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miami beach's chief resiliency officer leaving for private sector

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susan askew



miami beach's chief resiliency officer leaving for private sector: susy torriente will join jacobson as director of city resilience

Miami Beach, one of the cities most vulnerable to sea level rise and on the forefront of adaptation, is losing its first Chief Resiliency Officer. Susy Torriente who has held the position for the past four years is leaving to take a job in the private sector. Torriente, who also served as Assistant City Manager overseeing planning, transportation and mobility, environment and sustainability, housing and community development, and economic development, will join Jacobs Engineering Group in their Orlando office. She'll serve as their Director of City Resilience, a new position in Jacobs' Advanced Planning Group. [Torriente, above center, works on a resiliency exercise for the West Avenue project.]

Torriente's first took on a role in the sustainability field ten years ago when, as Assistant County Manager for Miami-Dade County, she was asked to supervise a Sustainability Manager who was "a really smart guy" but no one was sure what to do with someone using unfamiliar terms such as climate adaptation and mitigation. Torriente's boss said, "Don't worry about it. Susy will supervise him on this agenda."

"The more I talked with him, the more I realized it was going to change everything in the way local government operates and provides services," she said. Around the same time, the County received a grant to create its first sustainability plan.

In the summer of 2009 when she became the County's Sustainability Director, she also co-founded the four-county Southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact. The Compact is a "partnership between Broward, Miami-Dade, Monroe, and Palm Beach Counties whose goal is to reduce regional greenhouse gas emissions, implement adaptation strategies, and build climate resilience within their own communities and across the Southeast Florida region," according to its website. The Compact's unified Sea Level Rise projection for Southeast Florida issued in 2015 estimated sea level rise at 6 to 10 inches by 2030, 14 to 26 inches by 2060, and 31 to 61 inches by 2100. An updated projection is expected later this year.

After eight years with the County, the last two as Sustainability Director, Torriente was an Assistant City Manager in Fort Lauderdale for four years where sustainability was part of her portfolio. She joined the City of Miami Beach in 2015.

Torriente is not a scientist or an engineer "but I really put people together and listened and learned and tried to push to the next level and that's what I've enjoyed the most... taking complex problems, breaking them down, putting people together to just solve problems. Being collaborative and working beyond one department is just very natural to me," she said.

In her new role with Jacobs, she'll work with municipalities as well as private sector customers and on federal contracts. "It will be nice to take [the experience] I have from the City but also expand it into learning more about other areas," Torriente said. Her responsibilities will primarily be in the Southeast region but she will work "nationally and globally when the opportunity arises."

Mayor Dan Gelber said, "Susy has been amazing to our city and it's really a loss to see her go. She's one of the great thought leaders, not just locally or regionally, but nationally on resiliency challenges... She's given our city years of incredible counsel."

"I think she really set a template for how a city gets ahead of the curve and organizes its approach and its decision making," Gelber continued. "She always preached that resiliency was not a single department but, rather, something that informed all departments. It's not a stovepipe, it's horizontal to every stovepipe and I think that approach improves governance."

"She really informed our approach," he said. "The most important thing is we're a city that's trying to lead, in

part out of necessity, so having one of the most experienced thought leaders helping us guide the ship has been really beneficial.”

One of the accomplishments Torriente is most proud of is one Gelber also praised her for – the Urban Land Institute (ULI) review by a panel of experts of the City’s resiliency efforts. Gelber campaigned on having what he called a “red team” review of the City’s stormwater projects which have included raising roads, a controversial topic within the community.



“For me it’s interesting, I sort of ran on this platform of getting a second opinion,” he said. “I think [former Mayor] Philip [Levine] really wanted to get it done and I credit him with that. I wanted to get it done right, inform our decision making.” Many in government might not take so well to that, Gelber said but Torriente “was unquestionably enthusiastic... all these experts coming from all the over the world really excited her... She figured out how to do it at the highest level, and free I might add.” The Rockefeller Foundation and 100 Resilient Cities paid for the audit.

“I think that was a game changer,” Torriente said of the ULI report. “There’s some really good recommendations that helped us shift the program and we were told we were on the right track but we could do things to make it even better... It’s important in government that we should always be able to look at ourselves, assess what we’re doing, and keep getting better and better... I think our stormwater program will be better” as a result of the ULI study.

"I'm particularly proud and pleased of being part of 100 Resilient Cities and through that opportunity, bringing those resources to the City. Not only did we create Resilient305 with our partners, but we updated our strategic plan that had been dormant for four years and updated it through the lens of resiliency." Resilient305 is a 20-year vision with 59 actions for Miami, Miami Beach, and Miami-Dade County "to address the shocks and stresses posed to the Greater Miami & the Beaches (GM&B) from the warming climate." It was released earlier this year following a three-year collaboration among governments, non-governmental, business, and academic organizations. Around the same time, the Rockefeller Foundation announced it was ending the 100 Resilient Cities program. Some of the work will be continued here at the new Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center funded through grants from Adrienne Arsht and the Rockefeller Foundation.

In addition to the ULI report, Miami Beach has several other studies/strategic plans in process or nearing completion. Alan Shulman, an architect who specializes in historic preservation, led a team that included architects, landscape architects, engineers, and experts in building elevation in developing guidelines for resiliency and adaptation within historic districts. A draft report was presented to the Historic Preservation Board and will be on a future agenda of the new City Commission. Climate adaptation planning consultant ICF is midway through a business case analysis of the City's resiliency efforts.

Finally, there's "The Jacobs Study" which will take the ULI process a step further, assessing and recommending a range of options for the City's resiliency strategy which is expected to include blue and green infrastructure options as well as road elevation. Torriente will be precluded from participating in that project due to a prohibition on City employees lobbying the City for two years after leaving.

"I work with great people and have had the opportunity to mentor staff and younger professionals," Torriente said of her time here. "You know, that's your legacy when you leave, when the people around you are doing great things."

To be sure, there were frustrations and challenges including "trying to answer all the complex questions and the implications." Both elected officials and residents are "worried about what's going to happen to the property tax base, insurance, the market, real estate sales," she said.

"There was always a lot of speculation that made me frustrated," but the recent studies, Torriente said, "will help us get to the actual answers and the actual data. The frustration is speculation when I'd rather actually have data to make a difference."

While the studies are going on, many neighborhood improvement projects were put on hold. With the Jacobs report expected soon, the City Commission will begin to review methods and priorities for moving the stormwater program forward. The time has been referred to as a "pause" on the program.

"We need to stop the pause," Torriente said, "and we need to, again, just carefully and in a very transparent way work with everybody to explain climate change is real. These things are happening. We need to continue to invest in our city. We need to continue to adapt – continuously learn and improve – but we can't stop."

For his part, Gelber doesn't think it's a pause. With the ULI and soon to be released Jacobs report, he said, "We can now recalibrate our approach. By the way, we haven't paused. I don't have a second thought about taking action. I just want to make sure the actions we're taking are the right ones. A pause would be reconsidering what we're doing. I just want to make sure what we're doing is the right thing."

“We need to continue to be the model for other cities to start,” Torriente said. “And that’s why I’m excited about this opportunity of working in the private sector in a company that has the resources to help more and more cities and so I’d love to be able to take what I’ve learned and see it happening more and more and more.”

Torriente has lived in Miami most of her life, moving here with her family when she was 7. She earned a bachelor’s degree in English and a master’s in Public Administration from the University of Miami. For the past two years Torriente has been commuting to Orlando on weekends where her wife took “an amazing opportunity” with Disney, she said. After December 12, Orlando will become home base.

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