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Contact: Joseph Centorino, Executive Director
(305) 350-0613 or centori@miamidade.gov

Ethics Commission endorses change in Miami Beach campaign law

The Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust (COE) today gave its support to a proposed amendment to a City of Miami Beach ordinance that would prohibit the Mayor and City Commissioners and candidates for those offices from soliciting campaign contributions for Political Action Committees which donate to city candidates. That message was shared at the City Commission meeting this afternoon when the item was presented for first reading. The proposal would extend an existing ban on contributions from city vendors, lobbyists or real estate developers. The change, proposed by Commissioner Jonah Wolfson, came in response to controversy over a Political Action Committee established by Wolfson and Mayor Philip Levine that raised \$1.5 million dollars from local businesses and lobbyists to support certain candidates and issues in the upcoming Miami Beach election. The account was recently closed down by Wolfson, and the donations refunded. The COE has jurisdiction to interpret and enforce local campaign finance rules and had been investigating whether that PAC violated an existing city law prohibiting campaign donations from those who do business or lobby the city. Adoption of the ordinance change would eliminate the need for Ethics Commission action on the legality of the PAC donations.

The Ethics Commission approved the naming of Ingy Cruz, the Social Sciences Department Chair at Bob Graham Education Center, as the Ethics Commission Teacher of the Year for her dedicated contributions to civics education. The 2006 Miami-Dade Teacher of the Year has also led her teams to statewide wins in Project Citizen Oral Hearing in 2014 and 2015 and top placement in Middle School Mock Trial competitions during the past two years. In addition to planning and implementing various civic programs and community fundraisers, Ms. Cruz also serves as liaison for the Close Up program that sends students to Washington, D.C. to learn more about government. After graduating from Florida International University, the Hialeah resident was named 1997 Beginning Teacher of the Year. The presentation to Ms. Cruz will be a part of activities on Ethical Governance Day, Thursday, October 22, when more than 200 civic leaders will speak to 12th graders in most Miami-Dade high schools.

Today's meeting began with the introduction of new Ethics Commissioner H. Jeffrey Cutler, Esq. The appointee of the Miami-Dade League of Cities is a Partner in the Coral Gables-based law firm of De La Cruz & Cutler, LLP, specializing in Civil, Corporate, Commercial, and Personal Injury Law and Litigation. Mr. Cutler was elected as a Councilmember of the Village of Pinecrest in November 2006, re-elected in November 2010, and served as Vice-Mayor from 2008 to 2009 and 2012 to 2013. The native Miamian and University of Florida alumnus was sworn in to his four-year term on September 16th by Honorable Bertila Soto, Chief Judge of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit.

The Ethics Commission was created in 1996 as an independent agency with advisory and quasi-judicial powers. It is composed of five members, serving staggered terms of four years each. Through a program of education, outreach and enforcement, the Commission seeks to empower the community and bolster public trust.