Beach city manager marks a year in post

• MORALES, FROM 1B

office.

Morales declined to be interviewed for this article.

But Dori Foster-Morales, Morales' wife of almost 25 years, said her husband didn't have aspirations of becoming a city manager. But it was an opportunity to fulfill two of Morales' loves: to be "an agent of change" in local government, and to serve his hometown.

The day he was picked to become Miami Beach's top administrator, the seasoned politician was moved to tears.

Miami Beach is where he was born and raised. It's where he met his wife at a Beach High football game, where he graduated as salutatorian, class president and homecoming king. It's where, years later, he returned to announce his ultimately successful run for Miami-Dade County commissioner.

The only son of a cafeteria manager and head custodian who worked in city schools to put him through Harvard Law School, Morales was returning to the place that gave him his start. Only now, he was in charge of it all.

He took to the podium at City Hall and barely managed to get his words out.

"I keep thinking about my dad who came in 1947, and I wish he could be here," Morales said. "He loved Miami Beach and came here as a waiter. And I think the last thing he ever thought was his son would be city manager of this place one day."

Morales took the helm at a pivotal time. A rash of corruption arrests had tainted City Hall. The city was inching toward sealing its largest deal ever: a $1 billion redevelopment of its convention center campus. His bosses, the elected commission, were often divided. Halfway through his first year, an election swept a new majority into office.

Restoring trust in city government was one of the city manager's main mandates. To that end, Morales recently told commissioners he has continued to implement policies already in progress when he joined the city — such as completing ethics training for all city employees — and has launched reforms of his own.

The city provided money for a new compliance officer and an ethics hotline. Morales has hand-picked several new managers to lead troubled areas, including the Building Department. In 2008, the department was rocked by the arrest of employees on charges of bribery and racketeering.

Other problem areas, such as Code Compliance, have been restructured. Morales recommended turning code into its own department. In 2012, five code officers and two fire inspectors were arrested by the FBI on charges that they extorted a South Beach nightclub.

"Things in the past that may have been swept under the rug, are not being swept under the rug, and I think that has already begun to change the culture a bit," Morales told commissioners at a meeting in December.

He later added: "There's no substitute for, from the top down, making it clear there's zero tolerance."

But the biggest changes, say City Hall insiders, aren't tangible. There's much talk these days about a culture shift, with an emphasis on customer service.

Those who work closest with Morales say he pays special attention to whom he hires. Then, he gives his staff latitude to act independently — and even to mess up. Marcia Monserrat has worked with Morales since his first days in public office. Now, she's a liaison to the commission in Miami Beach.

"I noticed when I first got here that people were afraid to make decisions," Monserrat said. "I want to say that they didn't feel like the administration had their back."

Commissioners, meanwhile, say they can talk to department heads directly and get answers quickly.

"They're empowered to think, and to act, and to do their job," said Commissioner Joy Malakoff.

Mayor Philip Levine said the city is doing more for employees, pointing to a motivational luncheon featuring Miami Heat basketball team president Pat Riley. The city manager has also taken the time to ride along with first responders, and during the hectic Memorial Day weekend, he joined code inspectors on walks through the city.

Levine said employees appreciate the attention from Morales.

"He's turned people who were regular people — he turned them into being amazing," Levine said.

Much is also said about Morales' approach to difficult situations. Several people interviewed said the city manager is measured and fair, even in disagreements.

"If there's a dispute and both sides feel like the judge is being fair and straight-forward and honest, then the argument lives and dies without a lot of scar tissue," said Commissioner Ed Tobin.

Joe Jimenez, one of a handful of assistant city managers, chalks it up to Morales' experience as a corporate lawyer. After graduating from law school, Morales went to Wall Street, where he worked on million-dollar deals. He never was a litigator, Jimenez said.

"It's all about negotiating," Jimenez said. "You can say 'no' nicely."

Communications Workers of America local union President Richard McKinnon said he was happy with the way Morales handled a tough situation with an emergency dispatcher.

The dispatcher took 14 minutes to send help to a dying man's house, and was facing termination. But there were other factors at play, McKinnon said, such as a delay in the fire department's response, and malfunctioning equipment — and the dispatcher's previously undiagnosed brain tumor, which could have affected his cognitive ability.

The union president said the manager listened to his concerns, and Morales agreed to hold off on the termination until an independent investigation could be completed.

"To me, that was a big change," McKinnon said. "He listens to people's concerns, and if they have validity to them, and if they make sense," then Morales might change his mind.

Still, there have been rough patches.

Miami Beach Fraternal Order of Police President Alex Bello said he wanted the department to address the media shortly after a teen died after being zapped by a Beach officer with a Taser, but the city manager wouldn't allow it.

"Every time, the right process or the right reaction to take when we have a major incident is to come out and address the incident and put the facts out," Bello said.

But Morales suggested that a different approach would get better results for the city. Shortly after the Taser incident in the Beach, Morales sent an email to city officials noting that a similar case being handled by the county hadn't received nearly as much media attention.

"Miami-Dade Police certainly seem to have no problem issuing a short statement with only the facts. No interviews by anybody. Just a simple statement. Probably part of the reason why there has been so little coverage. The county is not giving them material to print. Let the facts speak for themselves. That is all I ask for. I find it is usually much safer to say less than more," Morales wrote.

In an email to the Miami Herald, Morales explained: "I believe that when an incident like this occurs, the key is to provide facts only, and not engage in speculation or conjecture."

Police Chief Raymond Martinez announced his early retirement in March. In a move that garnered citywide praise, Morales nominated Dan Oates to lead the department. Oates, who was chief of the Aurora, Colo., police department when a gunman killed 12 and injured 58 in a movie theater there, was confirmed by the mayor and commission at a meeting on Wednesday.

Relationships between the city attorney's office and city manager's office also have been strained. After police said a 13-year-old was allowed to dance at a city strip club, Morales moved to shut it down, saying the business owed resort taxes.

But soon after Morales' move, the city attorney issued an opinion that disagreed that the business owed resort taxes. According to the opinion, Morales had acted without first consulting the legal department. Morales later followed the legal opinion and did not move to close the club.

City Attorney Jose Smith announced in April that he's leaving to become lead attorney in North Miami Beach. Miami Beach Chief Deputy City Attorney Raul Aguila has been selected to take over for Smith.

In the next year, Morales' bosses expect him to keep up the pace.

Commissioners have tasked the administration with fixing flooding issues while planning for longer-term sea level rise. Staffers are focusing on master-planning entire swaths of the city, fixing up the major tourist attraction that is the Lincoln Road Mall, and bringing North Beach up to par with neighborhoods to the south.

Despite Morales' demanding schedule — his wife, a divorce attorney, says it's not uncommon to find them both at the kitchen table, answering emails at 4:30 a.m. — Morales makes time for family. He and his wife have a 12-year-old son ("Jimmy's doppelganger," Foster-Morales said) and a 20-year-old daughter. Morales' elderly aunt lives at home with them, while Foster-Morales' mother lives next door.

They like to get away to their home in the Keys, where they host friends, and where Morales fishes. He loves Elvis, karaoke and Hawaiian shirts. And, after his daughter was diagnosed with autism, he became devoted to raising money and awareness for causes that support people with autism.

Said Foster-Morales: "I often hear that he's so nice. He's always in such a good mood. And he is. . . He's actually really enjoying what he's doing in the Beach."

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