

A Global City



The skyline of Miami

An Interview with The Honorable Francis X. Suarez, Mayor of Miami

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to being elected with 86 percent support from Miami residents, Mayor Suarez served as Miami Commissioner for District 4 for eight years and achieved many legislative accomplishments, including implementing ShotSpotter technology in the City, a state-of-the-art gunshot detection system, setting up a transportation trust fund which allocates funds for current and future transit projects, and passing the Reverse Redline legisla-



The Hon. Francis X. Suarez

tion authorizing lawsuits against several major banks for discriminatory mortgage lending practices. Mayor Suarez also serves as Chair of the Environment Committee and on the Advisory Board of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. In these capacities, he takes a leading role in collaborating with fellow mayors from around the country to preserve the environment and develop programs and policies that directly benefit the City of Miami. Mayor Suarez also serves as Vice-Chair of the Miami-Dade Transportation Planning Organization (TPO) and is the former President of the Miami-Dade County League of Cities. In his role at the TPO, Mayor Suarez championed the Strategic Miami Area Rapid Transit (SMART) Plan, which was unanimously approved. The SMART Plan expands mass transit options in Miami-Dade County through six main corridors as well as new bus routes to ease traffic congestion and support future population growth. Mayor Suarez helped negotiate the Tri-Rail connection to Downtown, offering free ridership to Overtown residents for life. As the son of former City of Miami Mayor, Xavier Suarez, he was exposed to public service since he was a child, growing up around his father's office at City Hall, the same one he works out of today. Mayor Suarez earned a bachelor's degree in finance from Florida International University, graduating in the top ten percent of his class. He went on to receive his law degree from the University of Florida's Frederic G. Levin College of Law, where he graduated cum laude.

What interested you to become Mayor of Miami?

I came from a family where public service and giving back was a prerequisite.

My grandfather on my father's side came from Cuba with 14 kids. My father became the

first Cuban Mayor of Miami in 1985 when I was eight years old, so I got to see up close someone who immigrated to the U.S., was raised and educated up north, and then came down to Miami and struggled to get elected. It wasn't easy for him because he wasn't well known and there had never been a Cuban Mayor in Miami. I had a front row seat to a very transformational political figure, who was my father.

I educated myself and came back to Miami after law school, got married, and started a business. I realized that

there are two choices in life: one can be part of the solution or one can complain about the things they don't like.

I was 30 years old at the time and we didn't have children, and the person running for Mayor in 2008 was the councilman for the area I lived in. When he ran for Mayor, it created a vacancy for his council position, and I felt that if I was going to get involved in public service, this was the right time to do it.

I ran for office and was elected at 32 by a very slim margin against a very well-known candidate who had run many times in the past. This was during a very difficult moment in the city because the city had just gone into bankruptcy and two of the five councilmen had been indicted.

After I was part of the transformation that took place in Miami and my time as commissioner was coming to an end, I thought it was the right time for me to pursue a higher level and decided to run for Mayor. I was fortunate to be elected with the support of 86 percent of the residents of the City of Miami.

During my eight years as commissioner, we brought the city out of bankruptcy. Now, in my first year as Mayor, we have a significant reserve and the city is growing phenomenally well – we have double digit growth on average in our tax base for the past six consecutive years.

It has been an amazing first year full of accomplishments. It has also been a year where I have learned a lot and grown into the position. It is more intense than I expected, even though I had a lot of experience coming into it.

I'm the first Mayor of Miami in its 122-year history who was born in the City of Miami, the first with a father who was Mayor, and the first Mayor of my generation.

A confluence of factors have come together in a really incredible moment where the city is transitioning from being a gateway city to being a global city.

What were your key priorities when you were elected?

One of them was making Miami the safest city. In my first year, we were blessed to finish the year with the lowest homicide rate in 51 years. That is remarkable in the context of the urban landscape nationally.

We also wanted to be a city that is cutting edge, not only in its economy, but as an organization. As a city, we are a billion-dollar entity with 4,500 employees and four labor unions so, from a process perspective, we want to make sure that we are a city that is easy to work with.

In our first year, we introduced electronic plans and we created a new website. We also put our employees through an innovation workshop to help them understand how to work with our new systems so the community of people who depend on the city for their livelihoods are getting a city that understands that time is money.

Another issue we wanted to focus on was resilience. We know that we have to deal with certain climate-based realities and we are hitting that point head on and dealing with it rather than putting our heads in the sand. We have a \$400 million bond program and it's completely focused on making Miami the most resilient city on the planet.

I have been blessed to be named to two major national and international boards. I am the chair of the environment committee for the U.S. Conference of Mayors, which is unusual for someone in their first year as Mayor. I am also on a global commission of adaptation that was established by Bill Gates and former Secretary General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, who recently came to Miami to look at our resilience strategies, and gave our reports to the UN. We want to be a model for the world, not just the U.S. I'm the only Mayor in the U.S. on that commission and only one of two Mayors globally.

How have you built a broader understanding about the Miami of today as a global city and the transformation that is taking place?

We're very proud of the progress we have made in this area and it is something that we continue to build on. From an investment perspective, we have never been more diversified

A confluence of factors have come together in a really incredible moment where the city is transitioning from being a gateway city to being a global city.

in the pool of countries investing here. We are getting investment from countries that did not have us on their radars 15 years ago.

We have investments from Israel, the Middle East, India, Japan, China, Russia, and Turkey, as well as Europe, South America, Central America, and throughout the U.S. There aren't many regions of the world right now that aren't making significant investments here.

This is partially because one of my top managers used to be the former airport director and he did a great job expanding direct flights to and from different parts of the world. It's easier than ever to get to anywhere in the U.S. through Miami and it's an outbound launching point to many different parts of the world.

Will you address the state of the education system in Miami and your focus on achieving excellence in K-12 education?

We live in a knowledge-based economy today so it has never been more important to support education initiatives, and we're doing this on different levels.

Starting just last month, we passed a bill that establishes child savings accounts. Studies have indicated that children are three times more likely to attend college if they save even small amounts of money towards their education and they are four times more likely to graduate college if they have saved. Every single kindergarten student in the public-school system in Miami will get a child savings account that we are funding at a certain level. I'm also a big proponent of early (pre-K) childhood education.

We are also creating a scholarship fund modeled after a program established by one of our university presidents. In addition, we are also highly involved in developing technical skill programs so those who decide they don't want to go to college can have a career path that will allow their families to be successful.

Our objective is to create a path to prosperity for every single person born in our city. Government can't fix everything, but we're trying to level the playing field to the maximum extent and at least give people the opportunity to succeed.

What made your approach to public safety and reducing crime work so well?

We took a holistic approach – it was not just having more police officers, though we did that. We increased our patrol officers by 70

percent. As our marginal revenue was growing, we dedicated a significant portion of that to hiring more police officers.

We aided this on the technological front by developing a gunfire detection system. We now instantly know, with GPS precision, the location of any gunfire in the City of Miami. We have the ability to get to the scene faster, to collect evidence more precisely, and to create policing strategies based on actual gunfire incidents. This has radically changed our understanding of where these events are happening in the city and what we can do about it.

This system also gives first responders a few minutes of lead time to get victims to the great trauma centers we have in our hospitals in the event of a shooting.

We also have invested significant money in poverty reduction strategies and affordable housing, including a \$16-million investment in one of our most vulnerable neighborhoods. This area was an urban food desert, so part of that investment was for a supermarket. We also invested in culture in that neighborhood by reviving a cultural facility there.

Another approach involved the creation of job training centers. The developers of the affordable housing projects we invested in were required to hire from the community which allowed people who may have been selling drugs before to become construction workers.

I hired a new police chief as well and, to show my support for the communities, I started running 5Ks within 24 hours of any homicide beginning and ending in the exact point where it happened.

Even though our homicide figures represent the number of lives lost, when we're reducing that number, it also represents the number of lives saved. For me, this is way more than a statistic – it's personal; it represents human beings whose lives are being saved and who can become productive members of our society.

How critical is building a strong public/private partnership in addressing many of these issues?

All of our affordable housing projects have been public/private partnerships. We're leveraging the private sector's ability to deliver financing and to develop better properties than the public sector ever did. Instead of getting horrible looking buildings, we're getting beautiful buildings in our urban areas that look like they should be in the wealthiest parts of our communities.

When we marry the private sector's innovation and ability to manage projects with our funding and our land, we get a high-quality product.

Public/private partnerships are essential, and we have also created them to address transit issues with our trolley system, so we are expanding them on many levels.

With the partisan state of politics today in Washington, is it at the local level where real change happens?

Yes, for two reasons: number one, as local governments, we aren't allowed to carry deficits, so we have a prohibition against having a deficit in any fiscal year. We have to balance our budgets. Miami now has \$160 million in reserves so, from a fiscal perspective, we are much better managed.

Second, I did not run for office on a partisan basis. If I were to create a party based on what we are trying to accomplish, it would be called the solutions party. It would be less ideological and more about problem solving. This sometimes does ruffle the party structure, which is very powerful.

If we get away from the things that divide us and focus on the things that unite us, we would be far better off because, as human beings, we all have a lot in common and focusing on a problem/solution model is much more successful.

Are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to reflect and celebrate the wins?

It's critical to celebrate. I'm a very driven person and the metrics are important, so I'm always focusing on getting better and getting my staff focused on what is next, but we have to enjoy what we're doing to maintain the passion for it.

We all want to be happy in life and happiness is fostered by our ability to remain energetic and focused, so we have to maintain a certain balance and take the time to celebrate the wins.

I realize that what I'm doing at the macro level is meant to make a lot of people's lives better, but I'm also thinking about living in a city that will make my family's life better. I want my kids to have great opportunities and to be able to raise their families in Miami.

It's personal for me because I was born here. ●