

LOCAL

Broward, cities in ugly 'divorce'

Former judge will mediate over cash, real estate from garbage compact

By [Brittany Wallman](#), Sun Sentinel

A fight between Broward County and a majority of the cities over \$150 million in public real estate and cash has gotten ugly.

Broward County and the cities that are suing it agreed Friday they need a mediator's intervention.

Some latched onto the analogy used by the cities' attorney, [Jamie Cole](#): This is a divorce, and the county's trying to keep the money and the house.

Broward County is being sued by 18 cities who say they're owed millions that they paid into the countywide garbage disposal system over a period of 25 years. The countywide trash system disintegrated in July, and the assets of the system are being held by Broward County.

Drew Meyers, assistant county attorney, pleaded with the crowd of city commissioners and councilpersons in a dispute resolution meeting Friday not to continue with litigation. He thought 90 days of talks would be productive.

"When governments litigate against other governments, unnecessarily and spending taxpayer money in the process, everybody loses," Meyers said.

But Miramar Mayor Lori Moseley said months of talks had produced no results. Fort Lauderdale Mayor Jack Seiler said the county had stonewalled the cities, requiring them to file public record requests for information, then refusing to answer questions.

"The relationship somehow soured," Seiler said.

Hollywood Mayor Peter Bober said "the level of trust between the cities and county is so low, I don't think it'll accomplish anything."

The cities agreed to move ahead to formal mediation, with former Circuit Judge Herbert Stettin presiding. The county agreed to participate.

Friday's meeting was so packed with elected officials, it had to be held in the Sunrise Civic Center, with police outside doing traffic control. Several remarked it was a meeting of historic proportion, bringing at least 68 current elected officials together.

Though 18 cities are suing, a total of 26 cities were party to the longtime garbage system and have a stake in the litigation results. Most had representatives present.

Meyers said the cities are incorrect in thinking Broward is pocketing their cash, and said the liabilities for things like maintaining landfills far exceeds the value of the remaining land and \$78 million cash left over from the 25-year arrangement.

Meyers said the 1987 agreement that once bound together the county and cities dictated they share not just the assets but also the liabilities and "perpetual maintenance" of assets like landfills.

By the county's estimate, the liabilities are so high — \$125 million to \$190 million — there is nothing to divvy out. If there were anything left over, he said, it belongs to the residents who paid in, not the cities.

Cole says the disbanded garbage system has cash and land worth at least \$150 million. The land should be sold, he says, and the proceeds given out to the cities. If the county wants to keep the landfills, he says, the cities still should be paid.

"If the husband wants to keep the house, he can keep the house," Cole said, carrying forward his divorce analogy. "But he's got to pay the wife half the value."

The real estate: Alpha 250, a 47-acre, vacant tract near Florida's Turnpike, off Blount Road in Pompano Beach; the Southwest Regional Landfill in far west, unincorporated Broward County, off U.S. 27; and the Ash Monofill site on State Road 7 south of Interstate 595, where ash from a waste-to-energy plant is dumped.

Cole said there'll be no perpetual maintenance, nor any liabilities, if the landfills are sold.

Meyers told the crowd that further talks were his first choice. But if not, "we're ready to litigate immediately and aggressively, if that's what you decide to do. Jamie knows where the courthouse is. We know where the courthouse is."

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