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City OK's attorney deal

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Before a packed and sometimes loudly skeptical audience, the Sunrise City Commission voted Tuesday to award a no-bid legal contract worth at least \$432,000 to the husband and law associate of Broward Commissioner Ilene Lieberman.

The contract puts Stuart Michelson at or near the top of the highest paid city and county attorneys in the state.

Commissioners who voted to hire Michelson to be part-time city attorney said it would save the city about \$30,000 in legal expenses.

The vote was 3-1, with Mayor Steven Feren abstaining.

Feren, who is using Michelson as the treasurer of his campaign for a seat on the Broward Circuit Court bench, advocated forcefully for hiring Michelson from the dais. He announced his abstention after Michelson had the three votes he needed.

"I'm going to abstain out of an abundance of caution," he said, after disclosing that relationship to the audience. The Miami Herald reported last week that Feren did not make such a disclosure last month when he voted to offer the job to Michelson.

Florida law forbids public officials from voting on matters that "inure to the special private gain or loss" of themselves, their employers, relatives or business associates.

Earlier, Feren said he didn't disclose that relationship with Michelson because it did not fit that definition. "There is no conflict," Feren said in an interview.

The commissioners who voted to hire Michelson Tuesday were Deputy Mayor Roger Wishner and Commissioners Sheila Alu and Don Rosen. Previously, Rosen had voted against the job offer.

"This isn't a sweetheart deal," said Wishner.

Under the terms of the contract, Michelson would be paid \$36,000 a month. He will also be entitled to bill the city \$225 an hour for other Sunrise legal work he does outside the scope of his city attorney duties. Sunrise paid him \$126,607 for such services in the past year, records show.

Michelson's fees will "automatically" increase by up to four percent each year. The contract does not oblige him to give up his existing clients, such as Lauderhill, the North Broward Hospital District and Nationwide Laboratories.

As part of the deal, Michelson must hire and install at City Hall a full time assistant city attorney.

Michelson said in an interview that his wife, Broward Commissioner Ilene Lieberman -- whose district includes parts of Sunrise -- would do no legal work for the city.

Feren, Wishner and Alu each have political or legal ties to Michelson that were not aired before last month's initial vote to steer the contract to Michelson, but were last night.

Michelson has represented Wishner and Alu in various legal proceedings.

Public records also show that Wishner, who led the push to hire Michelson, previously employed Michelson in 1989 to help incorporate a private business and to sue

a political group that undermined his unsuccessful 2004 run for a seat on the County Commission. The suit was dismissed in 2006.

Wishner disclosed those connections at Tuesday night's meeting.

Earlier, he told The Miami Herald he did not disclose his outside ties to Michelson because they were already a matter of public record elsewhere.

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