

Penelas, group reach an impasse

Penelas' plea refused by foes of gay rights

BY KARL ROSS

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If Friday's talks between Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas and leaders of the movement to repeal the county's gay rights amendment serve as a preview of next year's referendum vote on the issue, expect a hostile conflict to unfold.

Penelas arranged the meeting at his offices on the 29th floor of County Hall so he could make a public pitch, with members of the media present, to avert the September 2002 referendum he says will cause "a lot of hurt, a lot of pain."

But leaders of Take Back Miami-Dade quickly tired of the mayor's appeal to them to end their three-year crusade against the amendment. They lashed out against Penelas and against Miami Beach Mayor David Dermer, labeling them "merchants of death."

"One of the reasons we don't want you spreading homosexuality in the community is because it's the lifestyle of death," said Nathaniel Wilcox, the group's assistant director.

To bolster his argument, Wilcox

circulated a Nov. 26 Herald article about Miami Beach's annual White Party — a fundraiser for AIDS prevention — in which one partygoer laments watching all his friends die as a result of the disease. Wilcox said he lost his brother to AIDS, but did not say how he contracted the disease.

In addition to calling the mayors "merchants of death," Wilcox compared the county's human rights ordinance — amended three years ago to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation — to the Tuskegee Experiment in which U.S. health officials studied the effects of syphilis on black men without offering them treatment. By the end of the meeting, Penelas had abandoned any hope of scuttling

the referendum and pledged to fight it with all the resources at his command.

"I just think this is a very sad day in this community," Penelas said. "And I just hope and pray — to the same God as you — that we can conduct this campaign in a way [that] does not demoralize this community."

Dermer said he feared a tourism backlash against the referendum campaign could have economic consequences for Miami Beach.

"I'm just listening to some of the rhetoric that's already beginning. Where is this going to lead us? We don't need that now. All this is doing is creating a divisive cause célèbre."

Also representing Take Back Miami-Dade was former state Rep. Eladio Armesto García, the group's chairman; his son and communications director, Eladio José Armesto; and Anthony Verdugo, chairman of the Miami-Dade chapter of the Christian Coalition.

Upon entering the mayor's office, Armesto García saw a Hanukkah menorah on display in the reception area and chided a Penelas aide for not having a nativity scene, as well. "After all, this is Christmas, which is about celebrating the birth of Christ," he said.

Armesto García challenged Penelas about the premise of the county's gay rights amendment.

"What do you consider human rights? If a human being wants to sell marijuana, is that a human right? If a human being wants to snort cocaine, is that a human right? If a human being wants to be nude in front of my young

child, is that a human right? Human rights don't mix amnesia with milk of magnesia."

Before Penelas could answer, the younger Armesto asked the mayor if he had invited them for any other reason besides "repeating your press release."

Saying they had the U.S. Supreme Court and the pope on their side, members of the group said they would not let Penelas stand in their way.

"We hoped to hear you say you were going to join the winning team," Armesto said.

"That's not going to happen," Penelas replied.

Take Back Miami-Dade members reminded Penelas that the 51,000 signatures they collected during their petition drive represented "51,000 votes."

Penelas angered group members when he said the signatures were, in many cases, "questionable" — a reference to forgery and fraud allegations that triggered an ongoing inquiry by the state attorney's office.

Armesto suggested Penelas' political future could be at stake if he opposed their referendum, calling gay and lesbian constituents "an albatross."

Penelas dismissed their political calculus, saying the group's 51,000 signatures represent "maybe 5 percent of the electorate."

He noted that he handily defeated — by more than a 2-1 margin — his closest rival in last year's mayoral contest, Miguel Diaz de la Portilla, who as a county commissioner opposed the gay rights amendment in 1998.

"This is not about politics," Penelas said. "This is not about votes. This is about doing what's right."

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The county mayor called the meeting 'a very sad day,' and said he hoped that the campaign would not demoralize the community.