

Local & State

Suit latest move in push for campaign cash vote

■ **Lawsuit demands county commission or mayor intervene and order Elections Department to begin counting signatures tied to petition on campaign-cash limits.**

BY DOUGLAS HANKS
dhanks@miamiherald.com

The push to get campaign-cash restrictions before Miami-Dade voters in November moved to the courts Tuesday, with an advocacy group unveiling a lawsuit demanding the county start counting about 127,000 signatures on a petition backing the ballot item.

“The petitions are collecting dust,” said Monica Russo, president of the local SEIU union and a chair of Accountable Miami-Dade, which organized the petition drive to ban campaign donations from county lobbyists and vendors. “Democracy delayed is democracy denied.”

At issue is timing, with the Accountable Miami-Dade group insisting the county can complete a count quickly enough for printing ballots in September. County officials say there isn’t enough time after the Aug. 2 delivery of 1,273 boxes of petition forms in the midst of a primary election and the coming scramble to get ready for November’s presidential election.

The lawsuit asks a judge to require either the 13-member County Commission or Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez to instruct election administrators to start counting the petitions. The commission called a special meeting last week to order the count, but could not get a quorum. No regular commission meeting is scheduled until mid-September.

In the lawsuit, Accountable Miami-Dade says Gimenez’s recess authority gives him the power to act without the commission, but county lawyers issued an opinion over the weekend saying he does not. Gimenez said he wants voters to decide the issue in November but that he cannot step in and start the count.

The petition drive is supported by top players on the liberal side of Miami-Dade’s political spectrum. Labor money is helping back the group, and Christian Ulvert, a leading consultant for local Democratic candidates, is running the effort. Supporters have used the #StartCounting hashtag to criticize commissioners and Gimenez for not intervening with Elections.

Restrictions on lobbyist and vendor money, along with the lower limits, could be an advantage to labor unions, which rely on smaller contributions from members to support favored candidates. The rules also would hit a core source of campaign cash for incumbents.

Critics of the measure privately say they expect it would pass in November, but that it would be vulnerable to a court challenge over freedom to participate in the political process. Abigail Price-Williams, Miami-Dade’s lead attorney, has not issued an opinion on the proposal.



PEDRO PORTAL pportal@miamiherald.com

Dr. Tomas Villanueva, a primary care physician at Baptist Health, speaks about the prevention of the Zika virus during an informational community event at South Miami Hospital on Tuesday.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Travel-related infections of Zika rise in Florida

BY DANIEL CHANG
dchang@miamiherald.com

Florida health officials reported a respite in local Zika infections on Tuesday, but the number of travel-related cases increased by 13, including five cases in Miami-Dade, four in Broward, one each

in Hillsborough, Orange and St. Lucie counties. There was also one pregnant woman with the virus.

The number of Zika infections spread by mosquitoes in Florida remains at 30 cases, with 27 of those reported in Miami-Dade, two in Broward and one in Palm Beach.

State health officials said

active transmission by mosquitoes is occurring only within an area of less than one-square-mile north of downtown Miami. But epidemiologists are investigating four cases outside of that zone, including three in Miami-Dade and one in Palm Beach.

Florida has reported at least 512 travel-related

Zika cases, including 60 pregnant women, who are considered at greatest risk from the disease because it can cause severe birth defects and neurological disorders.

Miami-Dade has the greatest number of Zika cases statewide, with 136 infections picked up by people traveling to areas

with active Zika transmission.

The first case related to travel within the continental United States appears to have happened this week, when a Texas man who visited Miami’s Wynwood neighborhood in late July returned home with El Paso’s first case of Zika infection, health officials reported.

Texas has 108 reported cases of Zika statewide, including three pregnant women, two infants infected before birth, and one person who had sexual contact with a traveler who had the disease. But the El Paso man, who has not been identified, appears to be the first travel-related case within the continental United States.

Robert Resendes, director of the City of El Paso Department of Public Health, urged residents to be calm but informed, and assured Texans that no local mosquitoes were carrying the virus.

“This is a gentleman who was healthy when he left El Paso, traveled to Florida, happened to go to the area where there has been transmission of Zika by mosquitoes, came home infected, sick, and sought out medical attention,” Resendes said Monday during a press conference to announce the Zika infection.

Symptoms of Zika include fever, joint pain, a rash and red eyes that can last about one week, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Resendes said the man has recovered.

Daniel Chang:
305-376-2012,
@dchangmiami

CAMPAIGN 2016

Garcia lashes out at TV station after Miami congressional debate

BY PATRICIA MAZZEI
pmazzei@miamiherald.com

Former U.S. Rep. Joe Garcia was fuming when the cameras stopped rolling Monday night at the end of his first televised debate against Miami Democratic primary opponent Annette Taddeo.

Angered over what he perceived as bias against him, Garcia stepped into a hallway just outside the recording studio of Spanish-language station *América TeVé* and lashed out — loudly — at moderator Felix Guillermo and, later, at station manager Miguel Cossio, according to several people who overheard the heated argument.

Two people said they heard Garcia say “*come-mierda*,” a common local insult usually taken to mean “fool” or “jackass,” though it literally translates to “s***-eater.” On Tuesday afternoon, Cossio and Guillermo vehemently denied to the Miami Herald that Garcia used the word against either of them.

“I wouldn’t have allowed that,” Cossio said. “He never insulted me,” Guillermo said.

The exchange lasted a few minutes, according to the people who heard it, with Garcia unleashing his frustration after a debate he apparently felt did not go well. *América TeVé* employees appeared surprised and embarrassed by the dust-up — especially because Taddeo still hadn’t left the station.

Guillermo dismissed the incident as an “internal” matter. “Nothing happened,” he told the Herald on Tuesday morning.

Cossio went further, denying that any tense discussion took place.

“I can tell you none did,” he said. “Joe Garcia and I have known each other for many years — 15, 20 years. Like in all relationships, I’ve had all sorts of exchanges with him — none of them violent. With Joe I have the best relationship in the world.”

Garcia, who’s known to lose his temper in the political arena, did not return a call seeking comment. His spokesman, Javier Hernandez, said there was no post-debate yelling match.

But news of Garcia’s outburst spread quickly Monday night among Miami’s tight-knit Spanish media regulars — so quickly that former Hialeah Mayor Raul Martinez, a Taddeo supporter who in previous campaigns backed Garcia, mentioned the verbal scuffle on *Prohibido Callarse* (Silence Banned), a program that aired immediately after the debate on rival station Mira TV.

It didn’t help Garcia that at least three times during the debate he mistakenly referred to Guillermo, the

moderator, as “Ricardo” instead of “Felix.” He repeatedly apologized, on air and later on Twitter.

“I’m sorry for confusing your name,” Garcia wrote Guillermo on Twitter in Spanish. “It was a senior moment. I send you a sincere apology and a hug.”

But Guillermo told the Herald on Tuesday that the repeated use of “Ricardo” — a possible reference to his media colleague Ricardo Brown — hardly seemed unintentional.

“He tried to create an uncomfortable environment, but that was it, it didn’t go further from there,” Guillermo said of Garcia. “He made the same mistake four times. I imagine it wasn’t a mistake, that there was some sort of intention behind it, but I don’t know what it was.”

The scuttlebutt from others inside *América TeVé*: That Guillermo had upset Garcia by not referring to him by the honorific “congressman.”

During the debate itself, Garcia and Taddeo, whose tone has gotten increasingly combative on the cam-

paign trail, did not hold back. The one-time friends and former political allies are competing in the Aug. 30 primary to challenge incumbent Republican Rep. Carlos Curbelo, who represents the Westchester-to-Key West 26th congressional district.

“The reality is that people know my character,” Garcia said during the debate, “and they know my service.”

Garcia, considered the leading primary contender, portrayed Taddeo as a Democratic Party patsy and serial failed candidate who sought his endorsement as recently as December — and then agreed to run a positive race against him once he announced his candidacy. He accused her of instead resorting to a “dirty” campaign using “Trump tactics,” referring to Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump.

He also held up a thick folder representing the 76-page opposition-research book her campaign wrote on him — a document released online just hours before the debate by

an anonymous hacker who obtained records from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Other party documents also cast Garcia — and, in one case, Taddeo — in a negative light.

On the debate stage, Taddeo pulled out paperwork of her own: a document from one of two past criminal investigations into Garcia’s previous campaigns (he was never charged) and a letter he wrote while in Congress on behalf of a now-defunct for-profit university. She chided him for spending more than \$150,000 in campaign funds for defense attorneys.

“*Mijito*,” she said, using a Spanish-language term of endearment that can also be condescending, “you should be ashamed of comparing me to Trump.”

Taddeo said the national Democratic organization Emily’s List tried to recruit her to run against Garcia in 2012 but she turned it down to support him. The night Charlie Crist lost the 2014 Florida governor’s race — Taddeo was Crist’s running mate — Taddeo said Garcia telephoned to urge her to run for U.S. Senate, which she took as a warning not to challenge him for Congress.

“Falsehoods,” Garcia retorted, countering that Taddeo was looking for “petty motives” to run against her friend.

Taddeo backed Garcia’s failed 2014 re-election bid, but decided against supporting him again after a federal investigation uncovered an email that suggested Garcia might have known about a ringer candidate his former campaign manager planted in the 2010 congressional primary — something Garcia has denied.

“We told you not to do it,” Taddeo said of Garcia’s latest run. “You got burned with everything that happened.”



Annette Taddeo is running against Joe Garcia in the Democratic primary for the 26th Congressional District.