

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY APRIL 19, 2016 6:50 PM

Opa-locka city attorney named to MDX toll board

HIGHLIGHTS

Vincent Brown under scrutiny for his role managing legal response to corruption probe of city

Says he opposes automatic toll hikes on MDX roads

Toll board not popular, with one county commissioner hoping it disbands by 2020



BY DOUGLAS HANKS

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The Opa-locka city attorney under scrutiny for his role in responding to a corruption probe tied to the city's fiscal meltdown was tapped Tuesday for a seat on Miami-Dade's MDX toll authority.

Vincent Brown won the seat on the 13-member Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, which sets toll rates and manages improvements for five of Miami-Dade's busiest highways. The appointment by the County Commission comes as Brown is under the spotlight at Opa-locka after he emailed a confidential FBI witness list to all 180 city employees.

Two top administrators of the city filed complaints against Brown, claiming he placed them in danger by revealing their status as grand-jury witnesses in a wide-ranging bribery investigation that coincided with exposure of the city's financial peril thanks to millions in uncollected revenue.

Brown addressed the witness-list controversy before commissioners took the vote that granted him a one-year stint on the MDX board and extended current member A.J. Meyer's tenure for another four years. Brown, a private attorney on a \$24,500-a-month contract with Opa-locka, said he erred in sending out the email but that the mistake only distributed information already well known in City Hall because FBI agents had already read off a witness list to a large gathering of Opa-locka employees.

"It was painful to be falsely accused, and that how I feel," Brown said. "It was not done intentionally or maliciously. It was just a simple mistake."

The appointment created overlap between one of the Miami area's most high-profile municipal scandals of the moment (Opa-locka) with the slow-burn resentment toward one of the county's least-popular government boards (the MDX). Before the vote, Commissioner Xavier Suarez said he didn't want to endorse any of the three MDX candidates for a four-year term because "I'm hoping this agency won't exist in four years."

Miami-Dade commissioners appoint a majority of the MDX board, and will control five seats once a new state law shrinks the toll authority to nine members. The changes will take place as seats become vacant after July 1, with positions dissolving until the MDX is left with five commission seats, and three appointed by Florida's governor. The ninth member remains the state transportation secretary for the South Florida region.

The screening process for the commission seats revealed a string of court judgments against Brown, including an \$876,000 foreclosure from 2013 over a failed restaurant deal and a \$441,000 foreclosure from 2014 over a property loan. Outside chambers, Brown declined to comment on the commission auditor's report. The background checks also showed three dropped

misdemeanor charges against Meyer from 2005 and 2007, including possession of alcohol while a minor and petty larceny. “I was a young man in college,” said Meyer, who works for Balfour Beatty Construction in Miami.

Meyer joined the MDX board in March 2015, and won the four-year slot Tuesday when he received the most votes from the 13-member County Commission. Brown tied with the third candidate, hospital executive Roymi Membiela, for the one-year seat but later won a run-off against her.

Asked about his position on tolls, the top source of friction on the MDX, Brown said he’s against linking tolls to automatic increases in inflation, which would occur on MDX roads by 2020 if the authority’s board doesn’t intervene.

“There’s a cost of doing business when you ride along MDX roadways,” he said. “Yes, there’s a need for tolls [but] I don’t believe in an automatic escalation.”



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