

Emilio Gonzalez pilots Miami International Airport, plans...

Emilio Gonzalez's broad knowledge of domestic and foreign business, government and policy practices has landed him as director of the Miami-Dade Aviation Department in April.

Prior to his new role, Mr. Gonzalez was president and CEO of NPI Advisors, an international and government affairs consulting firm, and president and CEO of Indra USA, the US subsidiary of Spain's Indra Systems, a European-based IT solutions international company.

Additionally, he served as director of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services within the Department of Homeland Security in Washington, as senior managing director for global and government affairs at a major local law firm, and as director of Western Hemisphere Affairs at the National Security Council at the White House. He retired with a rank of colonel from the US Army.

Mr. Gonzalez hit the ground running once he took office with an extensive list of goals to fulfill to grow and prosper Miami International Airport, ranging from smart parking to an overall improvement of every passenger's travel experience.

Miami Today reporter Blanca Venegas interviewed Mr. Gonzalez in his office inside the Miami International Airport.

Q: How long have you been in Miami?

A: I have been in Miami off and on since 1997.

Q: Are you a member of organizations in or outside of Miami?

A: I'm a member of the Cuban American National Council, which is a social service agency here. I'm a member of the Council in Foreign Relations in New York, a member of a couple of advisory boards, technology companies. I've had to resign actually most of my memberships to take this job.

Q: Miami International Airport faces debt service charges relating to more than \$6 billion revamping of the airport. How big are those charges each year and how will the aviation department repay them?

A: We repay them through our own budget process where we raise our own money. This is about a \$430-million-a-year enterprise. The debt service is about \$1 million a day when you add it up.

We have no problems in paying that kind of a debt service because we're one of the few airports that continues to grow. Our passenger levels are increasing. We have income from other sources and it all stays with us. Last year we ran a surplus as well so we'll be able to keep our bondholders very happy.

Q: Do you believe you will have to raise landing fees to handle part of the \$6 billion repayment of the revamping of the airport?

A: Several components contribute to the landing fee; annual principal and interest payments on outstanding bonds are only one factor. We constantly endeavor to control all the factors contributing to the landing fee and have kept the landing fees from rising. We hope to be able to continue to do so in the future.

We have been repaying debt associated with the Capital Improvement Program (CIP) for many years, and our last major



Photo by Marlene Quaroni

Emilio Gonzalez says he has a 12-item wish list to accomplish as aviation director but doesn't see it as the last stop in a career that included being US immigration director.

The Achiever

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borrowing for the current CIP was in 2010, so the principal and interest on those bonds have long been part of the landing fee computation.

Q: How will that position the airport in relation to its competitors?

A: We have a strategic advantage, one being geography and two being the fact that we have four very large runways. There aren't that many airports that have this many runways. The fact that we are where we are and we can handle the capacity that we have puts us in a number one position as far as airports go.

Q: The department has a number of initiatives to raise funds. Which are the biggest and where are they now in the pipeline?

A: Everything we do here is raising funds. This a \$400 million business masquerading as an airport, but we get our revenue from our concessions, from our landing fees, from the parking garages, we get our revenues from licensing agreements, so our non-aviation revenues are very important because that's what helps

us fulfill our budget.

Q: The Airport City project with Odebrecht has drawn criticisms from some Cuban Americans. If legal questions surrounding the issues were cleared up, how would you feel about going forward with the project?

A: Legal questions have been cleared up, and this is a project that I believe the mayor is very supportive of, and I will support our mayor.

Q: The aviation industry is complex. How have you gone about gathering the information you need to operate the county's airports?

A: Surround yourself with great people. This is an enterprise that has a lot of moving parts and you can't be an expert in all of them. As a result, you have to rely on a very professional and dedicated staff, and a long-term staff.

I've been surprised at the seniority of the staff. People like working here. It's like nobody leaves. Once you come to work here you stay and you make this a career, and that tells me a lot about the organization.

Q: In your last federal post you had significant challenges. What were the biggest of them and how did you meet them?

A: Major challenges were many. But the key ones were the long immigration case backlogs and the lack of adequate staffing and facilities.

In the first, we worked out a cost-sharing agreement with our partners at the FBI to expedite cases.

Regarding personnel and facilities, we inventoried what our needs were to create an efficient world-class immigration system. Then we brought in the resources to get it done. As a result, we created a master building plan that called for 40 new sites. The new USCIS buildings in Miami-Dade County are the result of this plan. We also hired almost 3,500 new immigration agents to help with workload and other pressing personnel issues that were stressing the system.

Q: Do you think the community has a generally good opinion of MIA?

A: Yes. MIA is the crown jewel of our county's economy. The new construction orchestrated by my predecessor José Abreu has given MIA a new modern look. We will build on those initiatives as

well as move in other directions to address passenger concerns.

This is, after all, a business in a very competitive market. To grow and prosper, our passengers must feel that their experience at MIA has been worth the flight. Our community values who we are, what we do and that we strive to represent the very best of Miami-Dade County every day.

Q: Do you have a wish list for what you want to accomplish in this position, and if so what are the top three items?

A: I have a wish list, but I think it has top 12 right now. They're not in any order. I have them written down, but I want to bring back the airport to what it needs to be.

For many years, rightfully so, this airport was all about construction. We needed to finish the north and south terminals. There was an imperative to do that. We've done that already and where the north terminal has maybe three gates left to finish and we'll do those hopefully by the end of the summer, my goal now is to now turn our attention to what we are, which is an airport.

This is a service industry. We're a city. It's a small city. We have about 100,000 people a day come through here. We have about 36,000 people that work here, so we need to look at those areas that we need to upgrade and, you know, I'm looking at technology across the board, innovation across the board. I'm looking at everything from smart parking to energy conservation, to how we do travel for our passengers via the cab system. You name it, I'm looking at it.

So, it's not a sequential list, it's a simultaneous list.

Q: What opportunities does Miami International have to add international links with new airlines and new routes, how close are some of them and can we expect any in the coming months?

A: The new routes is one of my priorities because without airline routes you're not an airport and, as a result, I want to make sure that we have the appropriate staffing in our marketing department to draw these airlines and the airlines with which we've had continuing conversations but haven't made up their minds. I want to help them make up their minds.

Between now and the end of the year, I'll be doing quite a bit of traveling, visiting these airlines, marketing Miami as a place where they should be, and my expectation is that by the end of the year we'll either have an additional foreign carrier or at least a letter of intent from an additional foreign carrier.

Q: In your last federal post you had significant challenges. What in your mind were the biggest of them and how did you meet them?

A: Well, the biggest challenge was the fact that immigration is a very passionate and controversial topic. We live in a country where people love immigrants but they hate immigration, and when you have that kind of a duality of thought everything you do becomes contentious.

My job was to make sure that the agency ran to its full potential, to reform the agency, to restructure the agency. You've seen some of that restructuring

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...to take to the air to bring home an additional foreign carrier

here locally that was all part of a master plan to bring the agency out into the communities that they serve. We've fixed our backlog. We added more employees, we added more offices.

I left because I had done everything I needed to do and it was time to come home.

Q: Looking down the road, do you see air travel in general forever facing long lines and security checks?

A: Both.

The security check issue is one not of our making. We have to rely on our federal partners for things like luggage screening, passenger screening, immigration, customs control. We can help them along as best we can. We've offered financial support to the Department of Homeland Security to help streamline the matter, but it's something that all we can do is mitigate it.

When the lines get big, we'll put women and children up front, we'll put the elderly up front, but it's something that we have no control over, which is a terrible place to be because, to some degree, we're responsible but we have no control.

So when a passenger has to spend four hours in a line to have their passports stamped, he doesn't really care that it was an immigration officer, he cares that it happened in MIA, and that gives us a black eye.

Q: Do you see innovations that will ease travel?

A: I'm looking at some potential technology companies that are offering tools to speed things along, and that's one of the things that I'm taking on personally. I think there are more than enough private sector companies out there that have tested their products to speed things up and make the experience quite a bit easier than it is now.

Q: Cargo is a significant part of MIA. How big is that and what do you see the department doing to increase Miami's market share, both domestically and internationally?

A: We're the largest airport for inter-

national cargo in the US and we hope to remain the world's largest or the US's largest.

It's an area that I'm very familiar with. I go over there and visit with those folks. This is not two airports, it's one airport. It just so happens that we have a passenger side and a cargo side. They have the same problems with federal inspectors, especially when they're bringing in perishable goods, flowers, seafood and so forth. So far they've been able to manage it and we've been able to help wherever we can, and we'll continue to be helpful and continue to grow that side of the business. It's every important.

Q: Different airports handle airport gates differently. Sometimes airlines have their own gates and sometimes they share gates. Explain MIA's system and why the airport chooses to function that way?

A: Most of it is based on economics or different models. For example, at Fort Lauderdale, airlines rent gates and you can push as many planes in and out of there as you can in a day.

Here we don't do that. Our business model is on a per passenger basis. So we know exactly what we're going to be making based on how many flights and how many passengers come in. It's a very different model.

It's the same model that tells us that we don't take any money from the county nor do they take money from us. The models of airports are very different throughout the US. Tampa's model is different; Fort Lauderdale's model is different.

Q: What is the difference?

A: In Tampa, I believe they have an airport authority and it reports to the county government, or at least the county government backstops all of their budgeting. So if they lose money, the county picks it up, whereas right now our backstopping comes from the airlines themselves.

Q: Retail at the airport has been a concern and the department has tried to upgrade quality and variety. How does that upgrade stand and is there change

ahead? Can you tell us of any newcomers?

A: What is the concern? We have like 250 stores here and they're all doing very well. What I want to see going forward is not only increasing the numbers of concessions, but mixing up what those concessions are, bringing in newer and fresher ideas and concepts so that you're not offering just different versions of the same thing.

Q: Do you see your direction of the county's aviation as an interim step or a long-term career change?

A: Neither. It's not interim because I'm not on my way anywhere, and it's not long term. I'm 56 years old. Long term for me is relative.

I'm here because the mayor asked me to take this job on. I think it's exciting. I'll be here as long as I need to be to get done those things that I've told you about – particularly the central terminal – and essentially just finish what needs to be finished.

Q: The airport has several passenger lounges that it has operated for multiple airlines. There was also a thought of letting other entities take over the lounges. Where does that thinking stand right now?

A: That's one of those concession issues. Originally it had been set out for RFP and then they changed their mind.

Q: How closely is the airport involved in the development of Miami's new grand central station at the Miami Intermodal center?

A: We're right next door. Even though we don't own the MIC, it's all about real estate. We're involved in the sense that we're going to manage the rental care agencies. There we are responsible for some of the maintenance there, so we're involved.

Q: Are you married?

A: Yes. 35 years.

Q: And children?

A: Two daughters.

Q: I see a baby picture up there.

A: That's my grandson, Noah. Both my daughters are married and Noah is

our first grandchild, he's 6 months old. He's a lot of fun.

Q: What has been the biggest lesson that your children have taught you?

A: Wow! Patience. Patience is a virtue. It's true. My children are great, my children are wonderful, but you have to be patient because they're going to develop and grow into their own personalities no matter what you say or do or think.

I only have two children, but you can have four kids and each one of them is going to have their own personality and you're going to ask yourself "My gosh, I raised them all the same."

Q: Who is the strict one of the family?

A: Because I was in the military, I spent a lot of time away, so I would have to say that it's my wife because she was there. But when I'm there I'm the strict one. It's terrible to have a colonel as your dad.

Q: Do you play any sports?

A: I use to play a lot of racquetball, mainly because it's great sport to beat out your frustrations, but I enjoy watching sports. I enjoy football, college football, baseball and soccer.

Q: Do you practice any of those sports?

A: No.

Q: Why not?

A: Because I now have a grandson and a boat. My grandson is my new sport.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to tell our readers about you?

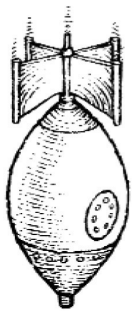
A: Anything else you want to ask? Catch me now when I'm kind of weak.

Q: Have you ever been afraid of flying?

A: Never. In fact, I use to jump out of planes when I was in the army. I enjoy flying. I'll tell you that getting to the plane is getting harder and harder. That I don't enjoy. But flying is one of the safest things you can do, and I enjoy flying.

Q: "Never walk by a mistake" is an interesting personal philosophy.

A: Yeah, because if you see a mistake you should fix it right then and there or bring it to somebody's attention. You just shouldn't just brush it off and say "it's not my business."



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