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City's vice mayor replaces ousted leader

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West Miami Vice Mayor Eduardo Muñiña has replaced ousted Mayor Cesar Carasa after he was charged with two counts of exploiting his official position.

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West Miami Vice Mayor Eduardo Muñiña is now the head man in charge after former Mayor Cesar Carasa was suspended and charged Monday with two counts of exploiting his official position.

Carasa was under investigation by the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office for racking up more than \$70,000 in long-distance calls on his city-issued cellphone between 2006 and 2009.

Prosecutors allege the calls, made to the Dominican Republic and China, had nothing to do with city business.

Gov. Charlie Crist suspended Carasa from office Monday. He could face a \$500 fine or up to 30 days in jail. Carasa was reached by telephone on Thursday but declined to comment.

His attorney, Bruce H. **Lehr**, told The Miami Herald on Thursday, "I look forward to appearing before a jury and make clear what my client did or did not do."

Muñiña presided at Wednesday's city commission meeting as the new mayor. He will assume the position until the next election on April 13.

"It's under unfortunate circumstances that bring me to this position, but I am ready to step up to the plate," Muñiña said.

"I pledge to restore our citizens' confidence, which I think has been compromised, and work with a unified board for the common good of the city."

Commissioner Luciano Suarez will be the vice mayor. The commission also nominated planning and zoning board member Candida Blanca to fill the vacancy left by Muñiña. City Attorney Jose Villalobos said the city charter allows the commission to fill a vacant seat on the commission when it is more than 120 days away from a regular election.

"I have been living in West Miami for 38 years and have always worked for the city in one way or another," Blanca said. "My goal is to help this commission bring the city forward."

Muñiña, Suarez and Blanca will be officially sworn in at 8 p.m. Monday at City Hall, 901 SW 62nd Ave. Also at the meeting:

* Commissioners passed a resolution recommending that distribution of all ceremonial items, such as proclamations, certificates and keys to the city, be approved by the commission first and reserved for individuals who have contributed greatly to the state, county or local community.

The item was passed after Carasa presented a key to the city to Ecuador's consul general without commission approval. The commission subsequently passed a resolution on Nov. 18 requesting the key be returned because it could be misinterpreted by local Ecuadoreans that the city supports Ecuador's socialist government.

* The commission voted against early voting for the April 13 municipal elections. Commissioners agreed it would be too costly.

* The commission announced City Hall will be closed on Dec. 24, Dec. 25, Dec. 31 and Jan. 1 in observance of the holidays. Garbage collection will be suspended on Dec. 24 and Dec. 25.

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