

Serving on good behavior

Pinellas Administrator Fred Marquis has held the county's top post for 18 years, almost unheard of for government managers.

By CARLOS MONCADA
of The Tampa Tribune

Bob Stewart was working in his county commission office when he called upstairs to summon County Administrator Fred Marquis. Marquis, a major general in the U.S. Army Reserves, told Stewart he was about to head out on military business and would be right down.

"All of a sudden, in comes this two-star general with the stars on the sleeves," Stewart recalled. "Here I am calling the general to come down and see me? Wait a minute, something's wrong here."

Like many a military man, Marquis split his working life between two careers, but with a difference — he rose to the top in each of them.

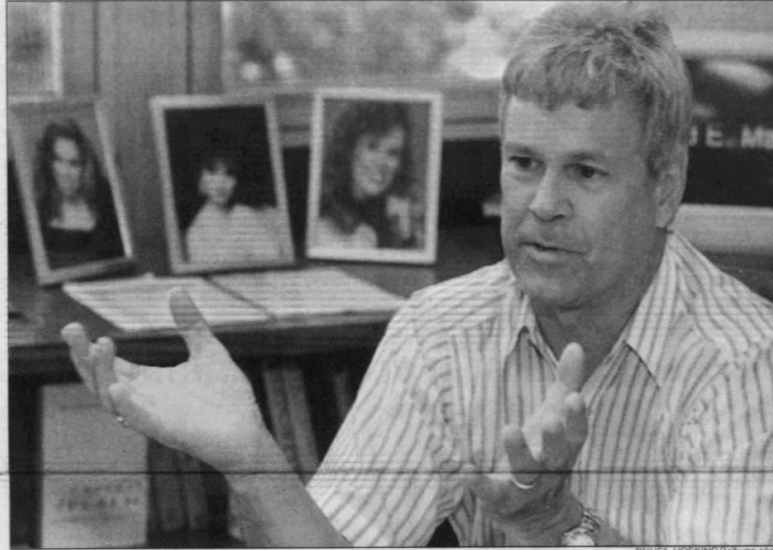
In his most visible role, the 58-year-old administrator is paid an annual salary of \$115,500 to manage the day-to-day operations of the government for Florida's most densely populated county.

He is perhaps the county's most powerful non-elected government official. His actions affect the lives of the nearly 900,000 people who live in Pinellas.

HE DRAFTED the \$1 billion county budget. He supervises nearly 3,000 employees. His recommendations guide the county commission's decisions on every county function, from operating ambulance services and public water systems to building roads and jails.

Marquis serves at the pleasure of an elected five-member commission whose composition can change every two to four years. Despite such a volatile political environment, he has held the top job for 18 years — almost unheard of among government managers.

What makes his tenure even more extraordinary is that Marquis has worked for as many as 22 commissioners without



Pinellas County Administrator Fred Marquis, in his office, reflects on his 27 years with the county, moving up through the ranks to the top spot on the staff. He also spent a brief time as a planner with the city of St. Petersburg. He drafted the \$1 billion county budget and supervises nearly 3,000 employees.

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Agnes Tillerson
Past president of the Citizens Action League, an East Lake civic group

a contract or formal annual performance reviews.

"I work from Tuesday to Tuesday," said Marquis, referring to the commission's weekly meetings. "If any member of the board — any one — loses faith in me, all they have to do is tell me. My personal integrity, my personal trust, is my employment contract."

Commissioner Sallie Parks called the board's arrangement with Marquis "a very healthy way to do business."

"It builds a relationship of responsiveness," she said. "If you don't have an administrator who is responsive to the people setting the public policy, they ought to

be as good as gone. And I don't want to have to stand in front of the court defending why we ended the contract."

Marquis prefers a low profile, saying he simply provides the glue that makes commission policy stick. But some observers of county government contend commissioners have delegated too much authority to him.

"I wouldn't know what the commission would do without him," said Agnes Tillerson, past president of the Citizens Action League, an East Lake civic group. "They've given him much power, and he uses it."

MARQUIS HAS BUILT a close working relationship with commissioners, who say he does a good job of alerting them to potential controversy. Each week, Marquis and County Attorney Susan Churuti engage in a time-honored practice of meeting privately with the commission chairman to review the agenda for the next week's board meeting.

"Fred wants to run a smooth meeting," said Stewart, the board's chairman. "He does not like surprises. He tries desperately to avoid open conflict. He has often said to me, 'If there's a problem with an issue on the agenda, let me know. And if I can't resolve that problem, it won't be on the agenda.'"

Marquis' 5-foot-6-inch stature is deceiving. He enjoys a reputation as a strong administrator and a consensus-builder.

Ramrod straight, he is a familiar sight as he strides through the county Courthouse in downtown Clearwater. Gray-haired and personable, he is savvy, bright and nimble on his feet.

"Whether he's right or wrong, when he says something it sounds good," said longtime Clerk of the Circuit Court Karleen De Blaker. "He's very articulate."

Parks recalled it wasn't what Marquis said, but what he *didn't* say, that annoyed her shortly after she took office in 1992. "There was something that came up that he just wouldn't give an opinion on," she said. "I said, 'Fred, that's your job. You may find you've got a split vote or you may not like the fact your commission voted against you. But that's your job. Do you understand?' He's never done it since then."

UNLIKE MOST managers, Marquis makes it a practice to go through the daily mail to keep a finger on the pulse of the community. He prides himself on his

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accessibility, and does not have his telephone calls screened.

"I made a commitment when I first walked into this office," he said. "It was a commitment to myself. I would not go home — I don't care what time it was — if I have one piece of paper on my desk and it doesn't have resolution to it. And I will not go home at night if there's one single phone call I haven't returned."

His desk remains remarkably uncluttered, with letters and memos placed neatly on top of one another. A desktop placard, which politically powerful Commissioner Charles Rainey gave Marquis shortly after the county hired him in

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Marquis and his wife Suzanne relax at their Palm Harbor home. She works in the county's computer department.

Marquis hired her in 1975 while he was planning director, but they didn't date until 1990. They wed in 1992.



Army Reserves Maj. Gen. Fred Marquis and his wife, Suzanne. He retires from the military next year.