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Coral Gables mayor: New Manager Pat Salerno can 'lead a CEO life'

Coral Gables' new city manager, who had the helm in Sunrise, has accepted a \$190,000 base salary plus tens of thousands more in benefits and perks.

By ELAINE DE VALLE

Coral Gables has a new top boss: Former Sunrise City Manager Pat Salerno said Tuesday he had accepted the city's offer of \$190,000 a year plus benefits.

He will start April 6, and will attend the next City Commission meeting. Commissioners voted 4-1 Tuesday to hire Salerno, 58, to replace former manager David Brown, who was forced into early retirement late last year.

Salerno will get an additional 15 percent -- \$28,500 -- for a qualified pension plan in lieu of joining the city's plan.

"I thought it was unfair that he work here without investing something for his future," Gables Mayor Don Slesnick said, "but I did not feel badly about negotiating a deal that was beneficial to the city because he already had one city retirement."

The deal also includes "unrestricted use" of a city-owned vehicle -- with insurance, maintenance and gasoline paid for by the city -- a cellphone or personal communication device, three weeks of vacation time in the first year to increase annually, health insurance for him and his family, disability coverage, life insurance equal to one year of salary, and a \$500-a-month expense allowance. His total compensation will be at least \$266,000 a year.

"This allows the manager to lead a CEO life," Slesnick said.

Salerno, who said he fell in love with the Gables when he was a student at the University of Miami, also gets a safety net: a severance of 75 percent of his salary -- or \$142,500 -- if his employment is ended "without just cause" during the first five years.

Salerno, who said he would start looking for a Gables home this week, spent 18 sometimes-turbulent years in Sunrise.

He has repeatedly described the Gables manager's position as a "dream job."

"It's a dream job because it's a dream community," he said Tuesday. "Coral Gables is a special place. It is an oasis, and I do believe it is one of the one or two best examples of an urban village in the state of Florida.

"The residents here are very fortunate that they have a very special quality of life that they enjoy. That quality of life needs to be preserved, protected, and nurtured."

While he has been described as an iron-fisted administrator and was forced out by a newly-elected commission reacting to his investment in a state pool and his public search for another job, Salerno is also credited with bringing sustained growth to Sunrise and for attracting the BankAtlantic Center, where the Florida Panthers play.

Slesnick said he ``found Mr. Salerno to be a very good person to work with. We had direct conversations. We had good conversations."

Concluded Salemo: ``As a manager, for me to do my best, I need to marry the community. That's the way I feel about Coral Gables. I am marrying this community."