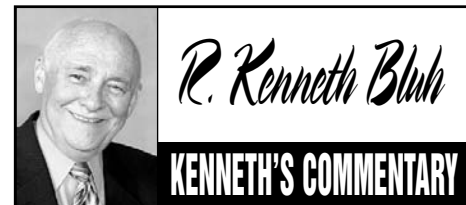


VIEWPOINT

Next time it will be 'petitions by the pound'



R. Kenneth Bluh

KENNETH'S COMMENTARY

The next time a group wants to start a countywide petition drive to modify the Miami-Dade County Charter or call for the removal of a county commissioner, they had better solicit the support of Arnold Schwarzenegger to help carry the petitions to the Elections Department for counting.

Thank you, Commissioner Natacha Seijas, for sponsoring an ordinance that requires petition gatherers to use an entire page of a petition form for one voter's name, address, precinct number, and signature. Heaven forbid they had only one line to fill in the information. Now they can write their names with letters the size of the headline in this column.

My friend, Juan Carlos Jesus Luis Emilio Fabio Jose Ricardo Gonzales de Mendoza-Garcia, will be so happy. Just the other, day he was complaining, that he never has enough room to sign his legal name in the space provided on the typical petition form he is asked to consider.

Notaries take notice and be happy. Rather than notarizing the signature of

the petition gatherer once for each page containing 20 or more signatures, you can now make more money notarizing at least 20 pages.

I have a sneaking suspicion that a rich backdoor lobbyist influenced Commissioner Seijas to introduce the ordinance. Who hired the lobbyist? Your guess is as good as mine, but I'll bet it must have been a major paper wholesaler. They are looking forward to the next countywide petition drive. The fact that Commissioner Seijas is in the middle of a recall couldn't have had any influence. Could it?

I checked with the Elections Department and learned that 6,177 signed petitions for the Seijas recall were delivered to the county, and counted to determine if the drive to remove her was acceptable.

If the "new" one signature per page ordinance was in effect when that petition drive started, the petition gatherers would have needed 13.3 reams of paper (each ream has 500 pages). At five pounds per ream, they would have used 66 pounds of paper.

Arnold, where are you? They will need your muscle to carry all that paper up to the county elections department. The strong mayor petition drive contained a little more than 123,000 signatures. At one signature per page they would have used 246 reams of paper.

That's 1,230 pounds of paper. Talk about cutting down another forest!

A companion ordinance also passed that would level a \$500 fine and/or 60 days in jail for deliberately misleading voters and encouraging them to sign petitions. We needed that ordinance during the days running up to the Nov. 7 elections.

I can think of half a dozen campaign TV commercials that would have landed somebody in jail for 60 days and/or pay \$500 to the county. There was so much misleading advertising that the honest-to-God true statements got lost in the battle — everything came out "misleading."

MORE ACTION ON THE COMMISSION DAIS

Now, don't you think that was enough for one day of commission activity? No! Besides electing a new chair — congratulations Bruno Barreiro, may your tenure run smoother than the last two years — the commission set Jan. 23 for the "strong mayor" vote.

Now this time you don't have to guess. You already know what's coming. The question: "Do we [county commissioners] use taxpayer dollars to fight the mayor, or do we go to outside sources for money?"

My comment, Mr. Chairman: Voters want their tax dollars spent on community needs, not on an ego trip to see who can accumulate the most power. Make

sure the commissioners seek financial support for their cause from their lobbyist friends. If not, we once again will experience an 8 to 10 percent voter turnout with disgusted voters staying away from the polls — or is that the commissioners' intent?

Commissioner Seijas is a busy lady. The latest is her effort to get a salary reduction on the ballot cutting the mayor's salary. Seijas is a leader in the fight to retain the commission's power and keep the mayor's position mainly ceremonial. I guess her logic is that if the public would cut the mayor's salary, they certainly would not give him the additional authority he seeks.

Some advice, Madam Commissioner, cut out your petty, nasty, verbal abuse of the community. Commissioners, give up your parttime jobs that could pay as much as the mayor's salary. Work full time, exclusively for the community, and the voters may say "okay" the next time a commission salary increase is on the ballot. Then I'll support the increase.

We appreciate your opinions on this column whether in agreement or disagreement. Please send your comments to (fax number) 305-662-6980 or email to <rkbluh@communitynewspapers.com>. The opinions expressed in this column are not necessarily those of this newspaper, its editors or publisher.

A shopping list: Money tips for holidays and year-round



Al Sunshine

SHAME ON YOU

Black Friday initiates the start of the holiday shopping season. This also goes hand-in-hand with long lines, no parking, tug of war over the new PlayStation 3, and excessive spending. As a result, this season seems to encompass so much more than just a jolly time. Here are a few helpful tips on managing and budgeting money — keeping this holiday season a stress-free one.

Before going shopping, determine a budget. Keep track of all spending as a way to help stay within the set budget. Read reviews in magazines or respected websites, talk to knowledgeable people, and compare prices offered by several stores, including online merchants.

Under the Federal Fair Credit

Billing Act, you have the ability, in certain circumstances, to withhold payment on defective merchandise until the problem has been corrected. That's not the case if you use a check or cash. If you decide to pay by credit card or get a loan, decide how much you can afford without getting too deeply in debt.

Identity thieves who steal your private information can use it to withdraw money from your bank account or obtain — and use — a new credit card in your name. You can minimize your risk of becoming a victim by protecting your Social Security Number (SSN), credit and debit card numbers, passwords and other personal information when shopping around town or online. For example, don't carry your SSN and unneeded credit cards in your purse or wallet, which can be lost or stolen.

BEWARE OF RETURN POLICY TRAPS

There are other hazards that go with this time of year. You buy one too many sweaters or a shirt two sizes too small, and then you try to return it. It

happens to all of us.

Returning merchandise is almost as stressful as buying it. Before hitting the malls, take a look at this helpful consumer advice. Following these tips promises a less stressful holiday season.

Check a store's return policy before making a purchase. The law does not automatically require businesses to accept merchandise returns. Each store has the right to determine its own return policy. This can be a policy of "No returns, exchanges or refunds." By law, retailers that have a return or exchange policy must have it posted at the point of sale so that the customer knows the policy before making the purchase, not after the sale.

Try to keep track of all receipts. After the holidays, the prices of items sometimes seem to plummet. If you are trying to return something and don't have the appropriate receipt, don't expect to get a full refund if the price has changed. A helpful tip would be to keep all receipts in a folder. This way, you can reference back to it if need be.

Where there is no sign describing the return policy, consumers have the right to return the merchandise within seven days with proof of purchase — as long as it hasn't been used, it's not perishable, wasn't custom made and remains in the original packaging. There also are other cases where the customer can return the merchandise, regardless of the store's return policy.

Stores can charge a restocking fee on returned merchandise, but it must be made clear before the consumer buys the product. Restocking fees should not be assessed when the product is defective or has been misrepresented.

Most of all, remember that this is a time of giving and sharing. Think of the less fortunate. Instead of dealing with the long lines at the malls, opt to donate some unwanted gifts to local churches, recreational centers, the United Way or the Salvation Army.

Watch Al Sunshine weekdays beginning at 5 p.m. on CBS4.