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## Miami Commission fires head of Community Redevelopment Agencies

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Miami commissioners fired the director of the city's Community Redevelopment Agencies late Thursday, saying new leadership was needed for an agency mandated with reviving blighted communities.

The ousted executive director, James Villacorta, had run the city's Southeast Overtown/Park West, Omni and Midtown CRAs since 2006. Before that he worked in the city attorney's office. Villacorta earned \$120,000 a year.

Villacorta was dismissed as head of the two largest CRAs -- in Overtown and the Omni area. It was unclear Friday morning if he would remain in charge of the Midtown CRA.

The firing came during a brief CRA meeting just before 11 p.m., shortly after most in the audience had left the chamber.

And, the dismissal came the same day the commission deferred a pair of controversial items in which Villacorta offered equally controversial opinions.

Commissioners Marc Sarnoff and Richard P. Dunn II -- who head up the Omni and Overtown CRAs -- had sought to use \$105,000 in CRA money to cover expenses for the time personnel in commission offices conducted CRA business, The Miami Herald reported Thursday.

That request prompted criticism from experts in redevelopment, who say money intended to spur community revivals should stay in the community. Under the request, the \$105,000 would go to City Hall -- at a time several commissioners were running overbudget.

Villacorta justified the requests by quoting from state statute: "[A] commissioner shall receive no compensation for services, but is entitled to the necessary expenses, including travel expenses, incurred in the discharge of duties."

The city attorney had not offered an opinion on that spending, and Mayor Tomás Regalado said the commissioners appeared to be looking to help cover budget shortfalls.

Amid those questions, commissioners put off the spending request.

Commissioners -- who make up the CRA boards -- voted unanimously to relieve Villacorta of the two posts, with Commissioner Frank Carollo absent. Dunn and Sarnoff could not be reached Friday morning.

Commissioner Francis Suarez, who heads the Midtown CRA, by far the smallest of the three, at one point asked Villacorta to stay at the \$12,000 salary he receives from that agency.

The director didn't announce his intention, and couldn't be reached Friday morning.

“Everyone as a political leader in a position of responsibility is entitled to choose,” said Suarez. “I have no problem with the executive director.”

In the other two CRAs, Villacorta was replaced by Pieter Botkweg, who had been overseeing the city's billboard operations as an assistant to the director in planning and zoning.

The agencies are special taxing districts mandated to reinvest money in blighted communities.

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