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CORAL GABLES GAZETTE

Friday, April 10, 2026

Censured in Coral Gables, celebrated in Tallahassee: Castro named Home Rule Hero

April 9, 2026 | NEWS



Commissioner Melissa Castro poses with Deputy General Counsel at Florida League of Cities David Cruz (far left) and Mayor of Bay Harbor Islands Joshua D. Fuller at a recent conference in Orlando. Fuller is chair of the League's Development, Code Compliance, and Redevelopment Committee and Castro its vice chair. Castro has been selected as a 2026 Home Rule Hero by the Florida League of Cities, recognizing her advocacy on behalf of local governments during the most recent legislative session.

By Coral Gables Gazette staff

Coral Gables Commissioner Melissa Castro has been selected as a 2026 Home Rule Hero by the Florida League of Cities, recognizing her advocacy on behalf of local governments during the most recent legislative session.

State recognition for home rule advocacy

Castro, who was elected to the Coral Gables City Commission in 2023, was informed of the honor in an April 2 email from the League's Legislative Coordinator, Brenda Jones, who praised her "steadfast dedication to defending local self-government" and noted that her contributions were "pivotal" to the organization's success in Tallahassee.

The Home Rule Hero Award is given annually to local officials who actively engage with state lawmakers to ensure municipal perspectives are heard. The League, founded in 1922, promotes the principle of “local voices making local choices,” emphasizing the ability of cities to address their own challenges with minimal state interference.

“Local voices matter, and during the 2026 Legislative Session, these leaders made sure those voices were heard,” said Casey Cook, the League’s Chief of Legislative Affairs, in a statement. “By engaging early, often, and thoughtfully, they helped elevate the municipal perspective and reinforce the importance of local decision-making.”

Castro said the recognition reflects years of work advocating for municipalities not only in Coral Gables but across Florida.

“This recognition reflects my work advocating at the state level to keep decision making where it belongs, with local communities across Florida, including Coral Gables,” Castro said. “At a time when there is increasing pressure to shift power away from cities, I have made it a priority to stand up and protect the voice of our communities.”



Commissioner Melissa Castro.

She added that her role as Vice Chair of the League’s Development, Code Compliance and Redevelopment Committee has allowed her to take on a leadership position in defending home rule, particularly as state legislation increasingly preempts local authority.

“At the end of the day, my focus has been on protecting residents and making sure their voices are not overridden by outside interests,” she said.

Castro is expected to be formally recognized at an upcoming meeting of the Miami-Dade County League of Cities, where the award will be presented.

Role in statewide policy debates

Her advocacy has also extended into complex and sometimes controversial policy areas, including the state’s Live Local Act, a sweeping housing law that limits local zoning control. Castro said criticism of her position has been politically motivated and mischaracterized.

“The law is already in place at the state level, so my focus has been on how we respond in a way that protects Coral Gables while also addressing broader housing needs,” she said. “My approach has been about balance.”

Recognition amid local friction

The statewide recognition comes even as Castro has frequently found herself at odds with the majority of her colleagues on the Coral Gables Commission.

Over the past year, she has been repeatedly reprimanded during meetings and was formally censured after seeking an opinion from the Florida Attorney General regarding the commission's decision to move city elections from April to November by ordinance rather than by voter referendum.

Castro argued that such a change required direct voter approval, a position that put her in direct conflict with the commission majority. Her colleagues criticized her for going outside established processes by requesting the legal opinion independently.

However, her stance gained validation when courts later overturned a similar ordinance in the City of Miami, finding that such election changes could not be made without voter input. In Coral Gables, the commission ultimately reversed course, placing the issue before voters.

The city is now in the midst of a mail ballot election featuring eight ballot questions, including the high-profile proposal to move municipal elections from their traditional April date (used for more than a century) to November.

The contrast between Castro's contentious experience at City Hall and her reception at the state level has become a defining feature of her tenure. While disagreements with colleagues have been public and, at times, personal, her work with municipal leaders across Florida has earned her growing recognition and influence.

Despite the friction, Castro said her focus remains unchanged. "Our residents deserve to shape the future of their own neighborhoods," she said. "I will continue to fight to protect that."