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Chief Aviation Officer

Running the Miami-Dade County Aviation Department might be the most interesting job in Miami

By Karen-Janine Cohen



Emilio T. González, chosen to head the Miami-Dade Aviation Department, has a background that includes running large organizations, including U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

We'll get to the reality TV part. But the first question one must ask Emilio T. González, whose resume already reveals not one but several distinguished careers, is why, when he could be teaching at a top university or military academy, making private sector money, or spend his days reading histories and boating on Biscayne Bay, he would take the job of

Miami-Dade County Aviation Department director.

"It's something in my wildest dreams I never thought about," he says, adding that he deliberated over several days before letting Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Gimenez persuade him. "The mayor made a very compelling case."

Though González's background is not in aviation, the key qualification sought by Gimenez in candidates to run the department was leadership experience in large, complex organizations. González served as director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services during the George W. Bush administration.

On the job since April 1, González is now ensconced in the director's office, where among family photos are pictures of González with former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and George W.; plus an antique map of the Spanish region where the González family originated and an assortment of model airplanes—American, Virgin Atlantic, Lufthansa—that have landed in the suite over the years.

González has kept a low profile since taking the reins, using these early days to learn the fiefdom, which includes MIA plus Homestead General, Kendall-Tamiami Executive Airport, Opa-loca Executive Airport and the Dade-Collier Training and Transition Airport. In particular, he's scouted MIA's labyrinthine reaches. "I walk this airport every day, looking for little things," he says. And he purposely delayed having his official portrait taken so he could roam incognito. "I was a secret shopper up until last week." At the end of April he finally allowed the photo to be shot and displayed.

His "leadership by walking around" had purpose: getting a first hand look at the many operations—security, transportation, cargo, airlines, traffic controllers, baggage, to name a few—that comprise the airport. "There

are so many simultaneous ongoing operations—there are a lot of moving parts,” he says.

It’s a city within a city, with everything from an alphabet soup of federal agencies, to dedicated police and fire facilities, to workers whose job it is to deal with wildlife, such as birds, rabbits and deer, which might materialize on remote runways. Yet challenges don’t seem like unfamiliar territory to González.

Military Man

González, 56, was born in Cuba and at 4 years old immigrated with his family to Tampa where his father continued in the cigar business. He graduated from the University of South Florida at 20 and joined the military, figuring “I would serve a couple of years, come back, go to law school, and become a lawyer.”

Instead, it was the start of a career that took him to Mexico and much of Latin America. Miami became home base when he attended the University of Miami to earn a Ph.D. in International Relations, and the U.S. Southern Command (Southcom) located in South Florida. The family—two daughters and, now, a grandson—is firmly rooted here. He retired from the Army with the rank of colonel. In the mid-2000s, Bush tapped him to run U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (not to be confused with ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement) in the Department of Homeland Security. He also served as director for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the National Security Council.

“My thought process is very military, though I try not to show it,” González says, comparing the airport personnel under his direct control to an Army brigade. “There is a lot of orchestration here,” he says, with the challenge and goal of making sure everybody knows their own responsibilities and what others are doing, “and that I’ll serve as the javelin catcher from the outside and the inside so they can do their jobs better.”

González also has business experience. After leaving government service he was CEO of Spanish IT company Indra USA. Later, he founded consulting firm NPI Advisors, which he wound down after taking the aviation job.

When announcing the appointment, Gimenez said that González’s experience and relationships, “in particular with federal agencies vital to the Aviation Department,” are invaluable as the airport’s construction phase nears completion and “we look to maximize all of our community’s aviation assets.”

González also gets high marks from former aviation director José Abreu, who handed González the baton at the end of March and is now with design and construction firm Gannett Fleming. Abreu says he backed González’s selection 100 percent. “He’s an awesome person, a great guy and professionally well-balanced,” with a “knack for organizational behavior,” and “a wry sense of humor.” Abreu, who worked with González for a week, says González shows an ability to move nimbly through the political and policy issues the job demands. “As far as I was concerned, every time he applied an instinct or opinion or decision, he was right on the money.”

Inland Dominion

It’s hard to grasp MIA’s scope. It handles the second-highest number of international passengers in the nation, just behind New York’s JFK, and leads the nation in international air cargo. About 100,000 people pass through it each day. It has a \$429 million budget and is in the last stages of a \$6.5 billion capital improvement project, which saw a rebuilt north and south terminal. The MIA Mover links to the Miami Intermodal Center and downtown. MIA is a key leg of the logistics hub formed by the airport, the new port tunnel and the cargo rail line. Centurion Air Cargo’s new 800,000 square foot warehouse and office storage recently opened off NW 36th Street.

“Anytime you have a company willing to make that kind of investment it speaks well of the airport,” González

says adding that the expenditure bodes well for a long-term Miami presence and signals cargo's importance at the airport and in the region. Miami handles 72 percent of all U.S. fruit and vegetables imported by air, about 90 percent of all imported flowers and more than half of the fish.

MIA is responsible for about a fourth of all Miami-Dade County jobs, direct and indirect, with an annual \$32.8 billion economic impact.

And the challenges are big as well. Complaints skyrocketed after Congress and President Obama were unable to reach a budget deal and federal workers' hours were cut. MIA's already famously long wait times to clear customs grew even longer. One of the first things González did was petition Customs and Border Protection for MIA to be among five airports in a pilot program that lets municipal governments use their own budgets to pay federal worker overtime. At press time MIA was waiting to see if the feds had figured out a way to process the funds.

Security is, of course, a concern. "I always look at things from a security prism because this is a very, very large organization, with many moving parts," González says, and even a minor problem could prove disruptive and costly.

Still, beyond post-9/11 issues, there's nothing like stirring together large numbers of people from every walk of life and language, intent on going someplace, many nervous, with their bags and baggage that seems like a recipe for surprises: Wayward luggage, frightened pets, toddlers on the run; dogs on the runway, planes and computer systems with unexpected glitches, and the occasional attempt to smuggle in everything from drugs and human skulls to endangered species (last year a man was found with live Cuban bullfinches sewn into his pants).

Miami's unique weirdness aside, every airport deals with such things. Making sure travelers, when all is said and done, get their needs met—the airport's core mission—is what González expects to focus on.

"We are trying, on a macro level, to shift somewhat from the construction aspect, which sort of consumed most of the energy, back into what is it that we do," he says. "This is a business masquerading as an airport and we want to provide users of this airport, which even now is a world-class airport, with all the comforts and amenities they expect," he says.

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