

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-3
December 9, 2025
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago
Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson
Commissioner Melissa Castro
Commissioner Ariel Fernandez
Commissioner Richard D. Lara

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez
City Manager, Peter Iglesias
City Clerk, Billy Urquia
Communications Director, Martha Pantin

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item F-3 [Start: 12:14 p.m.]

Update on Election Education Campaign
(Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: Moving on to item F-3. Update on election education campaign. Madam Pantin, how are you?

Communications Director: Good morning.

Mayor Lago: Good morning. Good afternoon. This is possibly one of the most important items, I believe, on the agenda today. And I'd like to see what we're planning on doing in regard to outreach, which I think is critically important, and see how we can put our heads together to make sure that we get as many people to engage. And I'm going to tell you one thing that I did already. And I spoke to the Manager about this and we're in a public setting. I can speak about it. I think the DCM was there also. At the Centennial Concert, I had a great conversation with Alina Garcia, our Election Supervisor. And I thought of the idea of having her produce a video. It obviously does

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not talk about the actual ballot items. What it talks about, and that goes without saying, what it talks about is how to properly fill out this ballot so that you can be effective and not make a mistake in regard to not having your vote count. I think if somebody goes through the effort of filling out a ballot and mailing it back, we want to make it count, right? And we don't want a simple technicality like a signature or missing your address. For example, if you don't put your address in the back, it doesn't count. So, she said that she was more than willing to produce a video that we could use to send out to residents a few times through the course before the elections saying, you're going to be receiving this ballot and an educational 30-minute campaign explaining on how to properly cast your vote.

Communications Director: Yes, and I've already reached out to her communications person, Mr. Mendieta, for us to be able to work.

Mayor Lago: You don't waste any time. We talked about this and you're already on it. I appreciate that. Thank you.

Communications Director: So, we were requested by the Commission to create an education campaign. The referendum will be voting by mail-in only ballots and about moving the election forward, but there are other items that will also be on the agenda. The only information that the city can put out, and we've been working with the City Clerk's office and the City Attorney's office, is information about the voting process. We cannot talk about the items at all. Critical dates here, ballots will be mailed by March 21st. Voter registration deadline. People need to know that they will receive a ballot if they are registered to vote. They do not need to register to vote by mail. And that registration deadline is March 23rd. The ballot submission deadline is April 21st by 7 p.m. The only way that people can send in their ballot is they can either mail it, or they can take it physically to the election's headquarters. There's no drop-off boxes. There's no library location, et cetera.

Commissioner Lara: Excuse me, Martha. If you go back to the previous screen. Okay, so this voter registration deadline is March 23. The ballots are mailed by March 21. Is a little confusing to me. Does that mean that if you register to vote after March 21, you'll still be able to get?

Communications Director: Yes.

Commissioner Lara: So, the mailing is going to continue after March 21.

Communications Director: They're trying to mail it so that it gets there like two weeks before the election. But those are the dates that we were given by Elections. City webpage, again, this has all been, we've gone through the City Clerk's office and the City Attorney's office. This webpage is live as of yesterday or today and it just has the key information. It will have more information once the items come for ballot language to the Commission in January. So, as we get information, we will make sure to update it. It is in the City Clerk's page of our website. And once we, in January,

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we will also have it on the news page, which is the landing page for our website. What are our outreach strategies? As I said, they will all be educational. We finalize the information for the webpage. We're finalizing information for printed materials. We're updating, just like we've done in the past, to encourage people to vote. We are planning to advertise. For the past couple of elections, we create a letter. The City Clerk sends that out to key organizations to make sure that they let their members know that this is happening. And we'll have flyers and banners, for example, the Ike's, et cetera. I think the key part of the education here is that people will need to make sure that they fill out the ballot correctly, because there's no remediation. If your ballot is not correct, it will not be counted. That's it.

City Clerk Urquia: So just one, sorry, Mr. Mayor, one key distinction on this one is, in a normal election, if your signature does not match the signature that the Supervisor of Election has on file, there's a cure period for that signature. In this election, if your signature doesn't match, you can still cure the signature. However, if you did not write the ZIP code on your mailing address, there's no curing for that. If you forgot to write your address, if you forgot to write your name on the ballot, there's no cure for that. So therefore, your ballot will not be counted.

Mayor Lago: So that's my point. So that's why we have to be very thoughtful and be very careful about how the education campaign that we put forth. It has to be about process. I want to be very careful, because I know how the blogs work and, you know, Vince Lago has an agenda. Obviously, everybody knows where I stand on all eight referendums. But what we're putting forth as a city has to be about process. And we cannot get away from that. And I want to make sure that's on the record, even though I know the blogs won't publish it. I think what's incredibly important is that we, number one, make sure, like you said, that there's at a minimum of two mailers that go to all the residents' homes explaining what they're going to be getting before the ballot comes in. I think these mailers have to explain the issues, be very concise, be very thoughtful, be very clear that they have to explain the issues. I believe that we should also have a phone operator here in the city that has a dedicated line, if that's in the interest of the city, where that person can answer any questions or can, you know, push the items towards the Manager's office so that those items are addressed. I don't think it should just be the city number. I think it should be a dedicated line that addresses the referendums that are being proffered before the city. I have no issues with, I think, that it should be on CGTV. We can explain forthcoming referendum elections. These are the eight referendums. You know, maybe put the video of our Supervisor of Election explaining exactly what's happening. I think it's important. We're advertising. We're telling people to come out and vote. This is the amount of time they have to submit their vote. Process-oriented delivery of the message. Do not get away from that. I want to be clear, again, before we get the two blogs stating that, you know, Vince Lago is using city funds to run his agenda. We all know how this is going to end up, okay? At the end of the day, I think it's key. We're now breaking ground. We're doing the same thing other cities have done. I've spoken to other cities that have run referendums very similar to this, and they've been able to deliver on the same agenda, and the agenda is simple. It's

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process-driven to have our residents come out and vote whichever way they want to vote. But at the end of the day, we want participation. This is why we're putting these referendums out there. So, do my colleagues have any objection to my request? Do you think that it's appropriate? Do you have any ideas to get more voter turnout to ensure process-driven aspects of this referendum are adhered to?

Commissioner Castro: Yeah, I have a question. When you say explain the issues, in what sense do you want to explain the issues?

Mayor Lago: Commissioner, I mean, it's pretty simple. It's explain the issues.

Commissioner Castro: Sorry.

Mayor Lago: You asked me a question. I'm trying to answer you. If you allow me to answer you, then I can complete my sentence. It's very simple. I'll give you an example. Elections are being proposed to be moved from April to November. Explain when that would happen, what would be the result of elected officials' terms, and how would we occur? It's occurring through a referendum vote. Very simple. If you're another referendum, we are moving forward with the prospect of presenting with a referendum where if an elected official or the Commission wants to raise their salaries, it has to be ratified by the members of this community through a referendum vote that you will be able to cast your ballot and approve. Simple. It's not one side or another. It's explaining the issue so that people understand what is before them and why they should come out and vote, whether they're on one side of the issue or the other. Process-driven.

Commissioner Castro: Yeah. So, what I'm going to ask is that we stay in the middle, very neutral, and we don't lean to having the voter vote a certain way because we want that outcome. Just to make it very neutral. Neutral language.

Mayor Lago: So, if I may, if I may, if I may. So first off, this is not the Amos Rojas days anymore. We have professionals here, okay? We have professionals here who take this seriously, okay? So, we are dealing with individuals here and that's a disrespect to all the employees that are here. No one is going to drive an agenda. The agenda that I'm going to drive personally is going to be an agenda that I'm going to spend a lot of personal money to ensure that I educate people to vote in a way that I think is in the best interest of the city, not of the Commission. But this city will deliver on a process-driven campaign to get the vote out so that people understand why they're receiving a ballot in the mail, and they don't confuse it with junk mail. How many times do you go to your mailbox, and you see that you have all these items and you throw them out and maybe you don't see what it is? So, at the end of the day, the agenda is simple. Process-driven and it's explaining the referendum and the items that individuals are voting on. It is not driven by an agenda.

Commissioner Lara: Through the Mayor.

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Mayor Lago: Commissioner.

Commissioner Lara: So, I've heard nothing either in the presentation by Martha or any commentary on the dais that there would lead anybody to think that we need to caution on being neutral. Like there's absolutely nothing said other than educating the voters that there's an election and that it's going to be done by mail. If we don't say what the issues are that are going to be teed up for the mail, what are we doing to sending out a mystery ballot? Open it and you'll see what the issues are that would make no sense to me or to anyone I think on the dais.

Mayor Lago: I can give you a perfect example of something that happened here. I heard a few gasps when I, not a few, one gasp when I mentioned Amos Rojas' name. When we had annexation here, which I am 110 percent in favor of annexation, I think it's a wonderful opportunity for the city. Just look at, look at Eric Spolstra's home recently, which was, took over 10 minutes and the house burned to a crisp. If we would have been there, if our Fire Department would have been there, I promise you that house would be standing today. My point is this. When annexation was being discussed and the voters were considering it, this city, through the leadership of Amos Rojas, and I had a conversation with him, did not do any outreach to the voters of that area. Did not send any mail. Did not do anything. It came and it went in an effort to kill the process. I had people who called me and said, Vince, I didn't even know what was going on. I had no clue. That was the effort. It's very clear. It's undeniable. It was an effort to kill it by not educating and by not telling people that there's a vote. If people vote against the referendums, they voted against it. It's okay. This is our democracy. But at the end of the day, let's at least get people out to the votes to make sure that they are able to make that decision, unlike what occurred with the annexation effort, which was zero effort was made to get people to come out and vote or to even really understand the process. And that's the fact. And that's what happened. And that's the truth of the matter. Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Well, for someone who's been registered to vote since you possibly could, you know, I know that the elections department does do exactly that as well. And they're not telling you how to vote. Its process driven. It's telling you who's on the ballot, what issues are on the ballot so you can study them ahead of time and make sure that you vote or just like the signs that we put up, the lit signs, make sure that people know there's an election. Look in your mailbox. Make sure you pull that envelope out. And if you didn't get it, where you can call to get one. Because we do need more people participating in our elections in the city. It's critical and it's important for our future for the next 100 years.

Mayor Lago: I'd like to put an item. I'd like to put an item before my colleagues on the Commission. I want a resolution vote, possible support to make sure this happens. I would like the two mailers at a minimum, two mailers at a minimum, to homes. Madam City Attorney, they're looking at you to make sure that this is completely legal. We're good, right? We're in good standing?

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City Attorney Suarez: So, it depends, Mayor. We can certainly work with communications.

Mayor Lago: What depends. What depends.

City Attorney Suarez: So, we can send out, we cannot send out information. We cannot spend money sending out communications about the issues that are going to go before.

Mayor Lago: We're telling you about a referendum to vote that's coming to your house.

City Attorney Suarez: That we can do.

Mayor Lago: We're not telling issues. We're saying there's a referendum that's coming to vote and this is the proper way to do it. Okay. So, your vote counts. Minimum two, if my colleagues are fine with that. Let's write this down to make sure we get this done. Okay. Minimum two, if not three. Okay. Let's go with three. How about that? The mailers will have a QR code on them where people can click on the QR code and it will take you to the video where the Supervisor of Elections will be speaking. Not Vince Lago, not the Manager, none of the members of the Commission. The Supervisor of Elections will be speaking explaining why did they receive this in the mail. What is happening? What is the referendum? How to properly fill out your ballot? Number three, I would like to have a person, a dedicated phone number here on those mailers so that someone picks up here and can answer questions and that person can be in the Manager's office with a dedicated line where someone can answer the questions and say what's happening in regard to the referendum. Ma'am, I'm not able to answer your question in regard to whether you should vote in favor of moving elections to November, but I'm willing to give you information on this. Clearly delineated responses in regard to questions. Number three, the website. You should have a website, like you said, Martha, which again encompasses the referendum, explains how to properly vote, what are the deadlines, what you'll be receiving, and just states the eight referendums that you will be facing. It's not explaining whether you should be voting in one form or another. Again, it is process driven. I think I've said it 3 times in hopes that the two blogs I'll be writing about this tomorrow will get it correct. What else am I missing? Dedicated phone line. Oh, yes. Dedicated TV ad on Coral Gables channel, which has on loop discussion on the referendums in regard to when are the referendums? How many are there? What are they? How do you submit your ballot? And also showcasing our Elections Supervisor who will give a 30, 45 second ad explaining the forthcoming vote and how to properly vote to make sure that your vote counts. These are things that I would like to do. And I'd like to make a motion in an effort to make sure that this is encompassed in our targeted ad campaign to get the vote out in a process driven manner. Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, I'd like to do a friendly amendment on that to include a mail by date.

Mayor Lago: Yes, very good.

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Vice Mayor Anderson: And what's your alternative if you didn't get it mailed by that date, which is driving it out to the Supervisor of Elections? I've done that trip.

Commissioner Fernandez: I'll second your motion.

Mayor Lago: I love it. And I mentioned this. Let me tell you why it's important because I've been voting my whole life. I didn't vote. I didn't vote the first time when I ran for office. I've been voting since I was 18. This is a sacred, sacred gift that is given to us in this country. To not vote is a travesty. And sometimes, especially elderly people like my grandparents, because this happened to them, where when they were alive, they submitted their absentee ballot, and they forgot to sign the back of it and their vote didn't count. But that to me, that to me is a travesty because I know it has to be a process, but they went out of their way. They wanted to give their God given right as American citizens to be able to vote. And they weren't able to because, you know, they didn't put an address or they didn't do a signature. And that happens to thousands of votes here in this community. So, we can do a reminder through a process driven, you know, fact-based process driven campaign. I think that people will appreciate it. And at the end of the day, they'll be grateful that we educated them. And at the end of the day, they'll vote count.

Commissioner Fernandez: I think the -- We always hear it, regardless of how much information goes out there. I didn't find out. We always hear it. And Martha, your team, every election puts out information and makes sure it's in the e-news on loop. You know, the information is getting out there. You do the YouTube stuff. I think Supervisor Garcia has done a phenomenal job in her office to increase the information that's coming out of that office to inform residents of when ballots are going out, timetables, early voting dates, and everything that comes out of that office. She has done a phenomenal job in improving the communication that's coming out from elections to make sure people are aware. And Madam Vice Mayor, I think timetable is very important. We have a major issue with the return mail. We had folks last to last runoff who submitted their ballots to the mail a week and a half before. That was me. Didn't arrive until Election Day.

Mayor Lago: And you were checking.

Commissioner Fernandez: And I was checking online.

Mayor Lago: But you're savvy, you know.

Commissioner Fernandez: Right. But my point is, the earlier we set that timetable, return it the day you get it. Because if you wait, there could be issues with the mail. We also have the issues, and I know the Police Chief has tried to address it with the Post Office here on Ponce. That mailbox gets broken into all the time. They have refused to take any action to address it. They've refused to move the mailbox across the street. I've had residents who complained about checks that have disappeared, ballots that disappear all the time. The ballots just don't make it in when they're

dropped off at that box. So, your best bet is either take it to the Elections Department or put it in your mailbox or hand it to your mailman.

Mayor Lago: Okay, but how about we do this? First and foremost, I agree with everything you said. Look at the City of Miami. They're in the middle of an election right now. Their voter turnout is abysmal with all due respect to the City of Miami. It's abysmal. It's abysmal. Who doesn't know there's an election today in the City of Miami? Okay. And they can't get people to vote. And they can't get people to vote. That's number one. Number two, in reference to the mail issue that Commissioner Fernandez just brought up. Perfect. Through the leadership of our City Manager and our Police Chief, let's put one of those mobile cameras there in that area to ensure that there's transparency over those two- or three-week period. It's a mobile vehicle that can be installed there. And it can ensure that if anybody even thinks about doing that during this time period of an election, they'll be caught on camera.

Commissioner Fernandez: Is there a way, and actually, Mr. Clerk, you would probably be the best person to ask, to have a drop box for this election? I know it's usually done during early voting, but is there a way to talk to the Election Supervisor to see if a drop box can be placed for people to go to a safe place to drop the ballot off?

City Clerk Urquia: It has been asked, and the answer is no. The only place to drop off the ballot is at their office in Doral.

Mayor Lago: Okay. All right. So, are we clear on my request, my resolution? My motion, excuse me. My motion.

City Attorney Suarez: I guess you passed the gavel.

Mayor Lago: Yes, I did. I passed the gavel. I just want to be clear. I passed the gavel.

Vice Mayor Anderson: It was a virtual gavel.

Mayor Lago: I passed the gavel.

City Attorney Suarez: So, I understand the motion.

Commissioner Lara: But through the Mayor, just as possible, a further friendly amendment. I don't know if it's overkill, but so many of our residents speak Spanish, Creole, consistent with the way that the Supervisor of Elections would normally send out. But I want to ensure that when we send out these informational, educational campaign outreaches, that we ensure that it's also at a minimum bilingual.

Mayor Lago: So, in reference to friendly amendments, there's been two today. There's one by the Vice Mayor in regard to my park's ordinance. And now we have one here by the Commissioner

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Lara. I completely agree. I welcome friendly amendments as long as it's in the best interest of the city. So, I made a motion.

Commissioner Fernandez: And I second.

Mayor Lago: And we have a second.

Vice Mayor Anderson: And we have a friendly amendment.

Mayor Lago: Yes, we have a friendly amendment on it.

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Commissioner Fernandez: You had a question?

City Attorney Suarez: I was just saying if I don't know if the Manager or Communications Director needs any clarification, or we're good. I just wanted to make sure.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes.

Commissioner Lara: Well, just a quick question. Do we require any public comment on this since it's been amended?

Mayor Lago: No, there's no public comment.

Commissioner Lara: Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Okay. Now, I want to thank you because I know you've been working hard at this with the Manager, and this is something that's been important to my office. I can't thank you enough for really engaging on this. I know that you have a long road ahead of you. Okay? It looks simple, right? The work is done today. We finished the work. No, no, no, not for us. The work is not done. The work just starts for her. Okay? And for the Manager and for the Clerk. Thank you, Mr. Clerk. This is not going to be easy. It's going to take a lot of work. And there's going to be a lot of people calling. That's why I said the phone line is important. There's going to be a lot of people that are going to be confused. And after having that conversation with the Election Supervisor, Alina Garcia, she told me, look, we've done this. This has already been done before. And there's been a lot of returns, negative returns, in regard to people not following the proper signatures, adding the addresses. That's why I'm so intent on doing a campaign that really explains

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things to people. And I like the friendly amendment. I have it both in Spanish and in Creole. So, people understand.

Communications Director: Okay. Creole as well?

Mayor Lago: Yes, that's what he said. What do you think?

Communications Director: I understood bilingual.

Commissioner Lara: At a minimum, bilingual.

Mayor Lago: Bilingual is fine. Let's go. Bilingual is fine. So, I just want to thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Great work. All right.