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Miami-Dade County voters remove Mayor Carlos Alvarez amid frustration over property taxes

MIAMI – Mayor Carlos Alvarez was ousted Tuesday by voters angry over a property tax rate increase and salary raise for county employees in a county struggling to recover from the recession.

With 100 percent of precinct votes counted, 88 percent voted to oust the mayor, making Miami-Dade the most populous area, with more than 2.5 million people, ever to recall a local official. Just 12 percent of the 204,500 who cast ballots were in favor of allowing Alvarez to finish his second term, which ends in 2012.

Alvarez said he was confident the county's professional staff will work hard to ensure a smooth transition to a new administration.

"It has been an honor and privilege to serve this community for the past 35 years," Alvarez said in a statement. "The voters have spoken and a time of healing and reconciliation must now begin."

The county commission will most likely schedule a special election to fill the remainder of his term. The effort to remove Alvarez was led by billionaire car dealer Norman Braman.

"County voters have demonstrated by their ballots that they are tired of unaccountable officials, of being ignored and of being overtaxed in this very difficult recessionary time," Braman said at a news conference.

Alvarez maintained throughout the recall effort that raising taxes was necessary to fill a \$444 million gap and avoid cuts to critical social services. He said those affected by the property tax increase had enjoyed an artificially low 3 percent annual cap on tax increases during the real estate boom, and that the last round of contract negotiations had authorized most of the employee raises.

Francisco Rodriguez, 58, a bus driver, said his property taxes increased by about \$600 this year, leading him to cancel his health insurance. He voted to remove Alvarez.

"It's time for him to go," Rodriguez said. "We want a change."

There have been numerous recalls of state officials in recent years, but not any of a local government official in an area as big as Miami-Dade County. said Joshua Spivak, a recall expert and senior fellow at Wagner College in New York. The Los Angeles mayor was recalled in 1938, but Spivak said the population at that time was smaller.

Alvarez, a former county police chief, also says Braman is angry over losing an effort to block the county from funding a new \$600 million stadium for the Florida Marlins baseball team.

At Alvarez's urging, the county commission approved it.

"The defining issue really is the type of government that the citizens of this community are looking for," Braman said. "It's about empowering the people of this community to take it back from the politicians who have been running it, and running it in a way that I think endangers the fiscal future of our community."

A recent poll by firm Bendixen Amandi, in partnership with The Miami Herald, showed that 67 percent of likely voters planned to recall Alvarez from office. Only 18 percent said he should stay.

Fernand Amandi, the firm's managing partner, said disenchantment with the county government and elected officials has been accentuated by the poor economic environment.

"This has been building," Amandi said.

Braman, a former Philadelphia Eagles owner, gathered twice the 51,000 signatures needed to recall the mayor. County Commissioner Natacha Seijas was also on the recall ballot and removed from office.

Yolanda Soler, 47, said she voted to recall the mayor.

"I think it's important that politicians know when the people are not with them," she said. "What he did didn't make any fiscal sense. I'm disappointed because I did trust him to do a better job."