

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-1
January 14, 2025
Police and Fire Headquarters
2151 Salzedo Street, 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)

Daniel Fernandez, MDC Tax Collector
Andrew Lopez, MDC

Agenda Item F-1 [10:38 a.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission, directing the City Manager to negotiate a potential lease agreement with the Miami-Dade County Tax Collector for space located at 224 Minorca Avenue, in the Minorca parking garage; waiving certain requirements pursuant to Section 2-1089 of Division 12 of the Procurement Code; providing for terms and conditions to be addressed during negotiations; and providing for an effective date. (Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: So, we are moving onto item F-1.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor A-3.

Mayor Lago: Okay. Excuse me, A-3 deferred to the next meeting at the request of the Coral Gables Museum. Thank you for the reminder. Item F-1.

City Attorney Suarez: F-1 is Resolution of the City Commission, directing the City Manager to negotiate a potential lease agreement with the Miami-Dade County Tax Collector for space located

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at 224 Minorca Avenue, in the Minorca parking garage; waiving certain requirements pursuant to Section 2-1089 of Division 12 of the Procurement Code; providing for terms and conditions to be addressed during negotiations; and providing for an effective date. Because this would include a waiver of the Procurement Code it does require a four-fifths vote.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Madam City Attorney. I want to be brief. We have our Tax Collector here who I had the privilege of attending his inauguration yesterday, which was very well attended, and it was a great show of support for a new five constitutional officers. I put this on the agenda because as always, we've seen the success that our Clerk has had with his Passport Agency that's he's been running here for the last few years in the city. Not only has it been a source of revenue, but it's also been more importantly, in my opinion, besides the revenue is, just the simplicity that it offers our residents and neighboring residents who want to come and address these issues here in the city. I remember having conversations with our Commissioner Jeanette Slesnick, may she rest in peace, and I was telling this to her husband. In the past, she had mentioned to me about, how can we extend what we are doing here, and one of the items that we talked about was possibly the idea and concept of possibly doing license renewals, license plate renewals here in the city. And as we've transitioned now with our old Passport Agency building, which is no longer in use, now we have a brand-new facility, that building is currently dormant. I'm not aware of any plans for it in the future. I thought of the idea of bringing our Tax Collector, who is here, Dariel Fernandez, please join us, to possibly present the opportunity. Instead of having to go, for example, to Dolphin Mall, which is pretty much a significant trek for residents, we could potentially do it here in our own backyard, a stone's throw from the Metrorail. So, I spoke to our new Tax Collector, who is here with us, bounce the idea off him and I asked him to please come here, so that we can present this opportunity to my colleagues on the Commission and possibly deliver for residents, again, quality of life, a simpler process to address issues and at the bottom of the issue is obviously, potentially garner some rent from the county in a building that is currently empty. Mr. Tax Collector, would you please join us and welcome to the City Beautiful once again.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, just really quick, for clarification. Our permanent building is being renovated. The building that they are looking at is the Minorca Garage. We would be moving back to our permanent building in April.

Mayor Lago: Finding opportunities. Thank you for the clarity.

Mr. Fernandez: Good morning, Mr. Mayor, good morning, Commissioners. I wanted to start, thank you, gives thanks to you, thank you for your community. Congratulations to all of you for recognizing the outstanding work of Leona Cooper and her family in our community. Their dedication and commitment have made significant, and we are grateful for their contributions. Why I wanted to address this, because every morning when I go to one of my daughter's...to school she is waiting all morning to say hello to her and I wanted to say thank you to all of you,

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because it's important to recognize people in our community and I think Leona, she will be very happy for this recognition. So, in the last couple of months, we have already started talking with different municipalities in Miami-Dade County, because we wanted to collaborate together. As I mentioned to you, when I came here maybe two months ago, we wanted to start talking to different municipalities. As a matter of fact, we already started conversations with City of Miami Beach, to start to bring the service to that community. For a long time, the residents of Miami-Dade County come to our office, now we want to go to them, and I think this is important for our residents in Miami-Dade County. In the last three weeks, we checked one of the buildings that you have here. One is near to here, the building. So, we wanted to try to start conversations with you, with your City Manager, with your people to see if you have anything available that we can work with. I wanted to present one of my directors, Andrew, he has sometime more to explain to you.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir.

Mr. Lopez: Good morning, Mr. Mayor, honorable Commissioners. My name is Andrew Lopez, I'm the Director of Motor Services for the Office of the Tax Collector. My team and I are responsible for assuming all driver's license services on behalf of Mr. Fernandez and the Tax Collector. I think for us, through Mr. Fernandez' commitment, we are looking for collaboration opportunities with all 34 municipalities. We are open, we don't have any restrictions as far as size and space. I think that there are opportunities to open up small Tax Collector offices, there are opportunities to open large Tax Collector offices. I'm sure many of you know, Miami-Dade County is experiencing a crisis with driver's license and identification card issuances, and we are committed to finding solutions to that problem. We do recognize that it's not going to be a one size fits all and there's not going to be a magic solution. It's going to take a multi-pronged approach and like I said, we are very open to starting this conversation with you to see what we can do to deliver better services to your residents as well as the residents of Miami-Dade County.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Mr. Clerk, before we open it up to the Commission and have conversations, tell us a little bit about, you and I haven't had a chance to really have a discussion on this, the benefits what you've been hearing, obviously, we all see it from the Passport, we see the revenue, we see how people come to me and say listen, it's a great service that is offered. It's so simple, it's so easy. What do you think we can benefit. Could there be similar benefits to having the driver license. I've had to go to Dolphin Mall, with all due respect to the county, first off, it's an obvious trek to get there, but also the issue is a simple one. It's a massive facility, there are a lot of people there. You are talking about hundreds and hundreds of people are trying to address the same issue we are and having something here closer, I think would be extremely beneficial. What is your opinion on it, because I value it, and you've already done it with the Passport, you've done it successfully.

City Clerk Urquia: So, I'll tell you, Mr. Mayor, Mall of the Americas, you are correct, it's quite a trek for City of Coral Gables residents. Currently, they are offering DMV on wheels at the library, which is the second Monday of the month and the appointments, they get filled pretty quickly. The benefit of using the facility next door is that it's already built for them. They can use it for, like you said, for renewals, simple transactions for Coral Gables residents. I don't think we have a large population that are looking to get their license for the first time, so they wouldn't be administering driving tests or anything.

Mr. Lopez: If I may add, when we talk about Tax Collector offices, this is not just driver's license services. We offer a full range of services to the residents in the community; drivers licenses, motor vehicle registration and title services, local business tax, real estate payments, tangible personal property tax, hunting and fishing permits. Potentially in the future we may offer concealed weapons permits, birth certificates, and so all of these falls under the purview of the Tax Collector, so we wouldn't just be limiting to driver's license services. Yes, driver's license will likely be our number one transaction. We will be opening up a full range of services in any facility that we open.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir.

City Clerk Urquia: And I will tell you additionally, the revenue that we make from Passports, it's the same across the United States. We don't charge more money than anyone else. You can go to the Post Office and receive the same service. The difference happens to be that you are in Coral Gables, and you get a Coral Gables level of service for the same amount of money that you would have to pay anywhere else.

Mayor Lago: Again, I'd like to hear from my colleagues in regard to their opinion on this opportunity.

City Manager Rojas: Mayor with your permission, if I may. As you recall, maybe two Commission meetings ago, we had a major conversation concerning leasing office space for staff from City Hall, and I believe you and some of the Commissioners were adamant about not spending taxpayer's money on lease when we have available vacant office space. So we looked at the rental of private office space, we also looked at the build-out of the vacant office space and we came to the conclusion that the best use of tax payer's dollars is to buildout the Minorca area that's vacant now and when the Passport office moves to the new facility, that that office would be remodeled and used for the City Attorney's office. So, you would have the Mayor's office and the Commissioner's office on Minorca, that office area that's empty, and you would have the City Attorney's office at the Passport office. We are still looking to see where the Manager's office is going to be. I just bring it to your attention that, I'm sorry.

City Clerk Urquia: And don't forget about me.

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City Manager Rojas: We're moving last. So, that stage, the second stage of the construction would only happen after the Passport office moves. So, realistically, and maybe staff can help me on this, there is no vacant office space available currently. Down the road there may be, or then we would have to go to the option of the city leasing office space for the folks in the City Attorney's office and the Mayor's office through a private vendor, and of course, we'll be charging Mr. Fernandez the rent to cover our expenses, but I just wanted to point that out that there are plans and we have drawings and we started construction already on Phase 1; Phase 2, which I have to agree, would be suitable for what Mr. Fernandez wants to do is already planned for the City Attorney's office, but again, it's the will of the Commission.

Mr. Fernandez: I want to be clear. This is just the start of the conversation, with the City Manager, with the people in charge to try to find out a place for the city and for us to try to provide this service. It's not because – when we saw that property, we saw that its used now for Passport. It's easy because it's just to move there. If you already have commitment with that property for a different thing that you need, it's just the start of the conversation, to try to find out a way to work together for the residents of Miami-Dade County.

Mayor Lago: If I may, if I may. So again, there are going to be changes in the next few months. At the end of the day, whether it's the space next door, or it's another piece of property in the city, there are a lot of opportunities here. I'm just putting the opportunity before you to say, I don't want to drive to renew my license and to get my concealed weapons permit or my hunting license, which I have or all these things at Dolphin Mall. I think this is an opportunity. How many square feet do you think you would need. I want to put this on the record and in a few months, in a year, we could potentially address the issue, if we find something that comes to light.

Mr. Fernandez: Everything that's been mentioned. We can start with one kind of service. Remember, right now we only have one office, the tax office in the middle of downtown. If you needed to pay your property taxes, you need to go there. So, if you need to renew your registration on your car, you need to go there. If you need to pay for your fishing license you need to go there. It's just to start with different services because we know the challenge that we are going to have with the driver's license office, with the DMV office. So that is...

Mayor Lago: What I would like to see, what I would like to see is over the next few months to explore options. Maybe we can collaborate, we don't own the library, but we own the land. Maybe we can collaborate with another one of the other buildings in the City of Coral Gables that maybe has an area where we could start off small and see if we even need to have such a large piece, such a large footprint here in the City of Coral Gables. My point is just to bring this opportunity of collaboration with yourself, your office, and come here to the city and be able to offer all these services, all these services here in the City Beautiful, just like we did with Passport and find a location. Doesn't have to be the building next door, happens to be the one on Ponce, it could be

any building, but the idea is to find a location here in the city that makes sense where we can offer your services.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Go ahead since you are already speaking.

Commissioner Castro: Thank you. Mr. Fernandez, thank you so much for coming and once again, congratulations. As the resolution states, it's to negotiate a certain address, so I can't be voting unless that resolution is really amended, but the Passport office, I'm going to go ahead and mirror what the City Manager just said. The Passport office will move out and it will be the City Attorney's office. I'm trying to be fiscally responsible when it comes to where the City Commission is going to be. We don't have a plan right now. I'm floating in different conference rooms, in a coffee shop having meetings. I think we need to establish first what we are going to do as a body and then think where we are going to put you. I'm completely open to working with you.

Mr. Fernandez: Thank you.

Commissioner Castro: Okay. I don't want the Commission to seek out space that is private. I want us to stay within our own real estate and City Hall construction is going to be done in three to four years at least, at least. The construction, I'm pretty sure a lot of space is going to open. I'm not saying to wait till then, but that for sure is going to be a time where we could probably do a bigger buildout and more space. The question is also, as the Mayor was saying, how much space you need, right, how much parking is going to be needed, what would be the daily function. I was talking to you outside and I was telling you, if we want to do something with licensing, maybe we could incorporate that as part of our Finance office, you know, like the local business tax payments and then we can establish more within time. If you want, what I could do is, I could arrange a meeting between you, me, and the City Manager's office and we can look for every opportunity available for you.

Mr. Fernandez: We are open to work together, and I think at the end it's for the residents of Miami-Dade County, for the residents of the City of Coral Gables. The other thing that I just thought about is the land. If you have a piece of land that we can work together, we can build. So, it's not just about one rented space, we can build. So, that is also another option.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Through the Mayor. And I think a collaborative conversation would be greatly beneficial and not cost our residents anything but yield a benefit. One of the things that, unless you have to deal with it in your life at some point is that driver's license is not just for people who drive.

Mr. Fernandez: Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: People who don't drive, people who are disabled need to be able to get to the driver's license offices for identification. You can't do anything without this type of identification. So, if we are going to have a discussion of a location, we have a great trolley system, we have a great rail system. It would be wonderful if we can collaborate on a location that can work. How much space you need is part of that conversation. Is it possible and I haven't had an opportunity to speak with our Clerk to share a window, to have appointments, to be able to have that flexibility where we are not overwhelming our existing facilities but using our existing facilities more efficiently. I think we need to have that conversation, and we can't wait three to four years. Going out to Dolphin Mall is not even feasible for some people.

Mr. Fernandez: To answer your question, we cannot share any space with anybody, because we have a lot of confidential things. Also, with the DMV office everything needs to be on compliance with Tallahassee, but if we first come to the city as a government, out of respect, because if at the end we cannot find any space, we are going to find out with real estate agency that can help us to find out around the city, because we want to provide and we feel that this specific location is very important because it's in the middle of everything in Miami-Dade County.

Mayor Lago: So, if I may, just two things. Number one, the Manager made a statement and the Commissioner to my right made a point about not spending taxpayer dollars. I want to clear the record. I never said about using private property to house your office, that was never my intent. So just clear the record on that. Number two, I am also more than willing to amend this resolution and make it so that we find a city property in the downtown, in the city without a problem. I don't have that. You are not married to the location next door. To me, if you want to move on from that, clean slate. The point is, to get the resolution passed and move on so we can start working on this project and over the next six months to a year, find housing to be able to address this here in the City of Coral Gables. The intent is simple. You don't want to pass the resolution, you don't want to move forward, that's perfectly fine.

Commissioner Castro: I would second that.

Mayor Lago: If I may, just one second, if I may. My intent is simple, very simple. I want to make it easy for the residents of the City of Coral Gables, that's all I'm doing here. This shouldn't be this difficult. It should be as simple as amending the resolution, saying finding a location in the City of Coral Gables where we could work together moving forward to be able to offer your amazing services here in the City of Coral Gables, so people like me and like elderly people especially, don't have to go all the way to Dolphin Mall, disabled people, people who are working every single day and are single mothers, or single fathers, and they have to be working, they can't find time and they are driving around with a suspended license or they have tickets, or they are going to go on a trip and they need to get their hunting license. Case in point, myself. I got tired of it, so what did I do? – I bought a license in perpetuity. I paid the fee to just have my license not

have to be every year or every five years. I just paid the onetime fee, because I was going and doing it online or I was doing it at this location. So, to make a long story short, it's just a simple amendment to this resolution saying, let's work with our staff and your staff to find the appropriate location, there is no timeline. I just think it's a good idea to again, streamline the process and make it as easy as possible for our community to resolve this issue.

Mr. Fernandez: Thank you.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Happy to move it.

Commissioner Menendez: If I may, through the Mayor. I'm supportive. If you look at our city, on the private sector, we have the finest legal services, medical services, you name it, and a lot of times Coral Gables residents don't have to leave Coral Gables to function and to take care of their families, and obviously we need to do that on the government, the public sector side. So, I'm supportive of finding a solution. I think it's much needed. I do have a question. If you did provide the services, you had a location in Coral Gables, its open to anyone, I guess in the county, it's not residents.

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, of course, because we provide services for residents of Florida, State of Florida.

Mayor Lago: Again, to dovetail on that point. So is the Passport service. At the end of the day, it serves the broader community, but its Coral Gables residents who can at any moment's notice go and visit that service in the morning prior to going to work. That's the intent of bringing you here today. Simplify the process. I'm going to take it a step further. If you have an expedited service that you can offer, people are willing to pay for that. They already do it at the Passport Agency. They pay for a Passport because it happens all the time. It's happened to me with my children. Going out of town, I forget. Oh my gosh, their Passport – I need to renew their Passport. I haven't done it. And you can get a passport service expedited already at X amount of time. That's something that again, I haven't checked to see if you do that, but I know that Coral Gables residents, in a pinch, they don't want to drive with a suspended license and they may not be able to wait because they have to go to work or they have a doctor's appointment, or for one reason or another they just can't make it. So that's the intent of this and I think it's a simple amendment to the resolution. I don't think it's anything that big.

City Manager Rojas: If I may. I just want to make sure we're clear. I'm confident that your staff working with our staff, we can find a location that suits not only you, but the residents. My only statement concerning the building here is that it's already been dedicated where we are planning on building out, but we will find. I assure you that my staff and your staff can find a location that suits you and the residents.

Mr. Fernandez: Thank you so much. Thank you.

Commissioner Fernandez: So, I have to comment. I don't know if you can hear me.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir.

Commissioner Fernandez: Mr. Tax Collector, I wanted to thank you for having the vision to expand and reach the residents where they are. I think that's a very important thing. Government for many years have been very stoic and staying where they are in their City Halls or their government offices and not being accessible to the residents. This is something that the Clerk and I have been talking about potentially doing since I met with him in July and we still hadn't even figured who the Tax Collector was going to be and I propose this to you when you visited us, I guess two months ago now, and I'm glad you've taken this proposal seriously, and that you are interested in working with us and finding a solution. I think the amendment to this resolution will help us find a resolution and find a location. I think any services that we are able to provide our residents here within the boundaries of our city are a win for our residents. I look forward to working with my colleagues and finding a solution and I would support, if there isn't a second, I'd be happy to second.

Mr. Fernandez: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk, we have a first and a second?

City Attorney Suarez: Just before you take the vote, clarify the motion. It's a motion to direct the City Manager to engage in discussions with the Tax Collector to explore potential opportunities for the Tax Collector to find space to offer services here within the city. That sum it up.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: In closing, this was part of your speech yesterday at the inauguration and I want to thank you. You and I had been working on this prior to your election. I congratulate you on winning. You are going to do an amazing job.

Mr. Fernandez: Thank you, Mayor.

Mayor Lago: One of the things that touched me the most about your speech yesterday, besides your incredible family, your wife works here at the city, was your passion and love for being American, and I was sitting all the way in the back and there were thousands of people there. It was amazing how many people showed up to Hialeah to see the Constitutional, and everybody was mesmerized by your enthusiasm, your family, your statements about this country, service, when you came to this country. So, I have high hopes for you. I think that you are going to do an amazing job. You are going to serve with dignity, with pride, and you are going to deliver on behalf of this community. So, I want to congratulate you.

Mr. Fernandez: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for your efforts. Thank you for your staff. By the way, your staff is amazing. My staff and your staff have been working together and you are very blessed, you are very blessed.

Mr. Fernandez: As I always say, its not about me, its not about my title, its about the residents, the residents of Miami-Dade County. God bless you. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, my brother. I appreciate you.