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## District 5 sees trouble, few results

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It's almost an urban legend in Miami. The "black seat" on the City Commission is cursed, its occupant subject to special scrutiny. The belief that something is rotten in lawless-land is so common that one celebrity friend of Michelle Spence-Jones recently wrote in a local newspaper that "you have to be the pope" to hold the seat.

Indeed, since 1995, every elected District 5 commissioner (though not the various appointees) has found themselves in legal trouble, including the twice-removed Spence-Jones, recently indicted for soliciting a \$25,000 bribe from developers (and of redirecting county grant money to a family business before she became commissioner).

The idea of a "curse" is a bit paranoid. The history of Miami is littered with the multicultural remains of political careers torched by scandal. There are former commissioners (Angel Gonzales, Johnny Winton, Art Teele), mayors like Xavier Suarez and Joe Carollo (whose ghosts now haunt City Hall in the form of their relatives), the men of Operation Greenpalm (Miami commissioner Miller Dawkins, ex-city manager Howard Gary and County Commissioner James Burke); and another former manager, Cesar Odio. Plus, the near-misses: Barbara Carey-Shuler, whose alleged bribery "bag man" came forward too late, and the recently departed police chief, John Timoney, whose career was run over by a free SUV.

But in District 5, the tragedy is compounded by the magnitude of the community's need and by the wasted decades in which little has gone right.

### Residents underrepresented

The District 5 seat is partly the result of the battle for single-member districts that heated up in the 1980s and '90s. Back then, black and Hispanic activists went to court, arguing that despite making up a combined 70-plus percent of the city and county population, they were underrepresented on the mostly white commissions.

Blacks had held office in Miami and "Metro-Dade" since 1966, when Athalie Range was appointed to fill a vacancy on the City Commission then got elected twice. Indeed, well before single-member districts became the law in Miami-Dade in 1992 and in Miami in 1997, Gwen Cherry was elected to the state Legislature (in 1970), Art Teele and Barbara Carey (pre-Shuler) sat on the County Commission, Bill Turner sat on the School Board and Carrie Meek served in the state House, having been elected in 1978, four years before

Florida adopted single-member districts for the Legislature.

Still, the idea of carving out "communities of interest" to ensure fair distribution of resources had broad support, and passed 79-21 percent in a Miami special election. (Voters also overwhelmingly rejected dissolving scandal and deficit-ridden Miami.)

Critics warned that ending candidates' need to run city- or countywide could lead to back-room deals, "ward politics" and vote-trading, as lawmakers stopped taking the entire municipality into account in their decision-making and instead guarded their own turf.

And while the goals behind single-member districts were -- and are -- worthy, it's hard to argue that Miami's poorest residents have benefited much. The two "black" School Board districts are packed with failing schools; District 5 remains locked in poverty, despite hundreds of millions of community-redevelopment dollars earmarked for it over the years.

### **The swing vote**

The District 5 commissioner is often the swing vote for important votes on lucrative projects that in a strange inverse of anti-single member fears, often benefit those outside District 5. Even the never-taken vote that Spence-Jones is accused of selling for 25 grand would have expanded Brickell Avenue northward, so close to Overtown but so far away.

The ousted commissioner did extract a commitment for a \$500 million bond issue for the District's CRA for her yes vote on the boondoggle Marlins stadium. Hopefully the money will be put to better use than past CRA funds, which have done nothing to improve blighted Overtown, while providing the grist for corruption and greed.

Ironically, one project for which Spence-Jones gained infamy -- the failed push to build middle-class housing in Overtown -- might have actually helped her district economically had it succeeded.

As David Bositis, the senior political analyst at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies (and a proponent of single-member districts) put it, "For a place to be governed well, there has to be a culture of accountability."

The real curse of District 5? Having fought for representation, the people there neglected to fight for results.

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