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X-rated antics spice up City Hall

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Municipal misconduct has been a familiar refrain lately in places like South Miami, Coral Gables and Miami, but Homestead may have just topped them all.

In the four months since a new mayor and council were swept into office, Miami-Dade's second oldest city has been consumed by a series of outlandish ethical and financial scandals involving the past and present administrations.

They have ranged from the mild (fights over alleged favoritism) to the wild (a department head sending sexually explicit texts to a subordinate; his boss, the city manager, frequenting an S&M website on his city laptop.)

Almost no one has been spared: Not the administration of the combative former mayor, Lynda Bell, who riled up voters by raising taxes and firing city workers amid a fiscal crunch. Not her daughter, who lost her position as a Homestead reserve police officer after allegedly threatening her ex-boyfriend with her service gun -- a charge Bell claimed was political payback.

And not the new mayor, Steven Bateman, who brought in a new city manager with a cloudy professional past, then promptly got into his own jam.

Things really got going when a private eye hired by the new council majority aired the old administration's dirty -- and we do mean dirty -- laundry: City Manager Mike Shehadeh's five visits to the sadomasochistic website on his city laptop, for one, as well as his romantic overtures to the married deputy city manager, texted over his city BlackBerry. All of which his lawyer claimed were unintentional.

And which were topped only by the parks director's hundreds of graphic, raunchy exchanges with several women, including an underling, also on his city BlackBerry. Not to mention a crudely racist joke he forwarded via the BlackBerry.

Then, abruptly, it was the mayor's turn to get in trouble. A woman who rents a home from Bateman accused him of battery during a dispute over rent, while bloggers ripped him for getting a break on his \$11,000 in overdue development fees.

For weary Homestead residents, the Animal House antics couldn't have come at a worse time.

This once-sleepy town, decimated by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, staked its future on untrammelled growth, annexing thousands of acres of potato fields where new subdivisions soon sprouted. The town became a city flush with new tax dollars as its population doubled to 60,000 residents, only to have

everything come crashing back down to earth with the recent real-estate bust. HARD TIMES

Today one of every 76 homes in Homestead is in some stage of foreclosure, and the city faces more belt-tightening as it struggles to cope with cratering home values. The fiscal crisis extends to its Community Redevelopment Agency, which was supposed to alleviate poverty in Homestead but instead wasted millions on insider deals and unfinished projects, according to a county audit.

Some longtime residents say they're not surprised. It's just the same ol' Homestead re-asserting itself -- a place they say has always stood apart from the rest of Miami-Dade with its country ways and quirky politics, from brawls after local elections to the city flirting with bankruptcy in 2001.

"I tell my friends, 'That's Homestead,' " said activist Jim Tranthem. "It's a small town. My friend [former mayor] Fred Rhodes went to jail for drug smuggling. They're nice people -- not bad people -- but they do bonehead things."

The former city manager, Mike Shehadeh, knew his time was running short when Bell and allies Nazy Sierra, Melvin McCormick and Tim Nelson all lost reelection in November.

"I do not know what's in store for me. All bad news," he told his friend Alicia Mesa.

On Nov. 23, the City Council suspended him. The city's attorneys hired **Patrick Franklin**, a private investigator, to look into city contracts given to Shehadeh's brother and other allegations of misconduct.

On Feb. 3, **Franklin** came back with a litany of missteps by Shehadeh, from soliciting campaign contributions from city vendors for Bell to clashing with two council members to giving a resident the finger at a candidates' forum.

The probe, which cost Homestead \$50,000, also exposed concerns with HSQ, an engineering firm partly owned by Shehadeh's brother, Nour.

HSQ got almost \$400,000 from the city in contracts that appeared to be intentionally split into amounts of less than \$25,000 each to avoid review by the council, **Franklin** said. Many were no-bid deals.

A former internal auditor told **Franklin** the FBI, which has declined to comment publicly, is aware of HSQ and its ties to the former city manager.

Alfonso Perez, Shehadeh's attorney, said his client had recused himself whenever HSQ came up.
GODDESS QETESH

Franklin wasn't done. From the city's IT system, he unearthed Shehadeh's visits to the "Temple of Goddess Qetesh," the sadomasochistic website of an Ohio dominatrix seeking submissive "slaves." The investigator also fished out Shehadeh's amorous texts to Deputy City Manager Johanna Faddis, whom he promoted after he became city manager in February 2008.

"I cannot entertain another woman in my mind beside you. I am deeply in love with you girl," wrote the divorced Shehadeh.

Perez said his client did nothing wrong, noting that other people had access to his laptop and cellphone.

"Mr. Shehadeh's entire career and reputation has been destroyed by individuals who wish to affect his creditability for their own private reasons," Perez said.

Faddis' attorney, Neil Flaxman, said his client had no comment.

Shehadeh, fired by the council on Feb. 3, has not returned the laptop and Blackberry to Homestead.

Digging further, **Franklin** found Robert Landen, the parks director, had used his city Blackberry for "sexting" at least four women, including a subordinate.

In one exchange that reads like poorly rendered porn, Landen and a woman fantasize about manual and oral sex.

On Nov. 26, Landen, 44, also forwarded a racist text from a buddy. A sanitized version: "Ur not going to believe this sh*t!!! I got a tattoo of a (n-word) on my shoulder, and now my f--king arm quit workin!"

On Feb. 18, acting City Manager Sergio Purriños suspended Landen, who decided to retire later that day.

Landen did not return phone calls for comment.

On Super Bowl Sunday, the daughter of former Mayor Bell made news when she allegedly threatened her ex-boyfriend with her police gun. Jenna Maldonado, 28, a reserve Homestead police officer, was later arrested for aggravated assault with a firearm. Prosecutors dropped charges last week after the boyfriend, Steven Encarnacion, failed to respond to a subpoena. Maldonado's attorney, Sean O'Connor, said she had acted in self-defense.

Bell, noting the police union had backed Bateman in the election, called the charge against her daughter a "purely a political vendetta." The union brass responded: "Ludicrous." DUSTUP WITH TENANT

In early March, Homestead police terminated Maldonado from its reserve officer program.

Bateman, the new mayor, had experienced his own alleged dustup with the female tenant at his rental house. In a 911 call on Feb. 4, the unidentified woman told a police dispatcher: "Hi, um, somebody came to my house, and it was my landlord, and they assaulted me and left."

The Miami-Dade Police Department's public corruption investigations bureau is on the case. Bateman, who has not been arrested or charged, "categorically" denies the woman's claim of assault.

"This is a simple landlord-tenant dispute," the mayor said.

To replace Shehadeh, Homestead installed a new city manager -- Purriños, 48, who won the job this month in a 4-3 vote after serving briefly as the city's acting manager and development services director.

Purriños has had his own controversies. In his previous job as Doral's city manager, which lasted from 2005 to 2008, Purriños was accused of misconduct, including misusing his city-issued credit card, having Doral foot a \$20,000-a-month bill from a high-powered lobbyist hired to fight the county's mitigation policy after two other cities stopped paying their share, and doing planning work for friends on city time. Doral withheld \$13,184 in unused vacation time to cover what city officials say were unapproved credit card charges for meals and a city laptop he chose to keep.

Purriños has denied wrongdoing. He has won kudos from Homestead council members for his hard work and responsiveness.

But, activists are keeping a close watch on him. Writers on the Homestead is Home blog, registered to activist Angel Lazo, lambasted a Purriños plan to give 50 developers -- including Bateman, the mayor -- a

30 percent break on outstanding fees for planning services. Previously, Bateman had refused to pay the city \$10,985 in charges for site-plan reviews because he deemed them "excessive."

Bateman had nominated Purriños for the manager's job in November. Purriños said there was no quid pro quo. Critics aren't buying it. "Not worth believing," one anonymous commentor wrote on the blog.

But bigger problems loom. Former employees say the FBI is investigating Homestead's community redevelopment agency. The FBI declined to comment.

Auditors say the CRA spent millions of taxpayer dollars from 2004 to 2008 with little to show for it -- for instance, overpaying \$1.9 million for 44 shotgun houses to a company linked to former Homestead Mayor Steve Shiver. The houses were demolished and the land is empty.

But at least one councilman thinks things are getting better at Homestead City Hall. **WORTH THE MONEY**

Newly elected Councilman Jimmie L. Williams III, an ally of Bateman's, said the CRA audit was one-sided. The City Council has reformed its boards and is working to bring wireless Internet to Homestead, he said.

And **Franklin's** probe was well worth the money, he said. It "may have stopped future mistakes and embarrassments . . . I think it justifies itself," Williams said.

But Shehadeh's supporters say the council's way of replacing him was nothing short of shameful.

"We've reached a very low point. They've wasted too much time and money on investigations," said activist Kevin Sullivan.

Tranthen, another resident, took a more sanguine view.

"This is another chapter in the city's history," he said before adding, in what could be the understatement of the year:

"It's the kind of thing you remember."