Mayor Cubillos’ State of the Village of El Portal Address,

Tuesday, August 25, 2015 at 7pm.

Good Evening Everyone---fellow Village Council Members, Distinguished Guests, Village Staff and Police Department Members, and most importantly the Residents of El Portal! I am your Mayor ---Claudia Cubillos--and it is my distinct honor tonight to deliver the 2015 State of the Village of El Portal Address.

First of all, how about the delivery of our nation’s pledge of allegiance and the singing of the National Anthem, let’s give them another round of applause!

Ms. Chante Sweet--Thank you for your heartfelt introduction and beautiful invocation –you did such a great job MCing your father’s 80th Birthday Party—I knew you’d be perfect doing this!

I’d like to commend Vice Mayor Nickerson, Councilperson Brunson, Councilperson Mathis and Councilperson Isaacs for serving---thank you, to each of you!

A special thank you goes out to our Village Manager Jason Walker; Village Attorney Joseph Geller; Chief Morales and the El Portal Police Department! I would be remiss in not thanking every single Village employee that works here and contributes to
making our little Village into the Village “that Could,” the Village that “Has,” and the Village that “Will”!

Lastly, I want to thank the El Portal Residents—all 3000 of you!! I am here because of you—and I am here to serve you. I am here because I believe in the Village of El Portal; I’m here because 12 months ago, I made an important decision—a decision to run for the Office of Mayor—and it’s a decision I have taken seriously. As I watched and listened to Janara recite the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance—I’m reminded of why I am here—of why I serve in public office—I serve because of the future—the future of our children and the future of our Village! While on the campaign trail for Mayor I made a commitment to myself: “If given the chance to serve as your leader—there would be a new attitude in El Portal—a “let’s get it done, and let’s get it done today attitude”!

You see, as a small business owner, I’m used to getting things done; in following through—and in not leaving for tomorrow what can be done today! To be a successful leader in business you must be results-driven and understand the “commitment to deliver results to your customers in a timely manner, because next month or next year, is not acceptable to them.” And, this has been my attitude I put forth as your Mayor!

Today this result-driven attitude is transforming the culture of our Village of El Portal and that of your local government.

And tonight, I’m proud to report that the State of our Village is UNITED, and Getting STRONGER! After last fall’s election, your new council knew it was time!” It was time to get thing done now—it was time for no more excuses, no more delays—and to treat YOU—our customers, our residents—with respect, integrity and deliver results to you—NOW!
With that, I am happy to tell you about some of our results we have achieved over the last 9 months in the areas of Quality of Life, Civic Engagement, and “Curb Appeal.” Then I will set the way ahead for the issues we are tackling for the new fiscal year, as we enter 2016.

In our efforts to improve Quality of Life and Civic Engagement, I would first like to mention the great job our Village children did at our Neighborhood Holiday Caroling even last December, which was prompted to be held by a 6-year old El Portal resident: Tai Fruitstone. Thereafter, in February, El Portal became home to the First Little Free Library in Miami-Dade County, in an effort to promote literacy, to encourage our youth, and to encourage our community to get outdoors and read more. As featured in the Miami Herald newspaper, El Portal's Little Free Library is made of 100% recycled materials and hand-painted by local artist Nicole Soden along with eighth-grader Paula Carrizo in a theme that features our famous peacocks and El Portal’s status as an official State of Florida bird sanctuary, which it has held for over 50 years. And, if you have not seen it, the Little Library is right outside in front of Village Hall. In fact, it has been such a great success and we have received so many book donations, we now have two carts in the Village Hall that we use to rotate books through the Little Library.

In April, we achieved great success at our first-ever—and now “Annual” El Portal Art Fair. Hosted by our Mayor’s Task Force and led by event-chair El Portal resident Vimari Roman, it featured over 20 art exhibitors, gourmet food trucks, live music, and attracted over 400 residents to attend.

We have enhanced our relationship with the Villages of Miami Shores and Biscayne Park through the Greater Miami Shores Chamber of Commerce and the newly
created Three Village Committee, and just last month El Portal hosted its first Three Village Social at the Village Hall.

Also in July, and in coordination with Florida State Representative Daphne Campbell, El Portal hosted a “Farm Share” community event. Many great residents of El Portal volunteered to help distribute donated food to over 1,000 local families in need.

We have also brought back the El Portal Women’s Club—led by El Portal resident Maribel Fruitstone, and we also brought back the Peacock Express, a quarterly newsletter now being delivered to your homes. We also hosted a slew of events such as: the Armed Forces 5K Run/Walk—now in its 7th Year; the Spring Egg Hunt; Resident Luncheons; Book Readings; the Back to School Book Bag Giveaway; and of course our Great Independence Day BBQ, which was attended by more people this year than in 7+ years I have been here.

It’s important to remember that both our El Portal Senior Citizens and young people are vital members of this community and this is why not only do I support the Miami-Dade Age Friendly Initiative, I also signed the Mayor’s Challenge, and I have coordinated an Age Friendly Community Panel of Experts at the Miami-Dade County League of Cities Best Practices Conference coming this October 9th, which I will be moderating. Although we are not in direct control of our public schools, we do have a great partnership with Horace Mann Middle School, where I also sit on the Educational Excellence School Advisory Council. In regard to Horace Mann Middle School, I am happy to report that it is being led by a strong and accomplished leader: Principal Leon Maycock who not only wants to work with us in strengthening our ties, but is an advocate
for being a part of the solution. We are happy to have Principal Maycock here tonight—
-Leon—could you please stand up and be recognized!

In our efforts to improve our “Curb Appeal” across the Village of El Portal, we hired a code enforcement officer to work with the residents in taking steps to comply or re-comply with our code. In addition, we received a much appreciated donation of a public works vehicle and a code enforcement vehicle, among other items from our friends at the City of Miami Beach, which will help improve El Portal’s Village Staff’s capability to provide excellent customer service. In addition, we landscaped the medians on North Miami Avenue and installed a new bike rack at the Tot Lot, along with replacing the water fountain. We are also replacing all broken/fallen and faded traffic signs and fixing sidewalks. Hopefully, you have seen the community garbage cans that have been installed around the Village in key areas—and the “Doggie-Do” stations installed by the Nature Trail—as they are making an impact in getting the trash and “nature’s call”—off of the street. Bottom line is that most people—and dog owners—will use a trashcan if it is available—and so we got them installed now. We are working hard to leverage our trees, our bold Peacocks and the Village’s status as a State of Florida Bird Sanctuary to every El Portal homeowner’s advantage. With that, we are pursuing getting El Portal designated as a “Tree City USA.”

In addition, I am happy to report that we just received outstanding news that our Nature Trail Expansion Project was one of 18 winners chosen from over 300 projects submitted across Miami-Dade County, where we will be awarded $20K from the Miami Foundation for this Green and Healthy-Lifestyle Focused effort. In fact, the Village will
be formally recognized at the Miami Foundation Public Space Challenge event tomorrow night!

With all of these positive changes happening in El Portal, it is necessary to have a codified official plan. This codified plan is in the process of being created through the vision of the Charette-construct, which is a process that commenced back in 2013. The Charette is the community-based construct for progress and growth in El Portal, which involved many stakeholders, including experts in village planning, who teamed up with our residents, business owner’s, and Village staff. The Charrette is posted on the El Portal website and in accordance with this construct, one of the first things this council did was hire an urban planning company to update the Village’s zoning policy to reflect the vision of the Charette. Some of you may be concerned about the Little Farm redevelopment, and with that—I want you to know that the Village Council is taking this very seriously—and is taking the necessary steps to ensure current Little Farm residents are treated with dignity, respect, and in accordance with the law, during their relocation process. I do encourage all residents to go to elportalvillage.com and to look at the Charette, as it is a quality product, which is the result of many residents hard work. I would like to take a moment to recognize former El Portal Councilman Adam Old, who spearheaded the Charette process. Adam—please stand and be recognized!

We also know that home values are important—as people’s homes are usually the largest investment in our life—hence we held community workshops (Ygrene and Code Enforcement) for El Portal homeowners to learn about the tax benefits and special financing available to them through these programs. As a result, many El Portal residents are installing new hurricane proof windows and doors, updating insulation,
putting on new code-compliant roofs, and even considering installing solar panels, which makes sense considering this is the Sunshine State!

El Portal's property values increased this year by 14.2%; and El Portal was recently named by the Miami New Times as the “best place to buy real estate” in Miami-Dade County. El Portal will be featured in next month’s edition of UpTown Magazine. Bottom Line: I am happy to state El Portal---Back is on the Map!

It may be true that we have made tremendous progress in achieving results in many areas, however our work is far from over--- and now I would like to tell you about our way ahead for the remainder of this year and into 2016.

Folks, nothing is more important than protecting the lives and property of our residents. It is important that we get the best return of investment for your valuable tax dollars and so I’ll be working directly with the Village Manager and Chief of Police to help better optimize our resources in a business-like manner. For example, the time is now to embrace and invest in some 21st-century technologies and tools to make our community safer. It is no secret that our “up and coming” community is being targeted by criminals, so I am proposing the actual installation of Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras, with night vision and motion detection capabilities, in high-traffic areas that send automatic alerts to Police Officers on duty. For example, no one should be crossing the closed footbridge across the Little River on El Portal’s west side at 3am—and if they do, our police officers should immediately know about it. Let us never forget that our Police Officers have a tough job to do---and as a leader, I want to do everything I can to provide them modern tools to fight, and moreover to prevent crime in our Village. Please let’s recognize all our Police Officers here tonight with a big round
of applause. You make us proud, thank you for keeping us safe and we ask you to keep yourselves safe too!

Now onto the Village’s budget, our Ad Valorem tax base reached $114.2 million this fiscal year, which was a 15.4% increase over last year and was the second highest percentage growth in the entire county. $3.3 million of the increase was directly related to new construction (i.e., new investment) in the village and we continue to realize steady growth. What this means is that we are getting some good results, but we must continue our efforts to support growth and re-investment in the Village in order to get back to the ten year high of $140.9 million we reached in 2007. It is important to point out we have achieved this growth by not raising taxes, but instead of by keeping the rate flat at 8.3 mils. This flat property tax rate has encouraged investment and the purchase of homes.

Going forward we want to be more financially prudent and further grow the general fund reserve which right now is at slightly over $700,000. In addition, we want to encourage the continued increase in property values by pursing a sewer installation feasibility study (for $150K). Most importantly, we want to continue to leverage partnerships with the state, the county, and community foundations to obtain grants and additional funding—like the Nature Trail Expansion—to support reinvestment in park space, better roads, and amenities for El Portal’s citizens. As such, I have directed the Village Manager and the Chief Financial Officer to prepare a 5-year financial forecast so we can have a written plan, work our plan to ensure the vitality and sustainability of our Village’s future.
As part of our effort to increase civic engagement, we have taken steps to bring El Portal into the 21st Century through the use of social media platforms in order to better communicate with our residents. Our El Portal’s website and are have instituted a process to keep it updated on a monthly basis with current events, calendars, etc. In addition, we have promoted the use of the NextDoor APP or NextDoor.com so that El Portal residents can communicate, advertise garage sales, recover lost pets, etc. which all further develop our unique and wonderful sense of community.

As I close, I ran for Mayor because it was time—time to get ready for tomorrow—time to welcome El Portal into the 21st century of ideas, vision and civic engagement—so please join us; get involved—join the Mayor’s Task Force, participate in the El Portal woman’s club, attend our community events, get to know your neighbors—and let’s take on every challenge and turn them into opportunity—the opportunity to become even GREATER.

But before I leave you, I have one last thing to add. Uptown Magazine, in the upcoming article featuring the Village of El Portal, asked me if I had one wish for our community what would it be— I said: “Since El Portal is a residential community with many families and small children, my one wish is that automobile drivers would better respect our posted speed limits—as if their own kids, parents and furry pets were playing or walking out on the street when they drive by.”

Thank you again for being here this evening and please remember that DIVERSITY is our strength in the Village of El Portal—and together: We Can and WILL deliver a prosperous and beautiful Village—where everyone matters!!

Thank you and good night!