

# MIAMI TODAY

September 18, 2024

Unique Monthly Visitors: 33,697

## Miami Commissioner Manolo Reyes focuses his efforts on city parks...

Commissioner Manolo Reyes and his family were among many who fled Cuba in 1959 seeking political refuge from Fidel Castro's regime. His father, who served as the last pre-Castro mayor in his hometown of Victoria de Las Tunas, instilled in him a strong sense of public service.

After arriving in the US, Mr. Reyes pursued his education in economics at the University of Florida, earning both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. He started his professional career with the City of Miami in the 1980s as a budget and finance administrator. There, he worked as the lead economic analyst for the Overtown Park West redevelopment project, which many regard as the foundational initiative for revitalizing the area near downtown Miami.

Later, Mr. Reyes worked as the principal budget analyst for Miami-Dade County Public Schools and served on the City of Miami Code Enforcement Board and the City of Miami Homeland Defense and Neighborhood Improvement Bond Issue Oversight Board. He also taught economics at Miami Dade College and math at Westland High School, where he led the FIU dual enrollment program.

In November 2017, Mr. Reyes was elected to the Miami City Commission to represent District Four with 57% of the vote and was re-elected in 2019 without opposition. In December 2019, a majority of his colleagues appointed him to chair the Downtown Development Authority, a city agency that assists in growing the economic vitality of downtown Miami.

Mr. Reyes won a third term in 2023 with support from 86% of voters. His work as a commissioner has focused heavily on infrastructure improvements, affordable housing and community services, including providing food and school supplies to thousands, expanding elderly assistance programs and securing millions in funding for park enhancements, road repaving, drainage and flood mitigation.

Having lived in District Four for nearly 50 years with his wife, Selva "Chacha" Reyes, Mr. Reyes maintains a strong bond with the neighborhoods and residents he represents. Committed to public service, he seeks to expand the achievements he has fostered in his district to benefit the entire city.

Mr. Reyes spoke with Miami Today reporter Genevieve Bowen.

**Q: Tell me how your Cuban roots influenced you to pursue a career in public service.**

**A:** I have great influence from my ancestors. My grandfather fought in the Cuban independence. We had two wars and he fought in both and was in charge of the regiment in Victoria de Las Tunas. He had about 1,000 men under his command and most of the people who fought in that area looked up to him, and he spent all his life helping people.

People came to my father for help anytime there was a problem, even before he was a politician. I remember waking up in the middle of the night because somebody who lived and worked on the farms outside of the small city would come in because they or a family member was sick and they didn't have medicine. And I remember



To upgrade city's image, Manolo Reyes led drive for independent inspector general.

### The Achiever

#### Manolo Reyes

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Born: Victoria de Las Tunas, Cuba

Age: 80

Education: Bachelor's and master's in economics, University of Florida

Personal Philosophy: There is a Spanish saying, "El que no vive para servir, no sirve para vivir," which in English means, "he who does not live to serve, does no service by living."

my father getting up and going to solve the problem.

I can give you 1,000 anecdotes like that of my dad. Finally, they asked him to run and he became mayor of the city. His philosophy was that power is to serve and that you are elected to serve. As a matter of fact, if you are alive, you have to serve your community. That was his philosophy and he instilled that in me.

When he became mayor, he fixed the parks, the streets and did a lot of cultural things and opened a library. He loved his city so much. Even today, they write about a particular park and praise my dad.

It's called Parque Maceo. When he was elected mayor, the benches were all made of pieces of wood and they were very uncomfortable. So, my dad wanted to redo all of them after he found the bench that he wanted to install. He sat in them tested them all and finally said, this is the one that I want. But when he looked at his budget, he couldn't change all the benches.

So, he had this idea. He went to the businesses and asked, "Do you want permanent advertising?" They said yes, and he told them to buy a bench. You can go to the park today and you can see all the businesses. Most of the businesses in Victoria de la

working and I went to Miami High, but I eventually quit to start working. I went to New York by myself when I wasn't even 18. I turned 18 there.

I went because I found a better job as a dishwasher. I was making about \$15 more a week than here, so it was tempting to go there. Money was very scarce at the time.

After I came back to Miami and kept on working, doing everything from working at a factory to learning how to get automobiles ready for painting and working at a body shop as a spray painter. At that time, I found out that if you were of a certain age, you could take a test at Miami Dade Community College. It was called a battery test.

I owe this to an American lady who I met by coincidence when I went to the North Campus. I was just looking around and she asked me, "Are you going to register?" I said, "No, I'm not." She asked me about high school and all that and said, "Why don't you take the battery test?" And she gave me a book on it. I get emotional.

She saved my life. I kept on working in a factory and somebody working next to me had an accident. That was when I said, "I'm going back to school. This isn't going to happen to me." So, I started taking classes, one at a time, until I got enough credits to graduate. Then, I was lucky enough to be accepted at the University of Florida. I worked there as a waiter from the time I first arrived until I left. I obtained my bachelor's and my master's in economics.

Then I came back to Miami and one friend, an ex-schoolmate of mine, was the deputy city attorney. I told him I was looking for a job. He said, "What do you think about working for the city?" I applied to the budget department since I have my degree in economics and know about numbers. I started working in the budget department and later on, when the city was developing the Overtown Park West redevelopment project, I was the lead economist.

I kept working there until 1985. I observed that there was no political will to make decisions that were not the most popular but that would benefit the City of Miami. So, I decided to run for office. I ran almost with no money and came in third. I ran several more times and finally, on my seventh try, I made it. That was in 2017, and the rest is history. The first time, I won by 58%, the second time I was unopposed and the last time by 86%.

**Q: What do you see as your most impactful achievements in your district since taking office in 2017?**

**A:** We have done many things, and with every single job that we do, I witness the improvement in the quality of life of the residents and I feel proud. Bay of Pigs Park is another park that we made that has a lot of significance, being named after the expedition of freedom fighters trying to liberate Cuba. We redid the park and have a monument dedicated to them there. I wish I had more money because I would be redoing all the streets.

I'm going to give you another anecdote. All throughout the time that I was running for office, on Southwest Sixth Street going east on the left-hand side, before getting to 29th Avenue, there was a duplex and an old lady lived there with another family. Every time that it rained, it became a lake. I was

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## ...infrastructure improvements, affordable housing, community services

campaigning and knocked on her door and she said, "Look at this." I told her, if I win, I'll fix it. Time went by and I eventually won. I got the funds to fix it and finally, I knocked on her door and said, "Tomorrow, we're breaking ground here. I'm going to fix this. I give you my word." She said, "God bless you. I thought that I was going to die and not see it fixed."

Things like that are what make my life, seeing real change. Now the family is very happy, and there's no more water. I can tell you of many places where we have done drainage projects that people have been waiting 30 years for. We try to fix as much as we can, and every penny that we get has an end goal, which is to improve the residents' quality of life.

We have two ongoing projects to mitigate flooding in the Auburndale and the East Flagami neighborhoods. Flagami is a huge project. We found funds in Tallahassee for it. It's going to be around \$40 million, and we almost have that money. But it also entails the construction of a pump with injection wells. Those pumps are going to redirect all that water from those streets. We have ameliorated the effect of rain and flooding there because we have pumps installed. When it rains, you still have flooding, but you don't have the lake and the rivers. There's water, but not as bad.

We have already identified and purchased the land where the pump is going to be installed. The drawings are coming along, and we have to enter into a MOU (memorandum of understanding) with Magic City Casino in order to pass pipes through the property to bring it all to the pump. And in Auburndale, we are going to start work on it pretty soon.

**Q: Tell me more about the District Four park improvements.**

A: West End is coming online soon and the kids are going to love it. There's a pool and also a splash pad for them to run around and all that. That'll be finished by the end of April.

We also opened Shenandoah last sum-

mer, which is a park we're proud of. With the help of my team, we found the funds to rebuild the whole park and among the new amenities is an Olympic-size swimming pool. I had the idea to build that because there's a swim team there called the Sharks and when we were doing the community meetings, some of the swimmers' mothers told me that if the pool could be made longer, it would help the team.

When the kids go to compete, they often go to larger pools, and they haven't developed the necessary stamina. I said, "You're right. I'm going to build a bigger pool." Then I started thinking, why not an Olympic pool? I began looking for money here and there, and we got to build the Olympic pool, basketball courts, soccer and baseball fields and a brand-new playground.

We're doing the same with West End Park. We have also improved others like Bryan Park and another which has great meaning to me, the Gold Star Park. That is for families of people who died while serving in the military. If you count them all, we have done around 13 parks.

But also, in areas where there was no park, we built parks. We inaugurated Fairlawn Park a couple of months ago, and now the second phase is coming along really well. In that area, Southwest 63rd Avenue and Sixth Street, there was no park there. We identified some lots to purchase from homeowners who wanted to sell and now, there is a beautiful park there.

We've also been fixing streets since day one. These projects require funds, and sometimes, you have to think outside the box. Every single session in state government, I travel to Tallahassee to find funding. Some projects get funded and some don't. But those that get funded are done immediately. That's the reason I was elected, to make those improvements and pass legislation to help the people.

**Q: In August, voters approved an independent inspector general's office, a measure you sponsored. What drove you to introduce the legislation?**

A: I know the City of Miami and I know how it works. I'm sick and tired of people referring to Miami as a Banana Republic with a lot of corruption. There has been corruption. We cannot hide from that. But the city had an audit department. In that department, if you asked for an audit of anything, it took forever and it was not independent.

The reality was that the job of the auditor was dependent on approval from the commission. They voted for the auditor and they could fire the auditor. I thought we needed a more independent office like the county has, an independent inspector who is not going to be picked by the commission. The inspector is going to be selected by an independent committee made up of members from reputable departments like the State Attorney and Public Defender of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Court for Miami-Dade, the chairperson of the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust and other similar agencies that have no ties to the city.

What I hope that office does is eliminate the cloud that is around the City of Miami once and for all and, at the same time, send a message to anybody who wants to run after I've left that you better come here to serve and not to become rich because there's going to be somebody overseeing you, and if you do anything, that person has the authority to start an investigation into contracts or whatever it is.

**Q: What other initiatives do you have planned?**

A: We have three initiatives that are very dear to my heart. I've always had a place in my heart for senior citizens. That's the way that we were in Cuba, you take care of your elders and you learn from them.

So, I have three projects. One is Badia, which is going to be a community center where seniors can come and take classes. We're going to have English classes and provide food for them there.

The others are two buildings that are going to be affordable housing for low-

income seniors. Both buildings are going to be reserved for Section Eight and are on Flagler Street. That has been delayed some because part of the site used to be a gas station. We ran tests that showed contamination, so we have to clean it.

But I'm looking forward for that to be developed. There are going to be about 150 to 155 apartments between both buildings. People forget how little financial assistance elders receive. It's nothing. It is our duty to help them as much as we can. I also have a hot meal program that brings food to about 300 homebound seniors.

I've also been blessed to be named the chair of the Downtown Development Authority. With the DDA board and staff, we've transformed downtown. Now it is safer and you can get around more easily with our free circulator.

Flagler Street is finally going to be finished. We established a grant assistance program for businesses that were affected by the closing of the street for the beautification project going on there. We also have seed money for people who are looking to establish new businesses downtown.

Our latest initiative, because I'm a firm believer in the safety of the streets and neighborhoods, is installing more cameras that are monitored by off-duty police. We have cameras in the central business district, but now I'm proposing that we expand it to Brickell and to the residential areas.

**Q: As this is your last term as commissioner, are you thinking about a mayoral campaign?**

A: God willing, and with health accompanying me, I'm planning on running for mayor because of the energy that we have brought to District Four. I want to spread it throughout the whole city. I want to bring the same philosophy to every single district, that we have to serve and work together with all the elected officials and institutions within the City of Miami in order for us to achieve the most important goal of improving the quality of life in our city and making people proud to live here.