

# In divided North Miami Beach, Publix gift card giveaway becomes another political fight

By [Aaron Leibowitz](#)

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The city of North Miami Beach gave away hundreds of Publix gift cards worth \$100 apiece to residents Saturday morning at Uleta Park, an effort meant to help people still reeling from the pandemic. But political battles cast a shadow over the event, as they have over seemingly every government-led effort in the Northeast Miami-Dade city in recent months.

The distribution of 1,000 grocery gift cards became the latest fight between sparring political factions now at odds over who should take credit, where and when the cards were doled out, and whether a batch set aside for the city's Orthodox Jewish community is being distributed properly.

Like many recent issues in the city, this one broke down at least partially [along racial, ethnic and religious lines](#). An April proposal by Commissioner Paule Villard to put \$100,000 from the city budget toward the gift cards was approved by a 4-3 vote, with four Haitian-American commissioners in favor and three white officials against.

Since then, Mayor Anthony DeFillipo and other commissioners have raised a host of grievances — an increasingly frequent occurrence when they are on the losing end of a vote. For one, they have complained that a flier promoting the event features only the commissioners who voted in favor.

“While I could care less if my picture is on this announcement, it proves the nonsense I now deal with in NMB government,” Commissioner Barbara Kramer posted on Facebook.

The City of North Miami Beach Commission, present

Commissioner McKenzie Fleurimond

Vice Mayor Paule Villard

Commissioner Daniela Jean

Commissioner Michael Joseph

**Publix**

**GIFT CARDS DISTRIBUTION**

**DRIVE THRU**

**\$100.00 GIFT CARD**

**ONE gift card per household**

**DISTRIBUTION DATE: SATURDAY, JUNE 5TH**

**ULETA PARK**

**386 NE 169TH ST.**

**NORTH MIAMI BEACH, FL 33162**

**DISTRIBUTION STARTS 8:00 AM UNTIL 11:00 AM**

**MUST be an NMB resident**

**MUST show proof of residency by providing a State issued ID containing a North Miami Beach address**

**MUST have experienced financial hardship due to COVID-19**

Please call the City of North Miami Beach at 305-354-4424 for more information.

A flier for the June 5 Publix gift card giveaway in North Miami Beach. *City of North Miami Beach*

Some questioned why the event was held on the city's west side, an area with a large Haitian population, instead of a more central location like City Hall.

"This is another political move," DeFillipo wrote on Facebook.

The mayor, who has [harshly criticized](#) the city's Haitian-American officials since they gained a majority on the commission in November, blasted them in a flurry of Facebook comments last week. He called them "hypocrites" and accused them of "corruption," a charge often thrown around by DeFillipo.

Villard, the commissioner who proposed the event, told the Miami Herald on Saturday that she saw other cities hosting similar Publix gift card giveaways last year and wanted to do the same for North Miami Beach.

"I felt like our residents needed something as well," she said.

### **Gift cards set aside for Jewish community**

After members of the city's Orthodox Jewish community asked why the event was planned for a Saturday morning — when people who observe Shabbat would not be able to attend — the city's solution set off more controversy.

Villard tapped Alan Sakowitz, an influential figure in the local Orthodox Jewish community, to help the city set aside about 200 gift cards for those who couldn't attend the giveaway. Sakowitz sent a sign-up link to subscribers of his email newsletter, with gift cards being reserved for the first 200 residents to submit their information.

"Commissioner Paule Villard has asked that I send a sign-up form to the Orthodox Jewish Community," Sakowitz wrote in one of his newsletters, featuring a photograph of Villard. "She has set aside 200 slots [\$20,000] for Shabbos observant Jews so we will not be excluded because its a Shabbos give-a-way."

That angered some Orthodox Jewish residents who said they don't receive Sakowitz's emails and therefore weren't aware of the opportunity. Others questioned why Villard had turned to Sakowitz, who has used his newsletter in the past to make political endorsements in North Miami Beach.

Sakowitz "is usually somebody candidates will go to because he is believed to control a large voting bloc," said David Templer, a former city commissioner who requested public records about the city's gift card distribution plan on Thursday, citing concerns about the process.

In a subsequent newsletter, Sakowitz noted that "about 30%" of the sign-ups were by residents of unincorporated Miami-Dade who aren't eligible for the gift cards, and said there had also been multiple sign-ups from within the same households, neither of which is allowed.

"I cannot turn in a list that has so many invalid names and addresses," he wrote.

Yona Lunger, an activist in the Orthodox Jewish community and the volunteer chaplain for North Miami Beach, said he wasn't briefed about the plan to set aside 200 gift cards or asked to assist in the outreach effort.

It wasn't clear if other avenues were taken to reach Jewish residents. Sakowitz could not be reached for comment. Villard did not respond to a message asking specifically about criticism of the approach.



North Miami Beach residents lined up in their cars along NE 4th Avenue during a Publix gift card distribution drive-thru at Uleta Park Community Center, on Saturday June 06, 2021. Pedro Portal [pportal@miamiherald.com](mailto:pportal@miamiherald.com)

### **'Giving back to the residents'**

As hundreds of cars lined the residential neighborhood near Uleta Park waiting for gift cards Saturday morning, City Manager Arthur "Duke" Sorey told the Herald that between 200 and 250 gift cards were set aside for the Jewish community. He declined to specify how the process was handled or the extent of Sakowitz's involvement.

The city worked with "a couple" of people in the Jewish community, Sorey said. "I'm not sure how many it was, but [they were] some of the people that we've normally dealt with in the past," he said.

Sorey said an additional batch of gift cards was set aside for homebound residents who told the city they couldn't attend the drive-through-only event.

As for the decision to hold the event at Uleta Park, Sorey downplayed any suggestions of political motives.

"No [reason] in particular," he said. "We tried to stay away from some of the major thoroughfares not to disrupt traffic in North Miami Beach, so this worked out for us."



City of North Miami Beach employee Quance Arnette (left) and Democratic State Representative Christopher Benjamin handed out Publix gift cards to residents lining up in cars at Uleta Park Community Center, on Saturday June 06, 2021. Pedro Portal [pportal@miamiherald.com](mailto:pportal@miamiherald.com)

Some people who waited in line Saturday were turned away because they didn't have state-issued IDs that proved they are city residents. One woman said after being turned away that she has Temporary Protected Status — referring to the federal designation that protects immigrants from specific struggling countries from being deported — but a police officer told her to move along.

Sorey said the decision to restrict the gift cards to city residents was made because taxpayer money was used.

“These funds came directly out of the city’s coffers,” he said. “We’re giving back to the residents.”

### **Villard defends her plan**

Villard defended her gift card proposal at an April 20 meeting. “Our city is hungry and our residents are looking for this \$100,” she said.

She added that “it’s not because I’m trying to do something for the election.” Villard is up for re-election in 2022.

At the meeting, city officials seemed open to the idea of putting taxpayer money toward helping residents alleviate financial burdens. DeFillipo and Kramer floated the possibility of helping pay residents’ water bills, suggesting it would be a more equitable way to help many residents, rather than only 1,000 in the city of about 43,000 people.

“To say that we’re gonna give money ... to some people and not to every taxpayer from a tax base that everybody pays into would be inappropriate,” DeFillipo said.

Several municipalities in Miami-Dade County, including Miami and Miami Beach, ran [Publix gift card giveaways](#) last year, but those were funded by federal COVID relief dollars rather than city money.

Commissioner McKenzie Fleurimond said he hoped the city would be able to reimburse the \$100,000 for the gift cards with money from the Biden administration’s American Rescue Plan Act, which will send funds directly to small municipalities. North Miami Beach is [expected to receive](#) over \$18 million in direct aid.

Former Interim City Manager Horace McHugh said at the April meeting that he wasn't sure whether the city would be allowed to use that federal aid to cover the gift card costs.

The drive-through event Saturday was first come, first serve, with residents being asked to show state-issued ID. The city also said in promoting the event that gift card recipients "MUST have experienced financial hardship due to COVID-19."

"We have a lot of people who are in need at this time," Villard said during the April 20 meeting. "Whoever wants it badly will come in line and get it."

*Miami Herald staff photographer Pedro Portal contributed to this report.*



North Miami Beach Commissioner Paule Villard welcomed residents as cars lined up along NE 4th Avenue during a Publix gift card distribution drive-thru at Uleta Park Community Center, on Saturday June 06, 2021. Pedro Portal [pportal@miamiherald.com](mailto:pportal@miamiherald.com)

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