

Miami-Dade commissioners lift ban on new cities

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Miami-Dade commissioners on Tuesday lifted a nearly five-year ban against new cities, opening the door for communities that have long sought to break from the county to seek their independence.

Commissioners approved getting rid of the moratorium on city incorporations with a unanimous, 11-0 vote. Chairman Joe Martinez was absent, and Commissioner Xavier Suarez was away from the dais at the time of the vote, though in debate earlier said he supported lifting the ban.

The move will not immediately lead to any new cities in the county, which already has 34 municipalities. But five communities — the Sky Lake and Highland Lakes neighborhoods west of Aventura, the Fontainebleau community near Sweetwater, a portion of North-Central Miami-Dade east of Hialeah, Biscayne Gardens and Fisher Island — have pending city bids that will now be allowed to move forward.

Biscayne Gardens and Fisher Island are far behind the other three communities in their cityhood efforts.

Cityhood activists exchanged congratulatory hugs after Tuesday's commission vote, while acknowledging that the road to creating new municipalities is long and often bumpy.

"This is really a historic moment for our community," said Lenny Feldman, who heads the incorporation committee for the Sky Lake-Highland Lakes Area Homeowners Association. "Now the real work begins."

Commissioners have yet to decide what to do about thorny questions new cities would pose, such as whether they would have to pay annual fees to the county as a price for incorporating, or whether they would get a share of the money Miami-Dade collects from a half-penny transportation tax. The commission agreed to hold a publicly noticed meeting soon to tackle some of those matters.

They also said they want to delve into the looming, big-picture question: Should all of Miami-Dade's unincorporated areas become cities, leaving county government to manage larger, regional issues such as transit, jails and the ports?

"If we're going to incorporate, I want to incorporate everything into a new city," said Commissioner Dennis Moss, echoing some of his colleagues' concerns that poorer pockets of the county would be left out of city boundaries to fend for themselves.

While Tuesday's meeting left that question unanswered, commissioners agreed that the county should stop getting in the way of residents proposing new cities — and that the county should take a stronger role in providing information about what new cities could mean financially for the

county and for residents whose property-tax rates could go up.

“If it’s going to cost them more, then let the community understand that and know it in the beginning,” Commissioner Barbara Jordan said.

In a committee vote last month, Jordan and Commissioner Jose “Pepe” Diaz opposed lifting the ban, as proposed by Commissioners Esteban Bovo, Sally Heyman and Jean Monestime. Both Diaz and Jordan said Tuesday they are not against new cities but want to make sure the county closely studies the effects of new incorporations.

It may have helped that mayors from Doral and Miami Gardens — two of the county’s youngest cities, which also happen to be in Diaz’s and Jordan’s districts, respectively — spoke in favor of lifting the ban, as did the president of the Miami-Dade League of Cities.

Jordan, who lives in Miami Gardens, praised that city’s mayor, Shirley Gibson, and her fellow city council members for dramatically raising city taxes.

“I disagreed wholeheartedly with the decision to incorporate, but I was wrong,” Jordan said. “They had the courage to do what was needed in order to survive.”

Doral Mayor Juan Carlos Bermudez reminded commissioners that they would have to vote to create any new cities — as would the potential residents of those new cities.

“In the end, you’re going to have a chance to say no. If you don’t say no, in the end, people can vote no,” he said. “That’s democracy at its best.”