

DOWNTOWN MIAMI

Miami downtown agency names new director and keeps previous one as a \$200K consultant

BY JOEY FLECHAS November 15, 2019 05:21 PM

Miami Beach Commissioner John Elizabeth Alemán wants to trade her elected office for the top administrative position at one of the city of Miami's largest tax-funded agencies.

Alemán, elected in 2015, will [leave her commission seat this month in the Beach after one term](#) and is expected to assume the top post at the Downtown Development Authority beginning Jan. 1. The agency's board voted to name her executive director of the autonomous municipal organization tasked with managing a \$10 million budget for promotion and economic development in downtown Miami for tourists, investors and a burgeoning residential population. Alemán's appointment requires final approval from the City Commission.

The agency, governed by a 15-member board, is funded by a taxes levied on 3.8 square miles in Miami's downtown east of I-95, west of Biscayne Bay, south of I-195 and north of the Rickenbacker Causeway.

As a commissioner, Alemán advocated for Miami Beach's elected officials to get pay raises in order to attract a wider pool of quality candidates and provide fair compensation for what commissioners consider a demanding workload. Her move to a government administrative job will return her to the type of management position she held before becoming a politician and will boost her earnings into six-figure territory.

On Friday, the DDA's board voted to hire Alemán and pay her \$198,000 a year, with an annual 17.5% bonus every July 31. She was one of 400 candidates for the job in a six-month search led by management consulting firm [Korn Ferry](#) under a \$67,000 contract. Alemán applied in mid-October toward the end of the search.

"Anybody that came in was funneled directly to Korn Ferry, including Commissioner Alemán," said Philippe Houdard, board member and co-founder of Pipeline Workspaces, a South Florida-based company that manages co-working spaces.

Houdard and others on the board's selection subcommittee said Alemán quickly emerged as a top candidate, even over internal applicants.

The board also approved a hefty severance package for the outgoing director, [Alyce M. Robertson](#), who has led the organization for more than 11 years through a period of booming growth. Robertson will remain a consultant with the DDA to assist with the leadership transition for up to one year, during which she'll receive a full year's salary — \$198,000 — and medical benefits.

Some board members questioned the potentially tricky management strategy of having a former director and new director in the office at the same time, especially for a year.

"I have never seen this kind of lengthy transition in any organization," said Eileen Higgins, a Miami-Dade County commissioner and board member. "I come from the private sector. People transition, and they move the vision forward. And it's not that they don't need the assistance and the advice and the wisdom of their predecessor, but that can be done in two weeks or four weeks."

Board members on the nomination committee said that Robertson will serve as consultant on standby for Alemán under terms that will be more clearly explained in Robertson's contract.

"In practicality, there will be a very smooth transition where the new executive director will work very closely with the former executive director as much or as little as they need," said Ken Russell, the Miami commissioner who represents downtown and serves as chairman of the DDA board.

Russell also emphasized that he felt Robertson's severance pay is appropriate given her decade of leadership for the organization, a sentiment echoed by several other board members.

"For me, I am 100% willing to stand by the package that's being offered to Alyce from a financial perspective, and I believe it's responsible, and I believe Alyce is worth it, and I believe it is the right thing to do," he said.

In a prepared statement, Alemán said she was looking forward to advancing downtown's transformation from a nine-to-five commercial zone to a vibrant neighborhood where people live, work and play.

“I am excited to collaborate with the Miami DDA’s Board and Staff as we enhance quality of life in Downtown Miami and improve upon the neighborhood’s standing as one of the world’s most exciting and resilient hubs for business and technology, innovation, lifestyle and culture,” she said.

Apart from four years on Miami Beach’s commission, Alemán’s resumé includes 14 years at Ryder System where she rose to the logistics company’s international director for information technology. She also worked as chief information officer at infrastructure firm MasTec.

In February, Alemán announced she would not seek re-election in November when her term ended. At the time, she said she might consider a future role in public service, but she wanted to spend more time with her family.

During her term as commissioner, Alemán has been a [strong advocate for the city’s plan to deal with sea level rise](#), including raising roads and installing anti-flooding pumps across the island — an approach that has proven controversial with some residents. The commissioner also relayed tips from residents to police that resulted in a [crackdown on massage parlors](#) linked to human trafficking, and she sponsored legislation to reign in [motorized scooter rentals that were causing complaints](#).

The change marks the end of a decade-long tenure with Robertson at the helm of the DDA. She has overseen multi-million-dollar beautification projects throughout downtown and was an advocate for the tunnel connecting downtown to PortMiami. Through those years, downtown’s residential population has swollen by more than 50,000, with continued growth projected.

In 2018, Robertson took a six-month leave for health-related issues. During a DDA board meeting in April, Commissioner Ken Russell announced Robertson’s intention to step down. Robertson did not respond to a request for comment.