

Miami Gardens will have several choices on the ballot in August as the mayor and three city council members all face opponents for their seats.

In the mayor's race, incumbent Oliver Gilbert faces Ulysses Harvard, a former city councilman and an insurance broker; James Wright, former Opa-locka police chief and security supervisor; and Clara Johnson, a retired AT&T employee.

Councilwoman Lillie Odom has one opponent for Seat 1, Nathaniel Miller, president of a Miami Gardens homeowners association and retired administrator at St. Matthews Missionary Baptist Church. In the Seat 3 race, Councilman Rodney Harris also has only one opponent, John Zeigler, who works security for the U.S. Postal Service.

And in the Seat 5 contest, Councilman David Williams is up against Kevin Brown, vice chairman of the city's progressive youth advisory board and a coordinator with the North Dade Youth and Family Coalition; Raymond Carvil, a former city of Miami police officer; and Andre Williams, a former Miami Gardens council member and attorney.

Additionally, voters will decide on a proposed city charter change that would give the city and the Miami-Dade County Commission joint building and zoning control of the Miami Dolphins' stadium and the surrounding land.

MAYOR'S RACE

Mayor Oliver Gilbert, 43, is up against a mix of new and familiar opponents for his mayoral seat, which he has held since 2012. Harvard and Wright have both competed for elected positions before but this will be the first time for Clara Johnson. Johnson, 65, said she wanted to get involved rather than just complain. She wants to see more small businesses and greater resident involvement in city government.

"I am a concerned constituent myself, and I'm looking for change. I'm looking for us to work together," Johnson said.

Harvard and Wright have both attended various community events in recent months, and both have focused their messages on resident involvement and combating crime, one of the major issues in the city.

Harvard, 59, was appointed to the council's Seat 3 in 2005, replacing the late Audrey King, but lost re-election in 2006. He has since competed in three elections, most recently against Councilman Rodney Harris in 2012, but lost in a runoff. He said he wants to bring transparency to the mayor's seat and also create more opportunities for veterans.

"I'm running to bring government closer to the people, and I feel that that hasn't been done because there's not enough people close enough to be truly involved," Harvard said.

Back in 1997, Harvard was arrested for battery on his then-wife. The charges were later dropped. Harvard said that there was no domestic violence but that the two had an argument.

"There was nothing that happened, there was nothing that occurred. That's why the case was dropped," Harvard said.

Wright, 49, who was Opa-locka police chief for about three years before he was fired in 2008, ran unsuccessfully in 2014 for the county commission seat currently held by Barbara Jordan. He hopes to use his law-enforcement background to devise new ways to reduce crime.

"People want to invest in the city, but they don't want to invest in the city to their detriment because of the crime issues and because of the perception of crime," Wright said.

Gilbert, who has led the city in the midst of development and growth over the last four years, has also had to deal with frequent high-profile violent incidents and criticism of the city's policing.

"I look forward to having a conversation with the residents about what we've accomplished over the last four years and what we hope to accomplish in the next four years," Gilbert said.

SEAT 1

Councilwoman Lillie Odom, 73, was one of the city's first employees after it incorporated in 2003, serving as an assistant to the mayor. She has spent much of her four years on the dais advocating for seniors and health services for the elderly. Odom wants to continue that work and also prioritize fixing blighted areas in her district.

"I'm working with management to make sure that we continue to improve the roads in those areas and do some cleanups," Odom said.

Nathaniel Miller, 65, her opponent, is a first-time candidate. Miller hopes his leadership of the Vista Verde Townhome Association has prepared him to advocate for residents in the surrounding neighborhoods. In addition to activities for seniors, he wants to see the city provide more job training for ex-offenders and young residents.

"Serving as a homeowners association president, I saw a lot of different problems and I think the whole area is facing a lot of the same problems," Miller said.

SEAT 3

As with the other council seats, a political newcomer is up against an incumbent as Councilman Rodney Harris is being challenged by John Zeigler.

Zeigler, 59, said he respects what Harris and the city council have accomplished but wants to bring a common-sense approach to the council chambers. He also wants to see the community be more active in responding to violent crime.

"If you commit a crime in Miami Gardens or anywhere in Miami, we're not going to just pray about it or talk about it - we're going to come after you," Zeigler said.

Harris, 50, has been on the council since 2012 and said that if re-elected he wants to continue to do community events like his monthly food truck invasions and plans to remain accessible to residents.

"If there's some issue they have or a concern they'd like to address, you can always reach me. I'll always try to come up with solutions and not just talk," Harris said.

SEAT 5

The race for Seat 5 includes David Williams, the incumbent; Raymond Carvil, a former law-enforcement officer; Andre Williams a former councilman, no relation to David; and Kevin Brown, an advisory board member who has never held elected office.

Brown, 31, and a member of the city's progressive young adults advisory committee, wants to address the development of businesses and advocate for seniors. He sees the council seat as a logical progression from his work with the advisory board, the purpose of which is to encourage more civic engagement by young adults.

"I think I've gotten to a point now where I see the need to take the next step and be a voice for our community," Brown said.

Andre Williams, 48, who served on the council from 2006 to 2012, is focused on keeping the city accountable for its spending. He competed unsuccessfully for mayor in 2012 and council Seat 6 in 2014. He wants to promote programs that teach residents more modern, technology-based job skills.

"I want to control our spending and spend our money more wisely so we invest in our residents," Williams said, adding that the city's tax rates have gone up in his time away from the dais. From 2012, when he last served, to now, the tax rate

increased from about \$6.30 per \$1,000 of assessed property value to about \$6.93. When Williams first joined the council in 2006 the rate was about \$5.15.

Carvil, 51, is running for Seat 5 after a 30-year law-enforcement career. He retired from the Miami police department in February and faced criticism from the Miami police union over a promotion he received just before leaving.

He said that his time with Miami PD and as security detail for Miami's mayor and commissioners has allowed him to see how politicians operate. He believes that experience has prepared him for elected office.

"I've been privileged to witness and see how to make changes in the community, and I'd like to replicate that in Miami Gardens," Carvil said.

David Williams, the incumbent councilman, said the work he's done to promote science education and environmental awareness in the city has helped him stand out. David Williams, 62, has been on the dais since 2011 and said he wants to continue pushing his individual efforts while working with the entire council to combat issues like crime. He also hopes to provide more amenities for the elderly.

"I'm not trying to duplicate what my colleagues are doing because I think the city's big enough and there's room for other ideas," David Williams said.

The Miami Gardens general election will take place Aug. 30. Residents have until Aug. 1 to register to vote. If a runoff election is needed, it will take place Nov. 8.

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Six candidates are hoping to fill the city commission seat of Coral Gables commissioner Bill Kerdyk, who is terming out after 20 years of service to the City Beautiful.

Running for the Group V seat are: Ariel Fernandez, 34, a PR executive; Jackson Rip Holmes, 63, property manager; P.J. Mitchell, 41, attorney; Sandra Murado, 45, immigration attorney; Tony Newell, 32, a general contractor; and Jeannett Slesnick, 67, real estate agent.

Kerdyk's absence on the dais come Tuesday will end a seven-decade tradition of having a Kerdyk on the commission. Kerdyk's uncle, Frank E. Kerdyk, served as commissioner from 1957 until 1961. Kerdyk's father, William Kerdyk Sr., served as commissioner from 1967 to 1995. Kerdyk, has been serving Coral Gables since 1995.

Many of the Group V candidates hold similar views, including:

- * Officers need to patrol the streets more, and the police department needs to make speedy hires to fill open officer positions.
- * Pensions need to be tweaked, although the candidates haven't suggested a solution.
- * The quality of life in Coral Gables needs to be preserved.
- * Interim Police Chief Ed Hudak should be made permanent.

Some other hot topics that have surfaced during the election cycle have included: the Mediterranean Village project, crime, Controlled Choice (a School Board policy that lets parents rank their preferences for schools, although parents don't learn of the school until right before the school year begins), the \$18 million redo of Miracle Mile and Giralda known as Streetscape, the trolley garage and garbage fees.

The Mediterranean Village project, developed by Agave Ponce LLC, is a \$500-million project that would rise on the former Old Spanish Village site on Ponce Circle, just a few blocks south of Miracle Mile. It would encompass almost seven acres and would include a high-end hotel with 184 rooms, about 300,000 square feet of office space, restaurants, stores and a gym. The project would also include residential towers with 214 condo units and 15 townhouses. The commission recently passed it on first reading.

Many of the candidates are split on whether this would be a good move for the city. Some said it would bring Coral Gables up to par with other cities, while others worried it would take attention away from Miracle Mile and cause congestion in a residential area.

ARIEL FERNANDEZ

Ariel Fernandez was the first candidate to begin campaigning for the April 2015 elections. Fernandez is the president of the American Strategies Group in Coral Gables, a PR firm.

So far, Fernandez has been vocal about eliminating garbage fees.

"Every year, our garbage fee rises, placing a huge burden on so many young families and seniors in our community," he said. "This fee is not tax deductible and an unnecessary double taxation of residents. I will work with our city manager and budget director to eliminate the garbage fee for residences in the City of Coral Gables, without raising our property taxes."

JACKSON RIP HOLMES

Holmes, 61, believes the "soul of Coral Gables" is at stake in the current election, and why, once again, the community activist and real estate broker has run for a commission seat.

He believes a stronger downtown, with tax revenue from an anchor mall store, could shore up the pension problem.

"I've been trying to get this city to have a department store on Miracle Mile. Had we done that, we wouldn't have these unfunded liabilities," he said. "We need to have a retail anchor so when you make a shopping decision, instead of going to Dadeland, you go to Miracle Mile."

TONY NEWELL

Newell, the youngest of the candidates, also isn't new to city hall. Newell ran in 2013 but lost to commissioner Patricia Keon.

Newell, who ran track and field at Miami Southridge High, is vice president for operations at his family's business, Hammer Construction Corp., which focuses on insurance restoration, both small and large.

He believes that development should be controlled, the commission should work to reduce crime and that the city should protect its quality of life.

He also wants to reduce traffic by implementing a traffic improvement plan that would decrease the cars that use city streets as alternatives to county roads.

SANDRA MURADO

Murado, an immigration attorney with her own firm in the Gables, represents clients before the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Department of Labor, and U.S. embassies and consulates abroad.

Murado said she wants to help reform the city's pension plan, build up city reserves, and lower taxes, user and permit fees. She also wants to preserve the Gables' charm.

JEANNETT SLESNICK

Slesnick, the former first lady of Coral Gables, is a longtime real estate agent in the Gables. She is married to Don Slesnick II, who was mayor before losing to current mayor Jim Cason in 2011.

Slesnick has been avidly against the Mediterranean Village project, saying she will only support development that is "proven to be good for the vibrant future of our downtown business and cultural district while serving as an important foundation for the City's tax base."

P.J. MITCHELL

Mitchell, an attorney in the Gables, has stated that his main goals, if he were elected, would be : to lower taxes, transform the city's pensions, encourage transparency in government and fight for neighborhood schools.

"I'm not a politician, I'm gonna vote my conscious," he said. "I'm going to do the best job that I can, I believe that at the end of the day, I'm the right person for this job."