

**Minutes of the District 22 Medical Examiner Search Committee**  
**4 p.m., July 5, 2022 – Meeting Room next to the State Attorney’s Office**  
**Charlotte County Justice Center, 350 East Marion Avenue, Punta Gorda, Florida**

**Members Present**

State Attorney Amira Fox, 20<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit  
Dr. Barbara Wolf, Medical Examiner, Districts 5 & 24 (via Zoom)  
The Honorable Kathy Smith, Public Defender, 20<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit  
Sheriff Bill Prummell, Charlotte County Sheriff  
Chief Pam Davis, Punta Gorda Police Department  
Commissioner Chris Constance, Charlotte County Board of County Commissioners  
The Honorable Ken Roberson, Roberson Funeral Homes  
Dr. Joseph Ravid, Gulfview Medical Institute

**Others Present**

Chief Assistant State Attorney Richard Montecalvo (via Zoom)  
Assistant State Attorney Shannon Doolity, Charlotte County Office Head  
Samantha Syoen, State Attorney’s Office Communications Director  
Investigator Steve Scalici, State Attorney’s Office  
Leandro Navarro, State Attorney’s Office I.T. Specialist  
Cameron Goff, State Attorney’s Office I.T. Specialist  
Chief Deputy Michael Casarella, Charlotte County Sheriff’s Office

**Meeting Commenced at 4 p.m.**

The second meeting of the District 22 Medical Examiner Search Committee was called to order by State Attorney Amira Fox, 20<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit. A roll call was done by members of the committee at the request of State Attorney Fox. Committee member, Dr. Barbara Wolf, Medical Examiner, Districts 5 & 24, appeared via Zoom. There was a quorum. Guests appearing via Zoom were Chief Assistant State Attorney Richard Montecalvo, 20<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit and Dr. Russell S. Vega, Chief Medical Examiner District Twelve of Florida.

State Attorney Fox passed out the minutes from the May 4, 2022, meeting for the committee to review.

State Attorney Fox began the meeting by recapping the work completed since the last meeting.

State Attorney Fox explained she had reached out to Dr. Vega for a 5-year plan via a letter which is posted on the State Attorney’s Office website under Public Notices. She advised Dr. Vega would be joining the meeting via Zoom to meet the committee.

Following the review of the minutes, Commissioner Constance made a motion to approve the minutes. The Honorable Ken Roberson seconded the motion. The minutes received unanimous approval by the committee.

State Attorney Fox introduced Dr. Vega who was appearing via Zoom and clarified that today's interaction with Dr. Vega is just a meeting and is not a formal interview.

Dr. Vega introduced himself to the committee and gave some background on his connection to Florida. He explained that all his medical examiner experience was in Florida. State Attorney Fox asked how long he has been working in Florida. Dr. Vega said he started as a Medical Examiner on October 1, 2003, almost 19 years.

Dr. Vega explained his geographic proximity to Charlotte County, and familiarity and work with the area, that staff retention is important to him and that he feels the building the Medical Examiner Office is housed in, in Charlotte, is in good condition.

The Honorable Ken Roberson asked Dr. Vega if Sarasota County is thinking of building a new facility for him. Dr. Vega said yes, as previous work was done at Sarasota Memorial Hospital. The new building process started in 2020, with ground being broken in April 2022. The plan is to move into the building in March or April of 2023. The building has easy access to I-75, near Fruitville Road.

Commissioner Constance asked what size the facility is. Dr. Vega said it is two buildings, one for administration and one for a workspace, with separate air handlers. The two-story administration building would have administration staff on the ground floor with the second floor available for other uses. That building is approximately 17,000 square feet. The second building, housing the morgue, will be 19,000 square feet and have the ability to hold 100 bodies, plus 50 more if there were a surge, like covid or a mass casualty situation like a mass shooting. The total cost is \$25.3 million.

Commissioner Chris Constance asked Dr. Vega how he planned to use our (the Charlotte County) facility. He also asked Dr. Vega how he would handle cases and how he envisioned his plan. Dr. Vega said he would keep the physical facilities separate but find a way to provide the services the stakeholders want. He would want to provide the same level of service, working well with law enforcement, and make the pick-up of bodies easy. He said he had no plans to bring bodies from other districts to the Charlotte County facility.

Sheriff Prummell asked Dr. Vega how he would cover the Charlotte workload. Dr. Vega said he would rotate personnel between offices. Dr. Vega would spend two days a week in Charlotte and three in District 12.

Sheriff Prummell asked Dr. Vega how many associates he has, how many would rotate to Charlotte County and how do you evaluate your associates? Dr. Vega said he has 3. They could all rotate between offices. He said he goes over cases and case reports with them.

Sheriff Prummell asked Dr. Vega how he planned to staff the office. Dr. Vega said he would use the current staff and would likely need to hire a new person.

Punta Gorda Police Chief Pam Davis, Public Defender Kathy Smith, and State Attorney Fox said they would want the office to be accredited. Dr. Vega agreed.

Public Defender Smith asked Dr. Vega if he got the position, would he change how toxicology is done? Dr. Vega said no.

State Attorney Fox asked to talk about the budget and Dr. Vega's budget proposals.

Dr. Vega continued with a presentation of the current proposed budget for the Charlotte County office and showed his proposals for future budgets on a one-page document via sharing the screen over Zoom. A copy of the document was distributed to the board to review as well as appearing on-screen. (Document is attached at the end of these minutes.)

Dr. Vega said he took the proposed budget from the Charlotte office and tweaked it. He said he feels current staff salaries are low and he would want to keep the staff which might mean more competitive salaries. He also said he would want the part-time administration person to be a full-time position. He would also want to offer retirement benefits to the entire staff and would want a contribution to retirement from the county. He elaborated on budget needs saying toxicology is becoming more expensive and more of it needs to be done. He referenced he added the budget lines in yellow (see corresponding document) for things he felt are needed such as computers. He would also recommend a vehicle be purchased. He also said there is a new trend of genetic testing becoming important.

The Honorable Ken Roberson asked Dr. Vega if the county in District 12 purchased his current vehicle. Dr. Vega said there are three owned by his ME office.

State Attorney Fox asked how much assistant ME's make in District 12. Dr. Vega said new assistants make about \$260,000.

Commissioner Constance asked what Sarasota's budget is for the next 5 years. Dr. Vega said it is \$3.47 million. He said it is about the same per capita as proposed for the 2023 budget he provided for Charlotte County. Commissioner Constance asked what is the population you are serving for that amount? Dr. Vega said a population of 890,000.

Commissioner Constance told the committee he wants to get the budget person for the county together with Dr. Vega's budget person to review the numbers. He also suggested the committee look at the populations.

Dr. Wolf said it is statutory that the county or district provides the facility for the medical examiner.

State Attorney Fox thanked Dr. Vega for his meeting with the committee. He left the Zoom connection with the committee meeting at 5:34 p.m.

State Attorney Fox said she wanted to answer a question from the previous meeting, presented by the committee. The question was "What is the harm in advertising the position?" State Attorney Fox checked with the attorney from the Medical Examiner Commission, and he advised we could advertise and then decide not to interview. She spoke to the county attorney to confirm this information. State Attorney Fox then asked the committee members where they want to go from here.

The Honorable Ken Roberson said there would still be a need for a back-up medical examiner so a new one coming in would need to work with Dr. Vega. Commissioner Constance and State Attorney Fox agreed there would need to be more than one person, so there is back-up.

Sheriff Prummell said if Dr. Vega needs to hire a new associate, that person could be for Charlotte. The Honorable Ken Roberson agreed and said Dr. Vega is also a known entity and has been providing coverage for Charlotte for years.

Commissioner Constance asked State Attorney Fox if she covers districts that Dr. Vega covers. State Attorney Fox relayed that she spoke to State Attorney Ed Brodsky of the 12<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit, who spoke highly of Dr. Vega and said he always answers his cellphone, he is involved in the community, always available if asked to speak to a group, and answers to any problems.

State Attorney Fox suggested Dr. Vega add one person that could be permanently assigned to Charlotte County.

Dr. Wolf said some medical examiner offices are going to great lengths to find staff including paying tuition and offering large signing bonuses.

State Attorney Fox asked if the committee wants her to write a letter to Dr. Vega for a formal interview.

Commissioner Constance suggested having the county finance person go over the budget first to see if money is not covered elsewhere in the proposal provided by Dr. Vega. State Attorney Fox asked if Commissioner Constance and the committee wanted the budget breakdown before the formal interview. Commissioner Constance said more information is needed. State Attorney Fox stated the county team should brief the committee after reviewing the budget proposal.

State Attorney Fox then asked if she should write a letter to Dr. Vega telling him he must assign a Deputy ME to the Charlotte office or it would be a deal breaker. Commissioner Constance said yes.

Dr. Joseph Ravid said even if Dr. Vega was here 40% of the time, with his experience, that's okay. With his experience, it means we would know the autopsies were done right.

State Attorney Fox asked Dr. Wolf if she felt the path the committee was proceeding on was reasonable. Dr. Wolf said yes but it may not be able to happen right away, as finding a full-time person would be a difficult task. She does not think that should be a condition. She said it is important to have Dr. Vega's leadership. She added she thinks he should provide a policy and procedure manual.

State Attorney Fox asked Commissioner Constance to invite his county budget staff to the next meeting.

Sheriff Prummell said the committee should advertise the position and maybe identify someone Dr. Vega should hire. State Attorney Fox then asked Dr. Wolf how to go about advertising.

Dr Wolf said guidance could come from the National Academy of Forensic Science and the National Society of American Medical Examiners. She said her Director of Operations prepares the ads and she agreed to provide samples to the committee at the request of State Attorney Fox.

The committee members then discussed the details of advertising a position, setting a time frame, and who would be in charge of creating it. Dr. Wolf agreed to take the lead in getting the committee draft applications to peruse.

State Attorney Fox summarized the plan of action moving forward to the next meeting. She said she would contact Dr. Vega and let him know the committee wants one person dedicated to Charlotte County and ask if he can commit to that.

The next meeting date for the District 22 Medical Examiner Search Committee was set for July 27<sup>th</sup> at 4 PM at the same location, the meeting room on the first floor of the Charlotte County Justice Center. State Attorney Fox said the meeting would be noticed online. There was no further discussion.

No public was in attendance so there was no public discussion.

Dr. Wolf ended her Zoom appearance at 6:13 p.m. Sheriff Prummell made a motion for the meeting to be adjourned. Chief Davis seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 6:15 p.m.