



Get 93% off your first month.

Subscribe today for \$1.

GET ACCESS



LOG IN

SUBSCRIBE NOW

Miami Herald

Part of the McClatchy Media Network

News Sports Business Politics Opinion Food & Drink Climate Change • Sports Betting

MIAMI BEACH

After tragedy, Surfside mayor comforts families, stokes feuds and floats a conspiracy

BY AARON LEIBOWITZ

UPDATED OCTOBER 11, 2021 1:39 PM





Charles Burkett is the mayor of Surfside, the oceanfront town now known across the world as the place where the Champlain Towers South condo tower collapsed. BY JOSÉ A. IGLESIAS



Only have a minute? Listen instead

Powered by **Trinity Audio**

00:00

10 10 1.0x

17:34

Charles Burkett wants to know why. Why did half of Champlain Towers South crumble on June 24? Why did the deadliest residential building failure in modern U.S. history happen in his small town? Why can't anyone answer those questions yet?

This summer, the Surfside mayor found an enticing possibility: a debunked conspiracy theory that sought to connect the June 23 death in a Spanish prison of antivirus software entrepreneur John McAfee with the Surfside building collapse. At the heart of the theory, which assumes the building was deliberately brought down, is a screenshot of a (likely fake) tweet suggesting McAfee was storing data near the tower and an online post suggesting McAfee owned a unit in the building (which he didn't).

Never mind that federal authorities said early on that there was no evidence terrorism played a role in the collapse. Burkett's interest was piqued. So he texted Town Manager Andrew Hyatt in early August, suggesting Surfside police look into whether the tweet was real.

"I think it's as good a theory as any other," Burkett told the Herald.

By July 1, the McAfee conspiracy theory had been debunked by [PolitiFact](#), [Reuters](#), the [Associated Press](#) and [USA Today](#), among others.

Allyn Kilsheimer, the renowned engineer Surfside officials hired to study the collapse, said he was unaware of the McAfee theory. But he was skeptical after a reporter described it to him.

"People that believe what they see on social networks should realize that they're reading a bunch of bull---- put up there by people who don't know what the f--- they're talking about," Kilsheimer said.

After an initial wave of solidarity following the collapse, Burkett has continued a long political history of antagonizing and befuddling — including those actually charged with finding what caused the catastrophe.

The mayor has feuded with county officials over the town's lack of access to the property, which is considered a crime scene and therefore sealed off; was threatened with a subpoena for records by the State Attorney's Office after the feds complained he was ignoring their pleas for assistance (he says no one passed along the message); and had to be escorted off the site before a crucial meeting in July because he snapped pictures without authorization.

As the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) investigates the tragedy, the wholehearted cooperation of the town will be critical — not just to pinpointing the cause of the collapse, but potentially determining whether other nearby towers built or designed by the same individuals might be unsafe.

Burkett has not only ruffled feathers with the feds, he has also infuriated fellow members of the town commission by — according to them — hogging the spotlight.

“I tend to have a reputation for saying what I think. I tend to create a tiny bit of controversy sometimes,” he said. “I do it because I'm up there swinging for all of us. I really believe that.”

'STOP COMPLAINING AND GET DOWN TO THE SITE'

Burkett was a constant presence after the collapse. Wearing a baseball cap and Surfside polo T-shirt, he addressed the media on TV and at press conferences day after day, and met with anguished family members during a weeks-long search and rescue process.

He shared gut-churning details with the public. On June 29, he spoke about encountering 12-year-old Elisheva Cohen staring at the rubble the night before, praying for her missing father, [Dr. Brad Cohen](#), and uncle, [Gary Cohen](#), both of whom were later confirmed to be among the [98 dead](#). Burkett brought Elisheva to meet President Joe Biden when he visited Surfside on July 1, and the mayor still wears a beaded bracelet she made him.

Burkett has been a “blessing” and has “a heart of gold,” Brad Cohen’s widow, Soraya Cohen, said in a text message. “He was a big comfort to my daughter during the worst time in her life,” she said.



Surfside Mayor Charles Burkett visited the Surfside Wall of Hope & Memorial as rescue teams continued their recovery mission at the collapsed Champlain Towers South site on July 16. MATIAS J. OCNER mocner@miamiherald.com

The mayor was also involved in big post-collapse decisions. As a tropical storm was approaching in early July, he advocated for the still-standing part of Champlain Towers South to be demolished immediately to protect rescue workers, a position he said he shared with Gov. Ron DeSantis — even as Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said the demolition would likely take weeks.

The building was **successfully imploded in a matter of days** ahead of the storm.

But while Surfside officials projected an image of unity and strength, there was bickering and bitterness behind the scenes, echoing a tradition of chaos that has

colored the town's politics since even before Champlain Towers South was built in 1981.

Take the president's visit. When Biden came to Surfside, Burkett joined him and first responders for meetings with big-name officials, including DeSantis, Sens. Marco Rubio and Rick Scott and U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz. But the town's four other elected officials were not invited. Two were angry — and suspected the mayor was responsible.

“Let me remind you that this is a 5 person commission, not just a Mayor that thinks he runs the show alone,” Commissioner Nelly Velasquez said in a July 2 email to the town's communications director. “It was highly offensive that the rest of the commission was not present yesterday during the presidents visit to OUR town.”

Burkett shot back in an email, referring to himself in third person as “the mayor” as he denied having anything to do with the decision. He told the Herald someone had simply informed him that he was invited to the meetings with the president, so he showed up.

“The mayor did not create the list to visit with the president of the United States,” he wrote to Velasquez and other town officials.

Vice Mayor Tina Paul was also not allowed in, writing the next day in an email: “It is an embarrassment for the town that I have been left out of the important meetings and the residents and media see and know.” She griped that she had received “little to no communication” since the collapse.

Burkett fired back again.

“Stop complaining and get down to the site and serve your constituents from 7am to 11 pm every single day, like the manager and I have done since that two am

call,” he wrote. “Service is our duty, not whining about not receiving communications.”



Burkett (left, wearing baseball cap) attends a meeting with President Joe Biden at the St. Regis Hotel on July 1, 2021. Al Diaz adiaz@miamiherald.com

A DOLLAR A YEAR

In Surfside, a town of about 6,000 people just north of Miami Beach, elected officials including the mayor make \$1 per year. The town has a strong-manager form of government, meaning the mayor’s formal powers are similar to those of his colleagues.

Still, Burkett effectively served as Surfside’s chief spokesperson and public face after the collapse. The town hired crisis communications consultant Brian Andrews in part to handle media requests, but Burkett preferred to take calls directly from reporters.

Velasquez, the commissioner, said that despite her frustration about the presidential visit, she was fine with Burkett taking a leading role.

“I thought he did very well on that and going out there and being there every day,” she said. “That takes a lot.”



Surfside Mayor Charles Burkett (center) joined families of Surfside collapse victims as they held a press conference Sept. 23 at the site of the Champlain Towers South collapse to call for a memorial to be constructed where 98 victims died. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

As interview requests poured in after the collapse, Burkett — a political independent who says he is a fiscal conservative and a social moderate — initially sought to prioritize interviews with Fox News, sources said.

He has not taken the COVID-19 vaccine, he told the Herald, citing skepticism about how it works and his belief that he already had the virus in February 2020. Burkett recalled a sore throat after returning from a trip to New York City, but that was before testing was widely available.

A product of Catholic schools and the University of Miami, Burkett says his view on COVID is that he's "more comfortable relying on my own antibodies to handle it — and a lot of prayer."

PRIVATE BRIEFINGS, PUBLIC UTTERANCES

Burkett caused a stir after the collapse not only among Surfside officials, but also with Levine Cava, the county mayor.

He would put Levine Cava's team on edge during their twice-daily media briefings near the site, events where the Surfside mayor would often reveal behind-the-scenes information about the search effort.

While Levine Cava stopped attending private family briefings after some relatives of the dead asked politicians to stay away, Burkett continued going to the gatherings and shared some of the discussions with reporters.

People who spoke to Levine Cava afterward said she was stunned on July 11 when Burkett stood before the microphones and [held up his cell phone](#) to reveal a photo of a ring found in the debris, identifying it as likely belonging to Brad Cohen.

Burkett said members of the Israel Defense Forces, who had joined the search and found the ring, asked him to share the information publicly.

"They wanted me to let people know they had found that ring," Burkett said.

In late July, a time when relations were particularly strained, the State Attorney's Office also threatened to subpoena Surfside for records NIST had requested, saying Burkett had not been responsive. Burkett said he hadn't received an earlier message from the federal agency.

"It's obnoxious, really," Burkett said of the subpoena threat. "They're the ones that have been blocking our investigation and [a prosecutor] has got the nerve to

imply that we're not helping.”

Still, Burkett said he has a “good working relationship” with officials at various levels, including Levine Cava, DeSantis and Wasserman Schultz.

“I try to work with everybody,” he said.

AN INTERESTING CHILDHOOD

Even in the heat of the rescue effort, Burkett made time in mid-July to talk to a reporter about his early years — a unique upbringing that involved moving into his grandmother’s Miami Beach mansion when he was 12, after his grandfather died, and befriending Barry Gibb of the Bee Gees when Gibb moved in next door.

Burkett’s grandmother was the heiress to a Cleveland family that owned one of the world’s largest nut-and-bolt factories, he said. Living with her at 5800 North Bay Dr., Burkett, a guitar player and singer, developed a kinship with Gibb and his brothers, who lived nearby.

That led to some remarkable memories: Sitting in Gibb’s living room as the Bee Gees performed. Playing tennis with Elton John. Teaching Michael Jackson how to water ski. Going fishing with Diana Ross.

“It’s amazing how lucky I am, how blessed I am and how grateful I am for all the wonderful things that happened to me,” Burkett said.

As Burkett reminisced at Town Hall on July 15, he lost track of time. A reporter reminded him a 4:30 p.m. family briefing at the Sea View Hotel would be starting soon, and he hurried downstairs to meet a police officer waiting outside to drive him to the hotel. The officer sped off — sirens on, weaving through traffic and arriving just as the meeting was about to start.

“You did it,” Burkett said to the officer when they arrived. “I’m impressed.”



Charles Burkett with Michael Jackson in the early 1980s. Burkett, now the Surfside mayor, says he taught Jackson to water ski when Burkett was living at his grandmother's mansion in Miami Beach. *Courtesy of Charles Burkett*

Burkett chose to stay with his grandmother until she died when he was 25. He said he “didn’t get a penny” from her estate until 30 years later, when her children had died. Burkett’s father also owned property, developing strip malls and shopping centers, but Burkett said he didn’t inherit any of it.

In the meantime, Burkett said he worked as a construction site laborer and as a document runner for the law firm Becker & Poliakoff. He began buying properties of his own in Miami Beach in the mid-1980s, and bought more over the years, renting them out to tenants and later selling for profits.

Today, he owns only a few properties locally — his home in Surfside, a condo in Bal Harbour and an apartment complex in Miami Beach, where he recently ordered tenants to leave within 45 days after residents [complained in a news article](#) that the elevator had been out of service for over a year and balconies had never been fixed after Hurricane Irma in 2017.

Burkett blamed the poor conditions on delays with the city's permitting process and challenges hiring and retaining contractors. He told the Herald he has offered to return the month's rent to tenants who moved out by the end of September.

"A lot of tenants have asked for help. That was something we were happy to do," he said.

A search of Miami-Dade court records shows Burkett's company, Burkett Properties, has filed hundreds of eviction lawsuits against tenants in the county dating back to 1989. Burkett said it goes with the territory.

"You hate it ... but when you have a dispute, that's the way you resolve it," he said.

Burkett said his company owns properties in eight states: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Colorado and California.

'OUR TOWN HAS SUFFERED FROM INFIGHTING'

Burkett made his first run for Surfside mayor in 2004, losing by 22 votes. He was later fined \$6,000 by the Florida Elections Commission for violating state elections laws related to improper reporting of his campaign's credit card use.

He apologized that year in a letter in the Herald, saying the violations were unintentional.

In 2006, Burkett ran for mayor a second time and won in a nasty election cycle that prompted the [Miami New Times to declare](#) that Surfside politics had "devolved into an ugly mess."

During Burkett's initial two terms as mayor, town politics centered on the fate of the community center — the decades-old iteration of a since-rebuilt structure that

was at the center of a recent controversy over a [potential land swap](#) to place a memorial to collapse victims at the Champlain Towers South site.

After the building was torn down, Burkett campaigned against a 2008 ballot question on whether to issue a 30-year, \$16.5 million bond to pay for a new center, raising concerns about tax hikes. The bond referendum failed.

Burkett was defeated in 2010 by Daniel Dietch, a [trained geologist and anthropologist](#) who rode a skateboard to town meetings and would remain in the mayor's seat for the next 10 years. But Burkett returned to dethrone him last March, part of a sea change on the commission as four new officials were elected.

His 2020 platform — pledging to “save our small-town way of life in Surfside” — struck a chord with voters after a proposed \$33.5 million private-public partnership to overhaul the town's municipal facilities and add commercial development rankled residents. That plan was withdrawn in 2018.

But Burkett's return to office has been messy, even beyond the Champlain Towers collapse.

As he presses for lower tax rates and a reworked zoning code to decrease density and protect homeowners, Burkett has found himself on something of a political island. He uses a personal blog, Facebook page, email newsletters and the town's monthly Surfside Gazette publication to promote his agenda and take frequent swipes at his colleagues, who have criticized him for seeking to politicize town communications.

In the [October issue](#) of the Gazette, Burkett called out Paul and Salzhauer by name for disagreeing with some of his zoning code proposals, including one to allow taller hedges in residents' front yards.

He saves his most pointed commentary for his [blog](#) (whose tagline is, “News that you probably will not see in the Surfside Gazette”), where he recently shared

images of Salzhauer's backyard as part of the ongoing hedge debate.

Salzhauer is his most vocal critic. She has twice given Burkett the middle finger during virtual commission meetings after Burkett muted her microphone. In the [first case](#), Burkett was arguing that Christians should be added to a proposed anti-hate resolution as targets of discrimination during the COVID pandemic. Salzhauer, who is Jewish, flipped Burkett the double bird after he accused her of harboring "apparent anti-Christian zeal."

"I do regret not doing more to keep him out of office," Salzhauer told the Herald last week. "Shame on me."



Surfside Commissioner Eliana Salzhauer gives the middle finger to Mayor Charles Burkett during a virtual meeting on June 9, 2020.

Paul, the vice mayor, is contemplating a run for mayor against Burkett next March. Burkett has not yet formally committed to seeking re-election.

“Our town has really suffered from all this infighting,” Paul said. “After the Champlain collapse, I had hoped that things would change.”

Burkett, meanwhile, has been considering bigger things in the future — like a run for governor someday after DeSantis, whom Burkett supports, is out of office.

Burkett doesn’t shy away from sharing his political and economic worldview, which is rare for elected officials in non-partisan municipal seats. Below email messages from his town-issued account, he features a rotating cast of quotes that reflect his beliefs on small government and fiscal conservatism.

“The problems we face today are there because the people who work for a living, are now outnumbered by those who vote for a living,” one of the quotes says.

Another reads: “Any man who thinks he can be happy and prosperous by letting the government take care of him, better take a closer look at the American Indian.” He attributes it to Henry Ford, founder of Ford Motor Company.

The quote went viral [earlier this year](#) via a Facebook page called Americans Against Socialism. There is no evidence Ford ever said it.

Miami Herald staff writers Martin Vassolo and Douglas Hanks contributed to this report.

This story was originally published October 11, 2021, 7:30 AM.

FOLLOW MORE OF OUR REPORTING ON CONDO COLLAPSE: DISASTER IN SURFSIDE

MIAMI BEACH

Surfside mayor quietly met in Dubai with developer of Champlain Towers South site

JANUARY 20, 2023 5:30 AM

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Surfside collapse victims’ families tell developer: Memorial needs to go ‘on the site’

SEPTEMBER 19, 2022 10:07 PM

[SEE ALL STORIES →](#)



AARON LEIBOWITZ

305-376-2235

Aaron Leibowitz covers the city of Miami Beach for the Miami Herald. He was previously a municipal government reporter covering cities around Miami-Dade County.

Take Us With You

Real-time updates and all local stories you want right in the palm of your hand.

MIAMI HERALD APP →

VIEW NEWSLETTERS →

SUBSCRIPTIONS

- Start a Subscription
- Customer Service
- eEdition
- Vacation Hold
- Pay Your Bill

LEARN MORE

- About Us
- Contact Us
- Newsletters
- Archives
- Reviews
- Sports Betting
- Personal Finance

ADVERTISING

- McClatchy Advertising
- Place an Ad
- Place a Classified Ad
- Place an Obituary
- Staffing Solutions
- Political | Advocacy Advertising

Part of the McClatchy Media Network

COPYRIGHT

**COMMENTING
POLICY**

**PRIVACY
POLICY**

**YOUR PRIVACY
CHOICES**

**TERMS OF
SERVICE**