

Ex-Miami Commissioner Pleads Guilty in Conspiracy Case

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A former Miami City Commissioner, Humberto E. Hernandez, pleaded guilty today to a Federal charge of conspiracy to commit bank, wire and mail fraud, less than two weeks after a Florida judge sentenced him to a year in prison for a misdemeanor.

Mr. Hernandez had faced a 23-count indictment involving fraudulent real estate transactions and the use of a Medicare fraud scheme to increase his real estate holdings. Federal prosecutors said that they had agreed to drop all of the charges except one, and that they would recommend that Mr. Hernandez serve four years in prison for the conspiracy charge, which usually carries a maximum penalty of five years. Sentencing is scheduled for Nov. 12.

"Humberto Hernandez, after much deliberation, concluded that it was in his best interests and the best interests of his family to put this matter to an end," Jose Quinon, a lawyer for Mr. Hernandez, said at a news conference here.

Mr. Hernandez has been in Federal custody since late May, when state prosecutors charged him in an investigation of vote fraud in last November's citywide elections. On Aug. 14, a jury acquitted him on charges of obstructing justice and fabricating evidence, but convicted him on a lesser count of being an accessory to covering up evidence of fraud. Three days after he was convicted, Mr. Hernandez was officially removed from the Miami City Commission by Gov. Lawton Chiles.

Officials at the United States Attorney's office said they would agree to allow Mr. Hernandez to serve his Federal and state sentences concurrently. He was indicted along with seven other people, but does not intend to serve as a witness for prosecutors, Mr. Quinon said.

Mr. Hernandez's guilty plea contrasted sharply with months of defiance in which he denied any wrongdoing, and said on Spanish-language radio programs that he was a target because of his Hispanic origins.

Miami has acquired a dubious reputation in recent years as a city where official corruption is the norm. Mr. Hernandez's case was one of the most prominent in a series that in the last year has led to charges against top city officials and politicians, including a former city manager, a state senator and a director of the port authority.

The State Attorney's office for Miami-Dade County said recently that in the last five years it had charged at least 270 public employees with crimes that included falsification of records and embezzlement.

A state investigation into last November's voter fraud ended in several arrests this year. In March, a civil suit filed by Miami's current Mayor, Joe Carollo, led to the removal of Xavier Suarez as Mayor only four weeks after he took office.

A judge in that case determined that Mr. Suarez's election was invalidated by hundreds of absentee votes fraudulently cast in his favor. Most of those votes were from Mr. Hernandez's Little Havana district.