



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

## County says yes to early voting at MDC. And no to a billionaire paying for it.

BY DOUGLAS HANKS  
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Miami Dade College students on Thursday night secured early voting on campus after county commissioners and the mayor agreed to reverse earlier decisions and bring two polling places to the community college.

“We have students from all walks of life — mothers, veterans, employees, and many first-generation students,” MDC student leader Rebecca Diaz said during the evening’s budget hearing, nine fellow students in matching college shirts behind her. “We take public transportation — sometimes two or three

buses — just to get to campus ... It is these students, more than any other, who need ready and easy access to voting.”

The Democratic majority on the nonpartisan County Commission pushed for MDC to get the same kind of early-voting site that Mayor Carlos Gimenez awarded Florida International University the day before. Gimenez and fellow Republicans on the 13-member board resisted giving MDC an early-voting site, arguing it wasn't needed for the commuter school.

But ultimately the commission voted 12-1 to put an early-voting site on MDC's North campus. Gimenez said after the vote he would use his authority to bring an early-voting site to the school's Kendall campus as well.

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The paired decisions end a week of controversy after a coalition of civic and left-leaning groups pressured Miami-Dade to join other large counties in taking advantage of a July court decision striking down a statewide ban on campus early-voting sites.

The showdown came at Thursday night's otherwise tame budget hearing. Gimenez's proposed \$7.8 billion spending plan with flat tax rates, millions of dollars for school safety, expanded library hours, and more police hiring passed with only a modest amount of input from members of the public. While past budget hearings have stretched will into the early-morning hours, the downtown Miami commission chambers cleared out shortly after 10 p.m. with the budget ordinances passed by wide margins for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

One potential flashpoint was settled when Gimenez whittled down a planned \$4 monthly increase in county water bills to less than \$3.

Adding voting sites to two of MDC's eight campuses for the two weeks of early voting that start Oct. 22 will cost about \$300,000. MDC has been pressing the Gimenez administration to give it at least one early-voting site since the July 24 ruling by a federal judge in Tallahassee that the ban under Republican Gov. Rick Scott was unconstitutional and unfair to students.

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Miami Dade College student Rebecca Diaz urges the Miami-Dade Commission to bring an early-voting site to the community college. Behind her are MDC students Christian Rosquete and Jaqua'Jah Frederick.

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On Thursday, MDC released a letter by billionaire auto magnate Norman Braman, a top Republican donor from Miami, offering to pay the county's expenses for early voting at the college. His offer got almost no mention during the extensive debate on early voting at the hearing, and Gimenez said in an interview he didn't want wealthy people to influence where people can vote in Miami-Dade.

"Thank you very much," Gimenez said of Braman's offer. "But if you accept that, you're opening up Pandora's box."

While the vote for an MDC site was nearly unanimous — only Commissioner Joe Martinez voted no — the debate highlighted the party divide on a board that's officially nonpartisan. All seven Democrats spoke in favor of bringing MDC voting sites to give voters a choice of locations, including Read more

questions about why elderly voters shouldn't be getting last-minute attention from the county.

“The people who are really suffering are those who want to vote, but they can't,” said Commissioner Jose “Pepe” Diaz. “Because they're handicapped. Because they're elderly. Because they have issues.”

Miami-Dade already had 25 early-voting sites established for the general election in November. FIU became the 26th site. Miami Dade College will get the 27th and 28th sites. When Gimenez announced his decision on FIU Wednesday, he defended leaving MDC off the list by noting the school has no students living on campus. Each early-voting site is open to all voters in the county, so students could use the one closest to where they live.

Mayor Carlos A. Giménez  
Stephen P. Clark Center  
111 N.W. 1<sup>st</sup> Street, 29<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Miami, FL 33128

Dear Mayor Giménez,

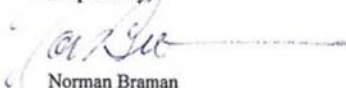
I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing today regarding a matter of grave concern to me, the denial of voting opportunities for young people in our community. When the regulation prohibiting early voting sites on college campuses was recently struck down, I expected your office would immediately support opening early voting at higher educational institutions around the county, particularly at Miami Dade College (MDC). I was disappointed to find out that, even after extensive lobbying from students from different universities, there are still no plans to do so.

Voting isn't just a right afforded to us by the Constitution, it is our civic duty, it is how we raise our voices and empower communities. For many of your constituents in Miami Dade County, it also feels like a privilege being afforded to them for the first time after fleeing corrupt governments and dictatorships. We have an opportunity to inspire a new generation of voters, to get students to participate in the political process and shape generations.

This is not a partisan issue, students on both sides of the aisle should have the opportunity to cast their vote. MDC serves more than 160,000 students and 8,000 employees across its eight campuses. As the largest higher educational institution in the country, it also serves nontraditional students, many of whom have families, full-time jobs and other commitments outside of an already demanding course load. Having a voting site on campus would allow students to vote between classes, without having to compromise spending time with their children, being late to work, etc.

I stand by MDC and its many attempts to work with the Department of Elections to install voting sites on one of their campuses. If the cost of expanding the early voting sites is an issue, **I AM HAPPY TO COVER THE EXPENSES REQUIRED TO BRING EARLY VOTING TO MDC.** We have an opportunity here to inspire the next generation of entrepreneurs, change-makers, community and business leaders. We have an opportunity to support young people in this community and encourage them to vote and exercise their civic responsibility. I hope you reconsider your position and join me, and MDC, in expanding access to the ballot.

Respectfully,



Norman Braman



**Doug Hanks**

@doug\_hanks

Miami auto magnate Norman Braman, a big Republican donor, offers to cover the expense of Miami-Dade bringing early voting to Miami Dade College. “This is not a partisan issue...”

5:05 PM - Sep 20, 2018

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Commissioner Daniella Levine Cava, the Democrat who sponsored the legislation directing Miami-Dade to add an early-voting site to MDC's north campus, noted that part of the county lacked a nearby voting site. Gimenez acknowledged a "hole" that could be filled with another site in the area but said the commission should let the Elections Department decide which location made the most sense.

Once Levine Cava's motion passed, Gimenez said MDC students in the south "face the same hardships" as the students in the north. He said he would accept the commission's instruction for an MDC North early-voting site and would use his authority to add one to the Kendall campus, too.

Also Thursday, Gimenez used the budget passage to set himself up for a pay boost. His budget director, Jennifer Moon, told commissioners the budget ordinances included a revised pay plan for the mayor, setting the salary at \$250,000. Moon said it would be up to the mayor, as the county's chief executive, to set his pay for the year. Gimenez currently makes \$150,000 a year, having cut his office's compensation from close to \$400,000 shortly after winning his first mayoral election in 2011.

Last year, Gimenez asked commissioners to endorse setting his pay at just over \$300,000, but the board balked as some members asked why the mayor couldn't just reverse his early decision for a pay cut. After the vote Thursday, Gimenez said he was ready to take action on his own pay but would not say the amount.

"I may give money back," Gimenez said.



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Senator Marco Rubio casts an early ballot for the Nov. 8th election at the West Miami Community Center on Oct. 31, 2016.

By C.M. Guerrero



Miami Dade College student Rebecca Diaz urges the Miami-Dade Commission to bring an early-voting site to the community college. Behind her are MDC students Christian Rosquete and Jaqua'Jah Frederick. **DOUGLAS HANKS -** [dhanks@miamiherald.com](mailto:dhanks@miamiherald.com)

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