

## Blistering audit forces changes at MMAP

Contributed by JOY-ANN REID

MIAMI &mdash; A scathing, 76-page audit may mark the closing chapter in the rocky, 25-year history of the Metro - Miami Action Plan Trust (MMAP), an agency that is supposed to help reduce disparities between white, black and Hispanic residents but which has become mired in controversy over the alleged mismanagement of taxpayers' dollars.

The quasi-governmental agency was created three years after the deadly riots sparked by the acquittal of five white police officers in the beating death of a black man, Arthur McDuffie. Three days of rioting in 1980 left 10 people dead, nearly 300 injured, and nearly \$100 million in damage, mostly in Miami's predominantly African-American Liberty City area. These events awakened politicians to stark socioeconomic disparities between different ethnic groups, and how those disparities could fuel social unrest.

MMAP was set up through a county ordinance, but with considerable operational independence. Now, the audit by Miami-Dade County's Office of Audit and Management Services, and a consensus of many county leaders, suggests MMAP's independence may have been its key weakness.

Among MMAP's stumbles: granting \$50,000 to Karym Ventures, Inc., a company whose board of directors included Miami City Commissioner Michelle Spence-Jones and members of her family, and a \$25,000 grant in 2005 to a non-profit organization called Friends of MLK, much of which authorities allege wound up in the pockets of the non-profit's director, the Rev. Gaston Smith, who is the senior pastor of Friendship Missionary Baptist Church. That caused some to question the judgment of MMAP's board. Smith was charged earlier this year with second-degree grand theft for allegedly spending more than \$10,000 of the grant on hotels, classes at the University of North Florida, and a trip to Las Vegas that included a \$500 bar tab.

MMAP has also had successes: helping to launch Opa-locka Flightlines, a black-owned airline refueling company, granting scholarships for students to attend an annual black history educational bus tour, and operating a Teen Court youth diversion program.

### BLISTERING AUDIT

Among the findings in the county audit, which was prompted by complaints submitted to County Manager George Burgess by the county's Office of Inspector General, was an alleged pattern of incomplete paperwork, ineffective oversight by MMAP's board of directors, and a lack of due diligence in the awarding of grants and contracts between October 2003 and September 30, 2007. The improprieties date back to the 1990s, according to a Nov. 12 memo from Burgess.

Among other things, the audit claims MMAP:

- Spent \$21 million of the \$26.2 million it received from various funding sources from 2004-2007, often with "little or no accountability for achieving substantive results," and sparse documentation of what recipients did with the money.

- Granted funds to organizations or companies that have since gone out of business, including \$50,000 to the defunct Two Guys Restaurant in Overtown.

- Granted money to organizations whose principals later came under scrutiny or even indictment for misuse of the funds.

- Granted \$15.7 million in mortgage assistance, often to unqualified buyers, including \$1.3 million in a 2007 lottery to just seven people, and individual grants of up to \$206,000 for homes valued at up to \$275,000 — well above county affordable housing guidelines.

- Granted funds to organizations with ties to government officials or to members of MMAP's board, including the Florida Martin Luther King, Jr. Institute for Nonviolence, headed by board Chairman John Jones. (Jones said any grants were cleared through the county's ethics committee, and that he recused himself from any discussions or grant decisions regarding the Institute.)

- Spent county funds on consultants and junkets, including \$50,000 in fees to Tola Thompson, a former aide to retired Congresswoman Carrie Meek for a Congressional Black Caucus reception in Washington with her son, U.S. Rep Kendrick Meek, and more than \$10,000 for a board retreat at the Doral Resort & Spa, in which 14 rooms were secured for nine board members and five staffers. The retreat went forward even though the number of board members failed to constitute a quorum, so that no official business could take place.

## DEFENDING MMAP

Board member Dr. Marzell Smith, who said he opposed, but attended the Doral retreat, said he voiced objections to the Thompson contract and agreed that some changes should be made, but he defended the agency's overall stewardship of county funds.

"I think given the staff we had, I think we did a pretty good job of oversight," Smith said. "I have continued to ask people, 'Did any money get stolen?' I haven't seen anybody say that any money got stolen. There's some differences of opinion over the management of the funds [but] what I would challenge anybody to deal with is, if we're going to be fair about this situation, let's take a look at what's happening with the county now. If you want to put MMAP on management watch, I think the whole county could stand to be on management watch."

Smith, a retired educator who chaired MMAP for several two-year terms during the 1990s, was among the agency's defenders who blamed Miami-Dade County leaders, including Burgess and his predecessors, for failing to adequately fund or support MMAP, while constantly taking the agency to task. Meanwhile, Smith and others said, the county has largely looked the other way while projects like the Miami International Airport expansion and the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts of Miami-Dade County ballooned up to billions of dollars over budget.

County officials point out that the manager has had no supervisory authority over MMAP, which has since its inception answered only to the Board of County Commissioners.

## NEW REPORTING STRUCTURE

Now, the commission is set to dissolve MMAP's board of directors and put a task force in place to recommend a way forward, including a new reporting structure that would include the county manager. Smith and others worry that the end game is to get rid of MMAP entirely, taking with it its core mission of addressing economic, educational and criminal justice disparities in the black community. Smith said the county has never supported the agency, financially or philosophically.

"Merritt Stierheim," who was the Miami-Dade County manager at the time of MMAP's creation, "never wanted MMAP to get any money," said Smith. "He thought the Beacon Council (the county's marketing agency,) should get all the money."

Smith said MMAP was told by Stierheim, and by subsequent managers, to "go out and find your own money.&rsquo;&rsquo;

Smith continued, saying, &ldquo;Not only did we get some of the Beacon Council money" in the form of a percentage of the county's local business surtax, "we were trying to get some of the tourism money, and he almost had a stroke."

The business tax funds were stripped from MMAP and reverted to the Beacon Council earlier this year, after the Council complained that MMAP was using the money to directly fund businesses, rather than to market county services, as required by statute.

"It all depends on your perspective," said Smith. "I think they're trying to divert attention from the main focus of the problem, which is that they (county leaders) have not done anything for the black community."

"There is no other organization other than MMAP that has a top-down, bottom-up approach to address the disparities faced by blacks in Miami-Dade County without any governmental support," said Sherwood Dubose, who spent 13 years with MMAP and served as its executive director between 1997 and 2001.

Though he, too, admitted to concerns over "process and procedure," Dubose called any proposal that would give the mayor or manager direct oversight of MMAP "not in the best interest of the community."

"Those things will essentially kill MMAP and make it ineffective," said Dubose. "What MMAP needs is to be supported in its mission of helping the community, and that's never happened."

## DOUBLE STANDARD?

Dubose echoed Smith, saying he sees a "double standard in the county that when it's a black agency &hellip; the answer seems to be, &lsquo;Let's tear it down&rsquo; instead of, &lsquo;Let's fix it.&rsquo;"

County officials strenuously disagree.

"Nobody is being singled out here," said Miami-Dade Communications Director Victoria Mallette, referring to charges that MMAP was being treated differently than the airport authority or performing arts center. "We do audits all the time and we have to find the problems wherever they are."

Mallette insisted there is no "turf war" over control of MMAP, as has been reported in some media, and she said the mayor, county manager and the three commissioners who oversee MMAP — Dennis Moss, who represents parts of South Dade, Audrey Edmonson, whose district includes Overtown, and Barbara Jordan, whose district includes Opa-locka and Miami Gardens — are "on the same page."

"I think we all can agree that MMAP lost its way in the process of trying to do good things," Mallette said. "There is no turf war. We have the prospect of a whole new board going in and the mayor and the commissioners are all pleased about that."

"We clearly view the role that MMAP fulfills as an important role that needs to continue," added Senior Advisor and Assistant County Manager Cynthia Curry, whose area of responsibility includes MMAP. "So by all means we plan on pursuing that."

Curry added that Edmonson, Moss and Jordan are "taking the lead" in shaping MMAP's future.

"There is no reason for anybody to think there is a move afoot for MMAP not to exist anymore or for funding to be stripped out," Curry added. "The fact that the current board is being dismissed in this resolution is part of the discontent. It's not an easy thing, but it's important for us to have some reconstruction and positive energy going forward and we will end up with a new and improved entity."

## HOLDING MMAP ACCOUNTABLE

Not everyone is displeased that the county is stepping in.

"If there have been any violations of what was supposed to be their operating procedures, then they should be held accountable fully," said Gerald Muhammad, who owns a print shop in Overtown.

Muhammad added that MMAP has not focused enough on Overtown, which is among the county's poorest neighborhoods.

"I have no sympathy for someone who misuses funds that are designated for an area like this that needs jobs, and needs services," he said. "I know they have done some good things in the city, but when it comes to Overtown, I just want justice to be done and I want everything to be done with transparency and that's been my only concern."

Even MMAP's management recognizes that change must come.

The agency's interim executive director, John Dixon, said the Trust board believes that overall, "funds were used to address the disparities within the black community," and that the Trust often sought to partner with entities already in place within the black community, such as the Belafonte Tacolcy Center in Liberty City, the Carrie Meek Foundation and Florida Memorial University, all of whom were major grantees. (In all three cases, the audit criticized MMAP for failing to document the results of those partnerships.)

## PROCEDURAL CHANGES

Dixon, who became interim director in January, said he has already begun implementing procedural changes, including stricter controls on the disbursement of funds.

Dixon said that going forward, "any initiatives we have, we consult the county attorney's office as to the legal ramifications, and regarding any monies that are expended, we will go through an RFP process that will be based on performance- based accountability, with monitoring."

Still, the county is moving forward with its own controls. The commission has named a nine-member task force comprising community leaders, who will make recommendations over a 45-day period regarding MMAP's future. A nominating committee will recommend a new slate of board members, and MMAP will undergo a thorough overhaul.

"All options will be on the table," said Curry, "including the possibility of restructuring MMAP, merging it with another agency, or dissolving it and creating a new entity. Whatever emerges will be something new and improved."

The task force features familiar names: consultant Darryl Sharpton, Patrick Range Sr., attorneys H.T. Smith and Robert Holland, the Rev. Walter T. Richardson, senior pastor of Sweet Home Baptist Church, Miami-Dade NAACP President Bishop Victor T. Curry, P.U.L.S.E. president the Rev. Richard Dunn, former Miami-Dade Commissioner Betty Ferguson and Miami Times publisher Rachel Reeves.

Their challenge will be to remake an agency considered vital to Miami-Dade's black community, and to assure the community that regardless of what happens to MMAP itself, the agency's mission will survive.

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Photo: MMAP Interim Executive Director John Dixon