MIAMI-DADE COMMISSION ON ETHICS AND PUBLIC TRUST

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MATTERS UNDER INITIAL REVIEW

TO: Radia Turay, Advocate

FROM: Karl Ross, Investigator

SUBJECT: MUIR 23-05, Coral Gables Mayor Vince Lago

DATE: August 23, 2023

ALLEGATIONS

It was alleged that the City of Coral Gables Mayor, Vince Lago, falsely stated that neither he nor any member of his family had a financial interest in an area that the City of Coral Gables is seeking to annex known as "Little Gables," in possible violation of the *Truth in Government* provision of the Miami-Dade Citizens' Bill of Rights. Mayor Lago allegedly made this false statement at a City of Coral Gables Commission meeting, on August 24, 2022. He then allegedly voted in favor of a resolution supporting annexation and "then declare[d] himself the chief negotiator on all Little Gables deals." Additional information suggested that the Mayor's brother, land-use and zoning attorney Carlos R. Lago, had an ongoing and active relationship with the largest landholder in the Little Gables area, Titan Development Partners LLC (hereinafter "Titan"), and that Titan had a pending redevelopment plan for that area named "Little Gables Moorish Village."

FINDINGS

A formal affidavit signed by Mayor Lago and dated August 24, 2022, states as follows: "Neither I, nor any member of my immediate family, have any property or business interest in any property or business located within the boundaries of the area commonly known as 'Little Gables.'"

A review of agenda items and other records publicly available on the City of Coral Gables website shows that Mayor Lago introduced into the record the above-referenced affidavit at a City of Coral Gables Commission meeting on that same date, August 24, 2022. The meeting agenda reflects that Mayor Lago sponsored the item (G.-11.), described therein as: "A Resolution of the City Commission directing the City Manager and City Attorney to reinitiate the annexation process for Little Gables" (Resolution No. 22-4376).

A transcript of the discussion surrounding this item further reflects that Mayor Lago read into the record his affidavit and stated: "People have made very strong allegations that I own property in Little Gables, that I have a business interest in Little Gables, that I have accepted money from lobbyists from Little Gables to

bring this back. I'm putting it on the record that that is furthest from the truth and those type of allegations will not stand."

A review of City of Miami lobbyist records reflects that Mayor Lago's brother, Carlos R. Lago, registered as a lobbyist for Titan, on February 20, 2014. The lobbyist registration records note, under "issue description," that the registration was regarding "TDRs for commonwealth building property."

Little Gables is part of unincorporated Miami-Dade County, and property records show that Titan owns several large parcels of land within this area that are presently used as lots for a mobile home park.

On August 2, 2023, Mayor Lago provided a voluntary sworn statement to this agency via Zoom.[1] He was accompanied by legal counsel, Mason Pertnoy. Ethics Advocate Radia Turay also participated.

Mayor Lago advised that he has served as an elected official in Coral Gables for about ten years, and that he was recently re-elected to his post as Mayor. He said he previously served as City Commissioner. He said that he supported the issue of annexing the Little Gables neighborhood and that he decided to support a resolution to this effect based on feedback from residents and city officials. He said that at no point was this ever suggested to him by his brother, Carlos, and that he is not aware of any present relationship between his brother and any landowner or developer with property in the Little Gables. He stated that he had previously sought an opinion from now former Coral Gables City Attorney, Craig Leen, and that Mr. Leen advised him that his brother could appear before the City Commission so long as he was representing a client and not representing himself on a personal matter. Mayor Lago stated that even so, he advised his brother not to represent any clients in the City of Coral Gables while he held elected office in order to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest. He said that his brother has abided by this request.

Mayor Lago described recent reports linking his brother to the Little Gables annexation as part of "a smear campaign" by political adversaries. He said he started to hear chatter about this on the radio and elsewhere last year as the annexation issue became a topic of discussion and that he reached out to then City Attorney Miram Ramos, to consult her about ways to put these "rumors" to rest. He said that Ramos agreed to draft the affidavit and that he subsequently signed and submitted it as a public record on August 24, 2022. He said that Ms. Ramos also advised him to consult members of his family as to whether they owned any property or had any business dealings in the Little Gables area and that he did so during a Sunday dinner. He said that nobody in his family, including his brother Carlos, indicated that they had any property or business interests in the Little Gables. "The whole purpose of the affidavit was to create public trust," Mayor Lago said.

Mayor Lago further said that after subsequent media accounts indicated that his brother was an active lobbyist for Titan, he reached out to his brother and asked him about any such relationship. He said his brother advised him that he had not represented Titan in nearly a decade and that, when he did, it was regarding a matter in the City of Miami that had nothing to do with the proposed development in the Little Gables area. He said his brother has no active or pending involvement with Titan, adding: "my brother only wants what's best for me … He is not engaged with that client, and he has not engaged with that client for over a decade."

[1] A video of the above-referenced interview was added to the case file and should be relied upon for any quotes.

On August 8, 2023, this agency contacted Titan at its South Miami location, 4095 Ludlam Road. A message was left for the company's president, Jesus Suarez. This agency was advised that he was in Ft. Meyers on business pertaining to a project in that area and would return the call.

On August 9, 2023, Jesus Suarez, President of Titan, returned the call to this agency and advised that he has no relationship with Carlos Lago, professional or otherwise, at this time. He said that years ago, in 2014, his company hired a group to assist with obtaining "air rights" to a building that he was in the process of selling in downtown Miami (the Commonwealth building). He said Carlos Lago may have been part of that group, but that he had no recollection of ever meeting with him in person. He said that the air rights were required for a transfer of development rights or "TDRs" that were necessary to effectuate the sale. He said that Ben Fernandez presently serves as his zoning attorney and that he has no dealings with Carlos Lago. "If you put that guy in front of me, I wouldn't recognize him," Mr. Suarez said in the phone interview. He said he had been unaware of reports that he was in any way involved with Carlos Lago or his brother, the Mayor, stating "I'm not in cahoots with anybody. I don't have a relationship with Carlos or Vince Lago." He added that he is, in fact, the owner of the trailer park community in Little Gables and that he has ninety-five mostly elderly tenants renting spaces. He said he is exploring developing the property in the future, but not at this time.

On August 9, 2023, this agency received a sworn affidavit from former Coral Gables City Attorney, Miriam Ramos through Mayor Lago's private counsel, Mr. Pertnoy. The affidavit memorializes Ms. Ramos' interaction with the Mayor on the morning of August 24, 2022, as pertains to the Little Gables annexation issue. The facts, as described in the affidavit, are consistent with the Mayor's sworn statement regarding the same. The affidavit from Ms. Ramos was added to the case file.

In a phone interview on August 23, 2023, Carlos Lago advised that he had not had a professional relationship with Titan or its owner since 2015. He said that he previously represented Titan with respect to the sale of a property located in the City of Miami and noted that: "The representation concluded in 2015 at the time of the sale. I haven't spoken to Jesus [Suarez] in 10 years." He further advised that he had been unaware that Titan/Suarez owned the trailer park in the Little Gables area. He said that he did have a conversation with his brother, Mayor Lago, and that his brother did ask whether he owned any property in the Little Gables area, "And I told him, 'No.'" He said that annexation of the Little Gables has always been a highly politicized issue and said he felt his brother was being unfairly "attacked."

Mr. Carlos Lago provided a copy of his withdrawal notice for Titan that he filed with the Miami City Clerk's Office on March 6, 2023. He said he filed the notice for Titan and several other previous clients as a "housekeeping" matter.

CONCLUSION

Initial review report was forwarded to the Advocate.

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ADVOCATE'S CLOSEOUT DETERMINATION

The initial information gathered regarding this matter is not legally sufficient to commence an investigation on this matter. *Legal sufficiency exists where there is an allegation of a violation of an ordinance within the jurisdiction of the Ethics Commission, purportedly committed by an individual within the authority of the Ethics Commission, and the violation occurred within the Ethics Commission's three-year statute of limitations.*

Section (A)(2) of the Citizens' Bill of Rights, *Truth in Government*, states: "No County or municipal official or employee shall knowingly furnish false information on any public matter, nor knowingly omit significant facts when giving requested information to members of the public."

It was alleged that the Mayor of the City of Coral Gables, Vince Lago, violated the *Truth in Government* provision of the Miami-Dade Citizens' Bill of Rights during the Coral Gables Commission meeting on August 24, 2022, when he filed an affidavit and stated that neither he nor any member of his immediate family had a financial interest within the boundaries of the area commonly referred to as "Little Gables."[2] It was suggested that Mayor Lago's statement was false because his brother, land-use and zoning attorney Carlos R. Lago, had an ongoing and active relationship with a landholder in the Little Gables area, Titan Development Partners LLC, and that Titan had a pending redevelopment plan for that area, "Little Gables Moorish Village."

Based on the preliminary information gathered during our initial review of this matter, it does not appear that Mayor Lago knowingly made a false statement regarding this matter. Mayor Lago, in the voluntary sworn statement that he provided to this agency, explained that prior to the Coral Gables Commission meeting on August 24, 2022, he consulted with then City Attorney for Coral Gables, Miriam Ramos. Ms. Ramos advised him to consult members of his family as to whether they owned any property or had any business dealings in the Little Gables area. He stated that, based on Ms. Ramos' advice, he spoke to his family members, including his brother Carlos Lago, regarding the matter. He stated that none of his family members, including his brother Carlos Lago, indicated that they had any property or business interests in "Little Gables."

Mayor Lago indicated that. after his statements at the Coral Gables Commission meeting, media accounts noted that his brother was an active lobbyist for Titan. He stated that he reached out to his brother and asked him about any such relationship. He indicated that his brother advised him that he had not represented Titan in nearly a decade and that, when he did, it was regarding a matter in the City of Miami that had nothing to do with the proposed development in the Little Gables area.

This agency also spoke to Jesus Suarez, the President of Titan. Mr. Suarez advised that he had no relationship with Carlos Lago, professional or otherwise, at this time. He explained that years ago, in 2014, his company hired a group to assist with obtaining "air rights" to a building he was in the process of selling in downtown Miami, the Commonwealth building. He stated that Carlos Lago may have been part of that group, but that he had no recollection of ever meeting with him in person. He stated that he has no dealings with Carlos Lago, noting "[i]f you put that guy in front of me, I wouldn't recognize him."

This agency also interviewed Carlos Lago. Mr. Lago advised that he had not had a professional relationship with Titan or its owner since 2015. He stated that he previously represented Titan with respect to the sale of a property located in the City of Miami and noted that: "the representation concluded in 2015 at the time of the sale. I haven't spoken to Jesus [Suarez] in 10 years." He confirmed

[2] Section 2-11.1(b)(9) states, "the term "immediate family" shall refer to the spouse, domestic partner, parents, stepparents, siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings, children, and stepchildren of the person involved."

that he did have a conversation with his brother, Mayor Lago, and that his brother did ask whether he owned any property in the Little Gables area, stating "and I told him, 'No.'" Mr. Carlos Lago also provided a copy of his withdrawal notice for Titan that he filed with the Miami City Clerk's Office on March 6, 2023.

Consequently, the preliminary information gathered does not support further investigation of this matter as it appears that Mayor Lago did not knowingly make a false statement during the Coral Gables Commission meeting on August 24, 2022, when he filed an affidavit and stated from the dais that neither he nor any member of his immediate family had a financial interest within the boundaries of the area commonly referred to as "Little Gables." The preliminary information gathered showed that Mayor Lago's brother, land-use and zoning attorney Carlos Lago, did not have an ongoing and/or active relationship with Titan. Furthermore, the President of Titan, Jesus Suarez, unequivocally advised that he had no relationship with Carlos Lago, professional or otherwise, at this time.

This matter is hereby closed.

Approved by: ___RTuray_____ Date: _____10/23/23_____

Radia Turay, Advocate