

# Miami-Dade's \$11.7 billion budget passes quickly with a tax-rate cut

BY DOUGLAS HANKS

*dhanks@miamiherald.com*

Raises for Miami-Dade workers, more aid for low-income seniors and spare cash for Animal Services from a scrapped dog sanctuary are part of the 2024 budget that Miami-Dade County Commissioners approved without debate Thursday.

The final version of the \$11.7 billion spending plan proposed by Mayor Daniella Levine Cava passed in only two hours after 90 minutes of public comment, a surprisingly brisk pace in a county where budget hearings have

stretched well past midnight.

Changes Levine Cava made to the budget addressed some of the criticism and requests commissioners made after the first hearing earlier in the month. Commissioner Raquel Regalado had urged Levine Cava to find more money for low-income seniors if she wouldn't lower the countywide property-tax rate more than the 1% reduction that the mayor proposed.

In a memo ahead of the second hearing, Levine Cava announced she was

**SEE BUDGET, 2A**



DOUGLAS HANKS *dhanks@miamiherald.com*

Z Spicer, an organizer with Engage Miami, urges Miami-Dade County commissioners to invest in addressing climate change and other long-term needs. Other members of the advocacy group stood behind Spicer at the final hearing for the 2024 budget on Thursday.



CARL JUSTE Miami Herald file

Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava revealed her proposed budget and multi-year capital plan during a press conference in July. From left to right: Eileen Higgins, Levine Cava and Oliver G. Gilbert III.

FROM PAGE 1A

## BUDGET

shifting \$19 million from an under-used mortgage relief program to the county's Save Our Seniors fund, which provides grants for senior homeowners earning less \$35,200 a year. While the prior grants amounted to \$100, the 2024 amounts should be more than \$500 for more than 36,000 eligible residents, according to Levine Cava's memo.

"It was a lot of work and a lot of listening," Levine Cava said after the mostly unanimous budget votes.

Higher property values, elevated inflation and lingering federal aid from COVID programs combined to boost spending options for Levine Cava in the budget that will be in place when she faces voters for reelection next August. The spending plan includes a 3% raise for most county workers.

Brief efforts fizzled to force a larger cut than a 1% reduction to the countywide property-tax rate that Levine Cava proposed, a change that will still leave most residents with higher tax bills and support a budget with \$1.3 billion in additional spending. About 20% of the extra revenue comes from property taxes.

In her final budget version, Levine Cava formally dropped a \$2 million plan to build a sanctuary for homeless dogs in rural

Miami-Dade. Instead, that money will be shifted to Animal Services operations, funding sterilizations, adoption help and other efforts to reduce the shelter population. A stream of critics of the mayor's Animal Services budget spoke at the first hearing, and several of them criticized the sanctuary idea.

The budget modifications also included grants for multiple non-profits that received extra funding this year through the more than \$500 million that Miami-Dade received in federal COVID aid. Those dollars are dwindling, with about \$54 million in the 2024 budget for one-time expenditures and grants.

The budget's passage followed about 90 minutes of public comment, with a mix of speakers urging extra dollars for environmental conservation, improving the county's sewage infrastructure, long-term housing for people experiencing homelessness and other needs.

"I'm here in front of you, asking for help," Daymara Reyes, a Miami resident, said in Spanish through an interpreter. She said she's been unable to afford a place to live, and is forced to sleep in a county-funded homeless facility. "I'm ready to leave the shelter. But I have no place to go."

Five members of Engage Miami, an advocacy group, took the lectern together while one of them, Z Spicer, delivered a message encouraging more spending to help Miami-Dade prepare for climate change, provide affor-

dable housing and improve public transit.

"We're tired of being told that these plans take time, and that if we're patient, we'll see the benefits of incremental change in a few years," Spicer said. "Regardless, we'll see you next year."

Eight pieces of legislation pass the budget. The closest vote involved language required to implement the 7.5% increase in the \$509 trash collection fee, which passed on an 8 to 4 vote. Voting against were commissioners Regalado, Kevin Cabrera, Roberto Gonzalez and Anthony Rodriguez. Commissioner Danielle Cohen Higgins left the dais for that vote, and then returned for the rest of the meeting.

Cohen Higgins also requested the one change to the final version of the budget, securing more flexible language allowing Miami-Dade to consider sites for a new homeless facility other than a La Quinta hotel in the Cutler Bay area she represents.

After the 7:24 p.m. adjournment, veteran county employees said it was the fastest they could remember. Minutes show the 2004 budget, adopted during a housing boom, passed after a hearing that adjourned at 8:09 p.m.

"Congratulations," Gonzalez said to Levine Cava by the escalators at the Stephen P. Clark Center after the hearing ended. "That was beautiful."

Douglas Hanks: 305-376-3605, @doug\_hanks