

HOMEPAGE

# Coral Gables election results: New mayor elected, commission races will go to runoff

BY SAMANTHA J. GROSS

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Vince Lago is elected as the new mayor for the City of Coral Gables on April 13, 2021. BY AL DIAZ

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Coral Gables Vice Mayor Vince Lago will be the city’s next mayor after he beat Commissioner Patricia Keon in a contentious race to replace retiring Mayor Raúl Valdés-Faul, who is stepping down after four terms in city hall over the last 35 years.

Lago, an executive at BDI Construction Company who carried the endorsements of the last three mayors and other community leaders, captured about 60% of the vote with all precincts reporting Tuesday night. More than 10,000 out of 36,000 registered voters participated in the election, a much greater turnout than the 8,574 voters who cast ballots in 2019. Lago, 43, beat Keon, a 72-year-old registered nurse, by 2,117 votes.

Jackson “Rip” Holmes, 69, launched a long-shot bid for mayor only moments before the deadline, and netted 463 votes.

The mayor serves a two-year term with a \$40,761 annual salary.

“I’m feeling euphoric, this is a win for the community,” said Lago, who celebrated his win at Bay 13 Brewery in Alhambra Plaza near Miracle Mile. He greeted his guests — who included Miami Mayor Francis Suarez and his father, former Miami-Dade County Commissioner Xavier Suarez — with hugs and shouts of excitement.

The guest list was peppered with present and former Gables commissioners, mayors and other city of Miami types like commissioner Alex Diaz de la Portilla.

“The community sent a strong message today. We won emphatically, even over some pretty adverse situations,” Lago said. “The city made a statement today. We want someone who is transparent, who is ethical, and who represents this community.”

He said the first thing he wants to do as mayor is listen and be present for residents.

### **KEON OFFERS CONGRATULATIONS**

Keon, who watched results privately among family and friends at her condominium, said that she called Lago and left him a message, congratulating him.

“People vote, Vince won, he is next mayor,” she said. “I am going to go back to traveling and spending time with my family and grandchildren. And I look forward to playing more golf.”

Lago and Keon were both first elected to the commission in 2013 and reelected in 2017.

Lago and Keon’s candidacies left openings on the commission, triggering an election that attracted 10 candidates to fill the two vacated seats.

The three-race election had the trimmings of a big-city race or statewide campaign, complete with nearly two years of campaigning, about \$193,000 worth of mail advertisements and countless attack barbs traded.

Because no candidates received more than 50% of the votes cast in the Group Two and Group Three commission races, the top two vote-getters will oppose one another in a runoff election April 27.

In Group Two's six-way race, lawyer and community activist Rhonda Anderson and retired banker Jose Valdés-Fauli came out with the most votes. Anderson led Valdés-Fauli by 1,636 votes.

In Group Three, which attracted four candidates, CPA Javier Baños and attorney and community leader Kirk Menendez will compete in the runoff. Baños led Menendez by just 120 votes.

A commissioner's term lasts four years and pays \$33,121 annually.

#### **DEVELOPMENT THE KEY ISSUE**

The crowded races were colored by [attack mail pieces](#), some funded by largely anonymous political committees, that led to finger-pointing among rivals. Most of the ads — which featured puppet strings, wads of cash and a “For Sale” sign — focused on development and construction, a topic that was top of mind for Coral Gables voters, as the commission decided on [contentious zoning](#) changes during the course of the campaigns.

There were also other bits of news that reached voters ahead of the election, which some voters said changed their opinions of their choices on the ballot.

After the [Miami Herald reported](#) that Lago was among dozens of parents who signed a letter that denounced a Miami Catholic school's effort to address racism, he [lost the endorsement](#) of LGBTQ group SAVE as well as the endorsement of the Miami Herald's editorial board, which operates independently of the newsroom.

More than 150 parents and alumni — including former Florida House Speaker José Oliva signed the letter.

“The revelation of the letter Lago signed was a deciding factor,” said voter Lara Murphy, 50, who read about the letter in a column written by the Herald's Fabiola Santiago. Santiago called on Miami's Cuban Americans to address racism. “Fabi spoke to what so many Gable-ites feel.”

Murphy was among the 1,555 who voted during the city's two-day early voting period at the Coral Gables Branch Library.

Early voting brought out candidates and supporters to try their last-minute pitches as voters entered the library. Group Two candidate Mayra Joli brought a billboard truck and a stereo system that blasted music and invited members of the community to sing karaoke, and on Sunday Joli and Holmes [braved the rain to dance and sing together](#).

It also brought special guests. Suarez, a childhood friend and ally of Lago, made a swing by the library.

“It's sad to see how this political season has devolved into personal attacks,” he said. “[Lago] has gone above and beyond ... the personal things about his beliefs really hurt.”

He echoed the sentiment in his congratulatory speech Tuesday night.

For many voters, the negative campaigns and stuffed mailboxes were a turnoff, and they were happy for the election cycle to come to an end. On Saturday, voters told a Herald reporter that they mostly had their minds made up as they headed inside to vote.

When a reporter asked David Evensky, 52, what key issues he is voting on, he said “I’m voting for the mail to stop.”

Jasper Brock, who voted early with his wife Carol, said the amount of money that was poured into the races was “noticeable.” They were getting five or six mail pieces a day.

Niberto Moreno, 67, had similar complaints.

“I hated the negative comments,” he said.

### **HOW THEY DECIDED**

Orlando Abella, who is a Republican, said he voted for Republicans Lago, Baños and Claudia Miro in the nonpartisan races.

Their party affiliation “was a notch in their belt,” Abella, 70, said.

Tom Graboski, 73, said age was a factor in his decision.

He voted for the younger candidates in an effort he said he hopes will bring a fresh perspective to the commission. He worries about the [influence that the City of Miami has](#) on some candidates, naming former Mayor Joe Carollo, who has a decades-long history of involvement in political turmoil at Miami City Hall. Group Three candidate Baños, a CPA, has been the treasurer of Carollo’s campaign accounts and political action committee, and was Carollo’s appointee on the Bayfront Park Management Trust. Baños’ mother-in-law is Carollo’s cousin.

Group Two candidate Tania Cruz-Gimenez also worked on Carollo’s political committee and 2017 campaign and after, when she defended Carollo in a lawsuit that accused the commissioner of not living in his district long enough to qualify for the election.

Cruz-Gimenez, though, had a falling-out with Carollo, and is now part of an effort to recall the Miami commissioner.

“The good old boys system ... it’s just time for it to go,” said Graboski, who has lived in Coral Gables for 36 years.