

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item 2-1 and 2-2
April 16, 2024
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 Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez
City Manager, Amos Rojas, Jr.
City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Jack Lowell, Property Advisory Board Member
Christopher Zoller, Property Advisory Board Member

Agenda Item 2-1 [11:10 a.m.]

2-1: A Resolution of the Property Advisory Board requesting that the City Commission direct City Staff to begin a process to identify properties within the City for purchase that would enhance its portfolio and to review existing City-owned property to determine which City-properties should be surplus or be held long-term for public benefit.

2-2: A Resolution of the Property Advisory Board recommending that the City Commission conduct a parking study to ensure that any proposed pickleball or other recreational courts will not significantly reduce available parking for Coral Gables residents.

Mayor Lago: We will move onto the time certain of 10:30, and I apologize for being almost 30 minutes late, item 2-1, and before we move onto that item, I want to say thank you to all our board members who serve at the pleasure of the city and do everything they possibly can to provide us with guidance with their expertise, so thank you in advance.

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Mr. Lowell: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. My name is Jack Lowell, I live at 185 West Sunrise and have for 39 years. I'm Chair of the Property Advisory Committee. We work for you guys. We are appointed by the Commission individually; five serve now, we're waiting on the Manager's appointment. Congratulations on your new job. I bet you're having fun. I want to take a point of personal privilege and say there are so few people with distinguished beards in town. I have to recognize Commissioner Menendez, because he appointed me to this job for free, I'm having a lot of fun, so it's been a delight and I really appreciate it. We have two resolutions to come before you today. We would like your consideration. I want to recognize first Chris Zoller, one of our board members. Chris is in the back, been in the real estate business a long time. We are expertise, we give advice to you all on the facts of the matter by property matters, and you make the decisions, so we are an advisory board, clearly. The first resolution we have to come before you is to suggest we get some assistance and advice from the Commission to expand our role as a committee. We want to be able to examine both purchase and sale opportunities for the city with our staff, we have one staff person. Zeida is here, she does a great job. We are very lucky she's with us. So, the first resolution to come before you is to assign her that task.

Mayor Lago: Okay. Perfect. So, does anyone have any other questions or would like to speak on the issue. I just have one issue, that again, I appreciate you working on this. I've always thought that the city was in the position of trying to buy as many properties as possible. That's what I've worked on for the last ten years. The last time that I think we sold a property was adjacent to Doctors Hospital, but I required, and I fought, I only got 50 percent of it, but to put that money back into the acquisitions fund, so we could continue to buy parks and we're trying to find entrance features. For example, like we did on 37th Avenue, I'm desperately trying to get the one on Bird Road, anything else that's missing, maybe one on Miller, maybe one on 37th Avenue side, and we're looking for other parks as needed, as Fred and his team are working with the Manager to look at that. So, I've always thought that we're in the process of trying to buy as much land because again, in the City of Coral Gables we've seen how prices have skyrocketed and again, like you said, Mr. Zoller, yourself are people who know about real estate probably more than anybody else in this community, and those are assets that we can never, once we sell them get them back. We used to be buying single-family homes. I remember when Venny Torre sold us a lot that he split for \$3-\$400,000, now that lot is probably a million dollars, and it's only been maybe four or five years and it's a beautiful little pocket park that now the residents use. I'm more than willing to explore all options. I think it's a good idea. I just find it hard to find any piece of property that I would want to sell because of just the value of doing that. I'm trying to see how we can acquire – Zeida worked really hard, she never fails, but she worked very hard to try to see if we can get the neighboring property here from the church, which is a beautiful green space. She's been trying to get a lot on Bird Road that we've been working on for some time with a resident, Mr. Padron, who lives in that area. I failed probably twice on that attempt with the owners. We continue to try. If there's anything that we know. My colleagues, if they have any properties that they think are worth selling that we can use that money for something else that's good. I'm more than willing to listen.

Commissioner Fernandez: And I think, Mr. Mayor, a lot is said about you and I disagreeing, we are 100 percent in agreement on this issue. I think these are assets that we are holding on to for future generations and for future uses that the city may have for them. They may not be at their most viable state today, but going forward, there may be a purpose that future Commissions and

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future residents may see for these properties. I really appreciate the work that your board does, having sat on the board for two years. I know a lot of things that come up at the last minute and things that you need to make a decision on to help guide the Commission. I appreciate the work that's put in. I agree. I don't think that we're in a position right now to be selling, even though the property values are up. I think those property values will continue to rise and we should hold onto those assets as long as we can.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, Mr. Mayor, I'll put in another word of support for this, because I do think there are properties out there that could be acquired for additional park space in the future, whether it be a passive use or as we have advocates in the room here for pickleball courts, we need space for all types of activities in our city. I don't think it is time to sell right now. The only properties I can think of that eventually may get sold could be a better time in my humble opinion, as the other surrounding properties that are in private hands are all sold. So, I would like to see if we could acquire some properties that now that we're struggling with and have struggled with in the past, wishing that we had jumped on them and acquired them for park space in our city. So, I'm in favor of it, if we want to make it into a motion.

Commissioner Menendez: If I may. Having been around long enough, I remember years and years ago, decades ago the city had opportunities to acquire certain properties but at that time those properties for sale at that time they said perhaps were a little too pricey. Fast forward ten years, and it was actually a good deal, and I'm a big believer, sort of Warren Buffet is like a buy and hold investor and I think investing in Coral Gables is a great long-term investment buy and hold, because the city only gets better, and the value of the properties only increases and gets better. So, any opportunity, I think along with my colleagues to acquire properties to look for the best use of properties, I think that's the best for our residents. I think that's best for our future.

Commissioner Castro: I think its very simple what you guys are asking for. I think what you're really asking for is a plan, a vision of where are we going and where we are at this moment. So, to go ahead and direct staff to see what properties are available and also the vision of where are we going to keep and what's the surplus. I am in accordance with that.

Mr. Lowell: So, Mr. Mayor and Commissioners, your comments are all right on point. We have a lot of people who offer properties to the city. They're usually leftovers. They are not desirable properties necessarily, but we want to have the ability to go out into the market and see if we can surface things that might make sense. So, we offer the resolution with that in mind, and Chris Zoller is here.

Mr. Zoller: Pardon the interruption, Christopher Zoller. I've been a resident here of Coral Gables since December of 1987. A little historical perspective about properties for sale. Commissioner Jim Barker appointed me to the Property Advisory Board about 26 years ago. At that time there was a lot of property owned by the City of Coral Gables that was not within the confines of the City of Coral Gables. At one particular time of interest, we had a property sitting along the canal just west of 57th Avenue and it was being used by the city as a nursery. We found it very advantageous to the city at that time to sell that property and today that property now sits eight houses along the canal, and it was a very profitable arrangement. We continue to have property

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that we own as a city outside of the borders of the City of Coral Gables. Those are opportunities that may or may not come to happen that might be advantageous to the city. Again, I want to thank you all for everything, and like Jack, we really appreciate working here and helping that. Thank you.

Mr. Lowell: So, we offer the resolution, Mr. Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I moved it.

Commissioner Menendez: I'll second.

City Attorney Suarez: So, just to be clear. It's a motion adopting the recommendation of the board, Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Correct.

City Clerk Urquia: And this would be only for agenda item 2-1, correct.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Correct.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. We're going to take a five-minute break and then we'll come back, and we'll address the time certain.

City Attorney Suarez: Mayor, this board member is here on another item, 2-2 as well, the next one.

Mayor Lago: Oh, I'm sorry, excuse me. I apologize. Which is the next item?

Mr. Lowell: It's the second resolution we have for you which is very quick. This kind of relates to the pickleball discussion about Garage 4. We think pickleball is a great sport. I'm a little past prime for playing, but my daughter loves it. However, when you're converting parking to another use, particularly in the Central Business District, you need to take into account whether parking is really in use. Now Kevin Kinney is one of your best employees, runs the Parking Department. You need to be sure to have him come in and talk to you before you proceed with the Garage 4 deal. It's going to tie it up for a long time. That's it. So that's the purpose of this second resolution, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. Any further comments.

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City Clerk Urquia: I have a member of the public requesting to speak on this item, Maite Halley.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Halley, good morning.

Ms. Halley: Good morning. I just wanted to take a moment to say that I have watched the last two meetings of the Property Advisory Committee and I understand what they are trying to do, and I get that, but what I have found was that their expertise in real estate, which I respect highly and Mr. Lowell, I've been a resident of Coral Gables since 1968, so I know who you are sir, and I know your expertise and I respect it, and I respect the work done by all the people on the Property Advisory Committee, but you're not experts in recreation. And there were many disparaging comments about pickleball players, about the need for recreation at both of those meetings, and they went on for about 15 minutes without finding out. I'm a member of the Parks Advisory Committee/Board and I stay in my lane because I don't know anything about property. I don't know anything about commercial property in particular. So, I think it comes back to all of us working with civility and consideration of learning about what we're going to talk about. I've actually spoken privately to one of the members of the Property Advisory Committee, who actually said to me, why should the city provide recreation facilities for pickleball, which left me speechless, because if we're providing recreational facilities for basketball, for golf, for soccer, for many other things, of course you should be providing this for pickleball and I know that that is the will of the Commission. I just hope we find a way to do that. I'm not here speaking against or for the item, I just wanted to make that public comment that I think we all need to stay in our lanes and respect each other.

Mayor Lago: So, if I may, and I think this is a good opportunity as a Commission because I know we're going to talk about, at 11:30 we're going to talk about pickleball which is important. By the way, I'm in favor of pickleball. We don't need eight courts. I think we need ten courts. Let me explain to you what I think we need to do. I think that we need to have this conversation in five minutes, let us go to the bathroom, let us sit down, but I also think that we need to have a conversation also about the importance of the downtown, and we're going to find a resolution one way or another. I think there's an opportunity to do something spectacular in regard to pickleball while also addressing the issues with our business community. Remember, 40 percent of our tax base comes from the downtown. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't address issues of pickleball, but we're going to have to make some tough decisions and I'm willing to make those tough decisions. I'm going to bring up two opportune sites, two sites that are much better than the parking garage, and I hope that this is not about politics but it's about pickleball. And it's not about who came up with the idea versus delivering on something that makes everybody happy, because at the end of the day, I met with the business community yesterday for breakfast to have a concern. There were a bunch of individuals, property owners who came out who were part of the BID before the BID was dissolved. I met with the Chamber to do my due diligence. I think that we can appease the business community, which is so important, while also making the pickleball resident community also happy, but it's going to take a sacrifice. We may have to lose some parking in some adjacent parks to find a solution, but I think we need to find and dedicate ourselves to do first floor parking, first floor pickleball, not secondary or third floor, because I don't think it's the appropriate amenity. So, thank you for being here. We are going to discuss pickleball in five minutes. I just need to go to the bathroom, if you don't mind.

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Mr. Lowell: Can we do the resolution?

Mayor Lago: Do I have a motion. I wanted to address it with the pickleball conversation, that's where I think it will be appropriate. If you can give me five minutes.

Mr. Lowell: That's beyond our purview. We're just about property, so it's just a recommendation.

Mayor Lago: No, I understand, but what I'm trying to do is, I'm trying to see if I can build consensus amongst my colleagues to say, hey Vince, we'll join you together to deliver on pickleball in maybe a different location while also respecting the business community, and I have a few ideas and maybe my colleagues have a few ideas, but its going to hurt. It's going to hurt, but we've got to find a solution here to stop kicking it down the street and talking about something. Let's make a decision here and move forward.

Mr. Lowell: I'd love to give you a break, Mr. Mayor, but I'd love to see the vote first.

Vice Mayor Anderson: This is my concern. We don't need to vote on something if the ultimate decision is, there's a better place for the pickleball, because of ADA concerns, because of cost concerns, because of permanency concerns. We might be able to come up with even better solutions, so we don't need to do the parking study unless we're going to put the pickleball on there. We don't need to do an ADA evaluation or put in an elevator if we're not going to put the pickleball on top of that particular location. We may have another location that can accommodate all the courts that pickleball enthusiasts would like to have. I certainly would enjoy them because I can't get court space either. I don't have time to be reserving courts in the morning and playing the game. I don't have an AI App that can reserve a court for me, and I'm only five blocks away from the Youth Center and the line of people waiting to play pickleball is so long, I don't have time to wait that long.

Commissioner Castro: For this resolution to go to a vote, it needs to be moved, there needs to be a motion. Currently there's not a motion, therefore we cannot vote.

Commissioner Menendez: And I'll have when we come back a question for Mr. Kinney, how long a parking study would take. Does that sort of seem open-ended, so when we come back maybe you can provide some input.

Mayor Lago: And if I may, Commissioner, we may not even need to spend that money.

Commissioner Menendez: Correct.

Mayor Lago: That money can be allocated to the pickleball infrastructure. We may make a decision right here where you say, hey listen, I agree with the Mayor, I agree with the Vice Mayor, I agree with the Commissioner, in a different alternate location...[Audio/technical issues]

[Commission Break]
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Mayor Lago: Welcome back.

Mr. Lowell: Mr. Mayor, you want to have a pickleball discussion before voting on my resolution?

Mayor Lago: If you could just give me one second, we'll get right back to it. I just want to announce that 2-3 and F-3 have been deferred. Thank you very much. In regard to your comments, what is the will of the Commission? What would the Commission like to do?

Vice Mayor Anderson: My thoughts where you can do a conditional thing if the will of the Commission is to put the pickleball on top of Garage 4, then we need the parking study. Okay. If the will of the Commission is not to put the pickleball on top of Garage 4 and place it somewhere else, then we don't need the parking study. So, with that, I'd make that into a motion that if we vote in favor of the pickleball to go on top of Garage 4, we need the parking study.

Commissioner Fernandez: Fair enough. I'll second.

Commissioner Castro: Yes.

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much for being here and send my best to the entire board.

Mr. Lowell: Would you like to vote on my resolution?

Mayor Lago: I think we did vote on the resolution. We just tweaked it just one second.

Mr. Lowell: Good enough. Thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, my friend.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Sorry, I didn't do it earlier.

Mayor Lago: Send my regards to the board. Thank you for your service.