on the image of a cockroach, with the head substituted with that of Joe Carollo. Pedro Portal [pportal@miamiherald.com](mailto:pportal@miamiherald.com)

In his Futurama building office, Fuller told a different story. Since the 2017 commission race, when he supported Carollo's opponent, Fuller said he's been hounded by Carollo and "the arsenal of city employees and resources he mobilized." When Carollo won, Fuller sent an olive branch text, saying "let's work together" and an invitation to Fuller's holiday party. A uniformed code enforcement officer crashed the party and "laid it out for me: Prepare for retaliation by Joe Carollo."

Fuller and Carollo met for the first time six years ago for breakfast to discuss the future of Little Havana. Fuller's goal is to keep the area true to its history and keep the chains — like the Starbuck's down the street — out.

"Joe's opening lines to me were, 'You know my brother Frank. He was a mistake. He was born much later than me,'" Fuller said, referring to former commissioner Frank Carollo. "I'm wondering, what kind of malicious guy says that? Then he tells me his vision for Calle Ocho is aluminum palm trees with LED lights."

Fuller says he had no desire to sue Carollo or the city but felt he had no choice if he was to stay in business. He and Pinilla began documenting the threats, inspections, revoked permits, surveillance, City Manager Noriega rolling out a measuring tape in front of Fuller's Mexican *taqueria*, Assistant City Attorney Rachel Dooley interrupting a meeting to stop a vote on historic designation for five of Fuller's properties, Carollo skulking around in the dark, hiding behind trees, announcing "I am the law!"



In his four decades in politics, Joe Carollo has always commanded attention. Murry Sill

Carollo sees himself as an investigator pursuing truth. On the facts, he's usually right. He remembers names, dates, addresses, branches of family trees, numerals to the exact decimal. He can decipher campaign finance reports, recite budget figures, pick apart tax returns, deconstruct code regulations, list liquor licenses, do the math on occupancy limits, recall dialogue to the word and measurements to the inch. Carollo argues he was able to present only a fraction of his evidence in an unfair trial.

Given the filing cabinet in his head, it's no wonder the plots of his conspiracy theories are fantastic. Carollo's ex-wife Ledon and their two daughters said he used to keep the curtains of their house closed and checked for hidden bugs. He had a remote starter for his car. He had them tailed by private detectives during post-divorce legal fights over money.

Carollo does not go down rabbit holes so much as he descends into labyrinthine tunnels that run for miles. To follow him is exhausting.

"I'll make a deal. If Mr. Fuller can prove the \$6.5 million of federal PPP relief they got was spent appropriately and their employees were paid, I'll resign," Carollo said, pivoting to his often-repeated but never substantiated insinuation that Fuller committed mortgage and voter fraud.



“He’s got two new lapdogs on the commission but there are questions about the origins of their campaign funds.”

MIAMI HERALD

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### “HATES NATURE ... LOVES CONCRETE”

Carollo seemed tense and excited as he turned into Ferré Park, 18 acres of grass and trees bathed by Biscayne Bay breezes, reclaimed from its crime-ridden Bicentennial Park years as a derelict Indy Car racetrack. It was designed at a cost of \$10 million to be Miami’s downtown garden.

Carollo sees it as an expansive ring, surrounded by ropes, with himself in one corner, spitting onto his palms, and the park’s Biscayne Boulevard neighbors in the other. “Bring your popcorn,” he says of the ongoing fight for dominion.

They want him replaced as chair of the Bayfront Park Management Trust, a little-known board that oversees Ferré and Bayfront parks. Neighbors accuse him of running it like his personal estate. He counters that they treat it like their private front yard.

“The trust is a treasure where Joe can exercise his power,” Regalado said.

Contrary to the master plan, which Carollo disdainfully calls “the bible,” he’s added features that neighbors say nobody wants — such as an outdoor gym and a promenade to Miami’s premier art museum lined by 57 colorfully painted statues of dogs and cats. Two 300-square-foot LED billboards will be built. A dog park covered with artificial turf is way too large, even dog owners say. Carollo’s got more ideas — soccer fields, pickleball courts, beaches festooned with University of Miami and FIU logos.

“I told him, ‘Joe, you won’t be satisfied until you turn this into Coney Island,’” Michael Feuling said from his 26th floor condo overlooking the park. He estimates 20% of the park’s green space has disappeared in the past two years. “He does everything according to his whims, without public input or professional advice. It looks like landscaping by Home Depot.”



Michael Feuling was one of several condo residents who feuded with Carollo in 2023 over the vision for Maurice A. Ferré Park, across the street from Feuling's unit. Alie Skowronski [askowronski@miamiherald.com](mailto:askowronski@miamiherald.com)



Claudia Roussel helped launch a petition drive to have Carollo removed from the chairmanship. Neighbors discovered he was doing work without permits, including the removal of a large ficus tree. The resulting outcry helped new District 2 Commissioner Damian Pardo attract votes with his anti-Carollo platform.

“Carollo hates nature and loves concrete,” Roussel said.

Carollo strode to the gym that sits under banyan trees. The planning board ruled Carollo used loopholes to install the exercise equipment without proper notice and it must be removed.

“Here we have the mortal sin,” he said. “These rich condo dwellers say they have gyms in their buildings and want passive green space. What is that, a place where you sit around waiting to die?”

2B THE HERALD, SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 1997 A

# Carollo's vision tied to Miami waterfront

CAROLLO, FROM 1B

who will craft the annual budget, give the state of the city speech, preside over the commission or appoint its presiding officer. The new mayor will guide Miami into the next century.

Carollo can taste it. So can former Miami Mayor Xavier Suarez.

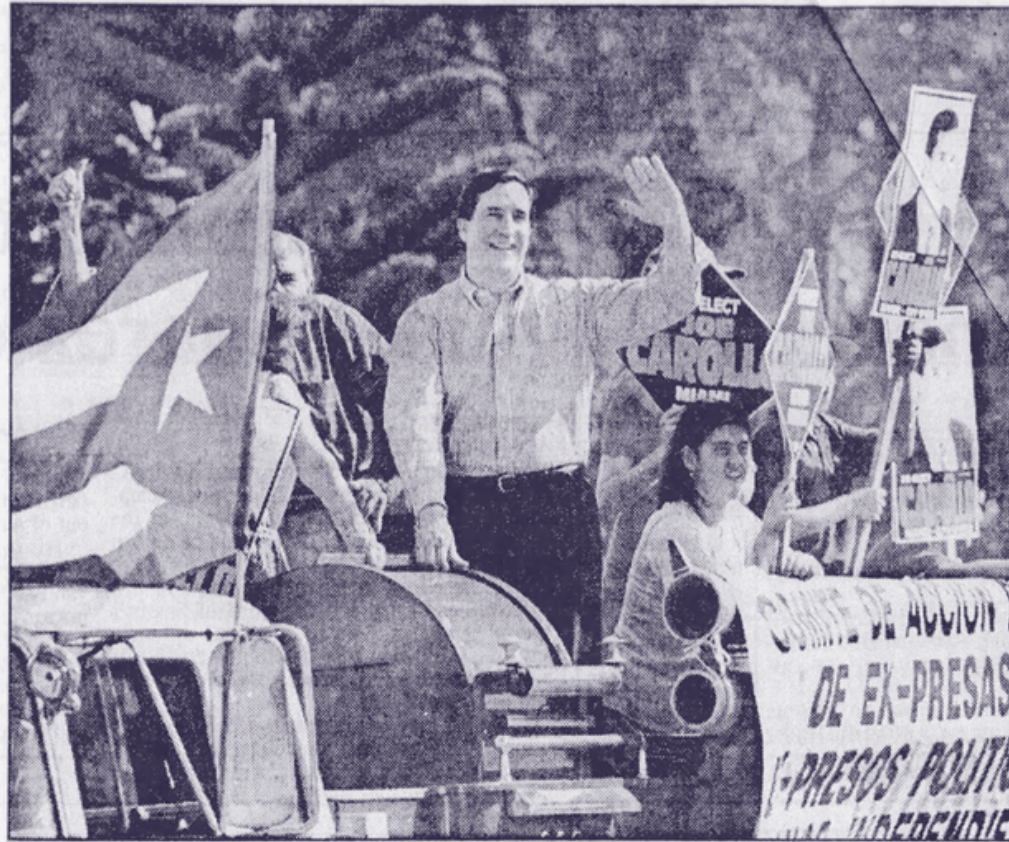
Voters will choose one of the front runners on Nov. 4. If neither candidate gets a majority, the run-off election will be Nov. 13.

## POLITICAL COMEBACK 'Kinder and gentler Joe' replaces a legend

Carollo's political comeback has been nothing short of extraordinary. In 1987, voters silenced Commissioner Carollo after eight years in office — zipping shut the mouth that toppled police chiefs, quashed million dollar developments and compared rivals to Adolf Hitler.

Voters re-elected him to the commission in 1995. He ran as the "kinder and gentler Joe." Carollo reached the pinnacle of his political career on July 23, 1996. That day, voters chose him to replace a legend, Mayor Steve Clark, the glad-handing old-timer, who died of cancer.

Carollo's 15 months in office have been a soup of good fortune



JEFFERY BOAN / Herald Staff

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL: Miami Mayor Joe Carollo rides through the streets of Miami on Saturday.

cal enemies or anyone associated with them.

Carollo once sent aide Sean Holt to follow Commissioner Hernandez when he toured the Solid Waste Department.

"I was there at 5 a.m.," Holt says.

"Carollo obviously had Sean follow me," Hernandez said. "Sean looked half-asleep. He followed me the entire time — to see me pick up garbage."

On the morning FBI agents arrested Hernandez, two sources say, City Hall staffers watched in mute horror as Carollo prayed to a statue of St. Rosalia — thanking the patron saint of Palermo for the indictment.

"Thank you St. Rosalia," both sources quoted the mayor.

Carollo vehemently denies that happened.

"Absolutely not," he says. "That was a sad time for Miami."

Carollo, however, is most haunted by the ghost of Odio, who is now serving 12 months in federal prison on an obstruction charge.

Carollo has tried to persuade City Manager Ed Marquez to fire or reassign his administrative staff, all former Odio staffers. Marquez refused.

Carollo also relishes a fight.

He baited and battled Suarez's supporters during a debate at Victor's Cafe, the upscale Cuban eatery. Carollo verbally sliced-and-

In 1997, Carollo campaigned on transforming downtown Miami into a waterfront mecca for tourists. *Newspapers.com*

Carollo approached a woman walking her two dogs and asked if the gym should be ripped out.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s an eyesore. It’s more clutter.”

He asked four Frisbee players if they liked the gym and they said sure, they might use it.

At the Dogs and Cats Walkway, Carollo asked visitors from Norway and North Carolina their opinion of the supersized poodles, chihuahuas and bulldogs. Critics call it hideously tacky.

“Are you the artist?” asked a woman from Colorado, snapping photos of the metal menagerie.

“I’m the commissioner who put this in,” Carollo said. She and her friends took a selfie with him.





The commissioner, center, poses with tourists at Ferré Park in downtown Miami. Linda Robertson [lrobertson@miamiherald.com](mailto:lrobertson@miamiherald.com)

The project, which Carollo says has attracted 350,000 visitors in one year, was installed at a cost of \$1 million with a no-bid contract.

“My enemies insinuate I got a kickback,” Carollo said. “I’ve never lined my pockets doing city business.”

Carollo pointed to bronze sculptures he acquired on loan, picked up a piece of trash and noticed that newly planted impatiens were wilting. He called a supervisor to get them watered.

“Looking more like a world-class European park every day,” Carollo said.



#### SHAKEDOWN CITY

## The Kingdom and I

How Miami's mayor helped Saudi Arabia rehab its bloody reputation.

## ADORING ABUELAS AND FRIGHTENED EMPLOYEES

So how has Carollo remained in power despite the dysfunctional state of Miami government? At Robert King High Towers, the mystery is solved. Here, home to low-income elderly people, in one of Miami's pockets of *el exilio*, is the nerve center.

Maria Campos and Lilian Pla, 75, are in charge of the teeny headquarters of the residents association. Inside, Pla — sister of Enrique Pla, drummer for the renowned Cuban band Irakere — plays Cuban ballads like “*Siboney*” and “*Guantanamera*” on an electronic keyboard. Campos cracks Cuba jokes: “A husband and wife sit in their Havana kitchen. They have no food or electricity. He opens a box that contains four new tires. She asks him, ‘Why do you buy tires when you don’t have a car to put them on?’ He asks her, ‘Why do you buy bras when you don’t have breasts to fill them?’”

They are thankful for Joe Carollo. Thankful for the 4,000 turkeys he hands out every Thanksgiving and the 7,500 pork dinners he delivers at Christmastime. Thankful that he comes for birthdays and bingo. Thankful that he “protects us and never forgets us.” Thankful that he listens whenever they call, sometimes to talk when they’re feeling lonely.



Watch on X

Carollo shared a video of himself giving away turkeys on X, formerly called Twitter, on Nov. 22, 2023.

“I walk around here every morning at 4 a.m. and saw that we do not have enough benches,” Campos said. “I called Commissioner Carollo, who is my friend, and the next day we had 43 new benches. We have people living on the 14th floor and it is difficult for them to use the elevator. He helps us obtain medical certificates to move them to a ground floor unit.

“We vote for him, always and forever.”

How many votes does he need? Not many. He won the 2021 election with 4,001 votes; only 7 percent of the 95,000 constituents in his district cast ballots. He won the 2017 runoff by 250 votes.

Once he's in office, Carollo maintains his grip on government by punishing anyone who disagrees with him, according to city employees' testimony in the Ball & Chain lawsuit. Ask former city manager Jose Garcia-Pedrosa, who was fired three times in three weeks by Carollo, and reinstated three times by commissioners before he gave up and resigned. Ask the former members of the Historic Virginia Key Beach Trust and operator of the Outdoor Center, all removed from their posts after they objected to Carollo's proposal to move the city's homeless population to an encampment on the island.

At least three employees said they comply with Carollo's demands for fear of losing their jobs, jobs that lead to generous golden city pensions upon retirement.



City of Miami Commissioner Joe Carollo celebrates supporters after winning the reelection for district 3, at the Old Havana Restaurant in Little Havana, on Tuesday, November 02, 2021. Pedro Portal [pportal@miamiherald.com](mailto:pportal@miamiherald.com)

## **RUN OR RETIRE?**



Carollo will be 70 when his term runs out. Is he planning to retire?

He'd like to have time to re-plant his garden and restock his Koi pond. Travel. Visit family. He hasn't decided whether to run for mayor. Miami's political insiders predict he won't be able to resist, "and Joe can easily raise a ton of money for another campaign," Regalado said. Carollo raised \$2 million in 2021.

Carollo claims he could say goodbye to all that and wouldn't be bored living on a farm with lots of rescued dogs and cats, which is what his wife Marjorie dreams of.

"This job hasn't given me a life," he said. "Majorie and I would like to retire to Shangri-La."

Where is Shangri-La, Joe?

Carollo chuckled. A monotone chuckle, but a chuckle nonetheless.

"I can't tell you where it is," he said. "Because then everyone will want to move there. I'd have to become prime minister to control the border."

*Clarification: The initial version of this article was updated to detail how city staffers came to accompany Commissioner Carollo on a visit to homeless gathering spots.*

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LINDA ROBERTSON



Linda Robertson has written about a variety of compelling subjects during an award-winning career. As a sports columnist she covered 13 Olympics, Final Fours, World Cups, Wimbledon, Heat and Hurricanes, Super Bowls, Soul Bowls, Cuban defectors, LeBron James, Tiger Woods, Roger Federer, Lance Armstrong, Tonya Harding. She golfed with Donald Trump, fished with Jimmy Johnson, learned a magic trick from Muhammad Ali and partnered with Venus Williams to defeat Serena. She now chronicles our love-hate relationship with Miami, where she grew up.



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