

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item H-1
February 28, 2023
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Michael Mena

Commissioner Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner James Cason

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Cultural Arts Specialist, Catherine Cathers

Public Speaker(s)

Geannina Burgos, Cultural Development Board

Agenda Items H-1 [11:42 a.m.]

Discussion regarding the Cultural Development Grant Program

Mayor Lago: 11 a.m. discussion regarding the Cultural Development Grant Program. Sorry about the delay, I apologize. Thank you for your patients.

Ms. Cathers: No problem. Catherine Cathers, Arts and Cultural Specialist with the city, and then we have the Vice Chair, Nina Burgos with Cultural Development Board, and I believe board member Frank Martinez is on Zoom.

Ms. Burgos: Thank you, Mayor, Vice Mayor, Commissioners, City Attorney, thank you so much. The board received a request from Mayor Lago through the Chair to delay notice of grant funding until such time that the Commission can provide clear guidelines for the staff, the Cultural Development Board and the applicants of this program. The board discussed and agreed that it was not fair to ask organizations to go through extensive application process before knowing of any

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major changes to this program. I was nominated to speak on behalf of the board and I'm requesting direction from the Commission to move forward with this year's cultural grant process. But before discussing this important item, I would like to share some key facts about the program. First, the Cultural Development Program was established, the Cultural Grant Program rather, was established in 1995, for the purpose of promoting cultural events and making recommendations to the City Commission on requests for funding of cultural and community organizations. It has always welcomed outside organizations with programming that takes place within the city. Coral Gables, Miami Beach and Miami-Dade County are the only area governments we are aware of, with established cultural grant programs. Outside of these, no other municipality in the area has the number of opportunities for the residents to experience the arts. All programs receiving support take place within City of Coral Gables and number over 1,200 programs and events, with about 35 percent of those being free. They represent theater, music, dance, film, the literary arts, gardens and more. For the past four years, this city has maintained funding at \$191,228, and the board has consistently requested an increase of this amount. At \$191,228, the return on investment to the city is estimated around \$783,682. With total expenditures by organizations and audiences at approximately \$23,648,637. Of the 33 organizations receiving grants this year, 36 percent have their residence in Coral Gables, meaning a loss of 64 percent represented organizations if grants are limited to organizations that are housed within the City of Coral Gables. Sixteen venues are used throughout Coral Gables and another ten at University of Miami. I have for your review and documentation and then I'm ready for any questions.

Commissioner Menendez: My quick question.

Ms. Burgos: Sure.

Commissioner Menendez: You mentioned the percentage organizations with business addresses in Coral Gables.

Ms. Burgos: Yes.

Commissioner Menendez: Do we have a percentage and I'm sorry, I have a lot of paper, percentage of number of organizations in Coral Gables that applied?

Ms. Burgos: So, I'm not sure if I have that answer, staff can answer that question, the number of Coral Gables organizations that have applied to the funding.

Commissioner Menendez: Not everybody gets a grant, I assume, that request.

Ms. Burgos: Correct.

Commissioner Menendez: So, I'm curious to see how many Coral Gables based organizations actually apply compared to those organizations that are not based, don't have a home address, just a match to see the interest and the involvement.

Ms. Burgos: Got it.

Ms. Cathers: So, this year, actually all of the applicants to the program were funded, which is a little unusual, like you said, there's usually a percentage that aren't. So this year there were 33 total and of those, as Ms. Burgos said, 36 percent are within Coral Gables, which numerically ends up being around twelve, six of those are the ones that are in our upper tier venue organizations, the ones that we've been considering Coral Gables-based that we're talking about changing how the term is used, but those are the larger venues over \$500,000 for their operating funds; their main function is the arts, etc.

Vice Mayor Mena: Has it been a year already since we just did this or is it my imagination that we did it not that long ago.

Ms. Cathers: The process starts at this time.

Vice Mayor Mena: What's that?

Ms. Cathers: The process starts at this time, so.

City Attorney Suarez: It didn't come to you a year ago, it came a few months, you're a few months away from the one-year mark.

Ms. Burgos: Yes, we're almost at the one-year mark. Like she said, the application process happens now, so we'd like to let the organizations know on the front-end.

Mayor Lago: I met with staff, and I had a conversation in regard to the cultural grants. We're spending a lot of money on this, and I think its important. We're trying to draw as many people as you can see by the Moon Project, by some of the cultural projects that we're doing with different embassies, in an effort to, again, make our downtown as inviting as possible, make it financially viable, make it a real profit center for the city. I do have some concerns, as I've had in the past about money that's going to entities outside the city. You and I were talking about, how do we ensure that every dollar that we give of taxpayer dollars goes to really benefit the city. Are we asking them for some sort of audited financials that shows where our \$5,000 check went, and how that money was used. I really want to see it, like I want to understand if that's the case, or are we just asking for simple e-mail with some receipts. I want to understand it.

Ms. Cathers: They have a final report and actually its now a two-tiered process. They are required to do an interim final report, at the time that the application is submitted, so that would be coming up in a few months. And then for their final report, and this is all through our grant platform, its

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an application system, its an extensive form where we compare their answers to what they've put in the original application. They are required to submit receipts and invoices and check receipts, specifically for all the funding that was spent, and then also they are required to show us their marketing materials where they credited the city.

Mayor Lago: Do they give any tickets to their events to Gables residents, to students, to anybody whose interested, do we provide them taxpayer dollars?

Ms. Cathers: Many of them do. We do encourage them to use the Golden Ticket Program and the Culture Shock Program that are both free and reduced fee tickets through the county's Cultural Development Affairs Program, so we do encourage that. Many of the events are free already. This year 35 percent are free. There are expenses, as you know, to do these productions, some of them higher than others. So, all those things are taken into account.

Mayor Lago: Who receives the largest amount of money in regard to our cultural grants?

Ms. Cathers: I don't want to guess. Its our upper tier, those six highest ones. So, it's going to be, you know, Actor's Playhouse.

Ms. Burgos: The ones that are located – the institutional ones.

Ms. Cathers: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Ms. Burgos: The Coral Gables headquartered ones gets the most funding because they can apply for more money than the other organizations as well.

Mayor Lago: What is the Montgomery Botanical Center?

Ms. Cathers: The Montgomery Botanical Center is located just south of Fairchild Tropical Garden, so they are basically a museum of plants. They specialize in palms and cycads; they are open to the public, mostly by appointment. They do have a couple of announced public events where you do not need to make an appointment to go in. They go around the world collecting seeds and plants. They are a phenomenal organization, and the board has consistently had discussions with them about how to expand their public programming.

Commissioner Anderson: Montgomery – you should go on a tour one day. It was associated with Fairchild and it was the reason why we have Fairchild Tropical Garden as well, and its mission is to make sure that we have a good seed bank; and they provide a significant service to arears around the world where you have devastation and they have to give back some of the original seeds and they can pollinate a lot of the palms to make sure that they are not cross-pollinated with something else. That's part of their mission and they do educational tours as well. Is that what this funding request is for, the educational aspects of it?

Ms. Cathers: Since they are in the upper tier, they do have operating funds.

Ms. Burgos: Its general operating funds because they are in the upper tier of those grants. So, the grants are split between two categories; the ones that have a certain operating fund, which is \$500,000 or more; they are located headquartered in Coral Gables. Those applicants able to get general operating funds, not for rent specific. The other ones that applied for specific programming are smaller, they don't meet those criteria, and their funding is specific to programming within city limits.

Mayor Lago: So, they are not open to the public, only on certain times.

Ms. Cathers: They are open to the public.

Mayor Lago: When?

Ms. Cathers: By appointment and then they have some events.

Mayor Lago: So, I have to call and make an appointment.

Ms. Cathers: Yes, except for a handful of things like they do a plant sale, they have certain days that you know, they publicize when the gates are open, and a lot of that, from what I understand is really for security purposes of the collection. It's a very high-level collection of the palms and cycads.

Commissioner Cason: What's the cultural aspect of it. I understand the educational.

Ms. Cathers: It's a museum, basically a museum of plants is how they.

Ms. Burgos: A plant museum.

Commissioner Anderson: Botanists come and visit this place from around the world too, to see these specimens.

Ms. Cathers: Yes.

Ms. Burgos: It's amazing.

Commissioner Cason: Have we ever considered helping foreign consulates that are based here in Coral Gables that generally don't have a lot of money, but they have a lot of really interesting activities that they could do if they had some support. Have we ever thought about partnering with them, the Guatemalans, the Spanish, the Italians or some of the others to do certain things?

Ms. Cathers: Any non-profit organization can apply for program-based funding, and then, also the Mayor has generously started a new program specifically to work with consulates and our foreign

leaders in the different cultural programs that they're doing. A while back the board had decided to eliminate funding for festivals, because they found them to be more commercial in aspect, so in many ways the program that Mayor Lago has started has been able to fulfill that niche and its still is very strict, from what I understand about adhering to the cultural aspects of it.

Mayor Lago: We actually turned down a consulate this past week, who had a not a full-blown consulate. I thought that maybe next year they can hopefully get funding, but they had to tweak a project for this year. My only concern is, and I think we have a lot on the docket today that I want to get to. I have concerns about the botanical center not being open to the public for Coral Gables residents, this is your tax dollars. I want to make sure that they have access to it. Making appointments, to me, is not going to satisfy them. While I'm a huge believer in trees, plants. My dad has hundreds of fruit trees in the backyard, I think its critically important, hundreds of orchids, I think that we need to have a certified validated accounting of every single entity that we give money to, not just, here are my receipts and here's my Excel spreadsheet. I want it to be something that is where an accountant puts their name on it, kind of like when you submit your taxes.

Ms. Cathers: They...

Mayor Lago: They do?

Ms. Cathers: They are required to submit their 990's, their tax forms. So, they are required to submit that. Obviously, if they are from outside its not going to specify on that document where the Coral Gables money is, but that is where the receipts and the check copies are going to be.

Commissioner Anderson: How much funding are we talking about for Montgomery? I've been in there several times, so it's not that hard-to-get in.

Ms. Cathers: So, the one document I don't have in front of me today, my apologies.

Vice Mayor Mena: The bigger issue is – I'm not sure I'm – Commissioner, this is not a cultural art. Like I'm looking at this, music, theater, film, opera, children's chorus, music society, symphony, botanical center.

Commissioner Anderson: They do have functions there, so if we could get some more detail about where this funding is going, I think that would go a far way. Its too vague.

Vice Mayor Mena: I'm sure they are wonderful, but its not a cultural arts program.

Ms. Cathers: I was just going to say the range of funding is, I think the minimum is \$1,000 or \$1,500, and the maximum that they can apply for is \$15,000. No grant organization, none of the organizations ever receive that amount. So, the amounts are relative.

Vice Mayor Mena: If they were applying for a grant with the top group to do an event that had a cultural arts component to it, this would be a different discussion maybe, but generally you're saying it goes to their general operating. What percentage of their general operating falls under the category of cultural arts?

Ms. Cathers: All of it.

Vice Mayor Mena: Of the Botanical Center?

Ms. Cathers: The Botanical Center is, they position themselves as a museum, a historical collection of plants.

Vice Mayor Mena: Other than their title, because right below them is the Lowe Art Museum, the Coral Gables Museum, that's a stretch, I'm sorry. I'm sure they are wonderful. I think NASA is fantastic, but that's not what this is. This is music, arts, film, etc. I have the utmost respect for what they're doing, but I just don't see how they belong on the cultural arts.

Mayor Lago: We had a very similar situation with Little Carver and the food event that was happening. They had music, they had a bunch of different things that were culture and that was not provided a grant from what I understand, correct.

Ms. Burgos: The reason for that was that, that application didn't meet the numerical criteria to be funded. When you looked across everybody that reviewed their application, that was the reason for – they didn't meet that minimum requirement.

Mayor Lago: They didn't get a good score.

Ms. Burgos: Correct. That's correct.

Commissioner Anderson: Well somehow...

Ms. Cathers: They ultimately were funded.

Ms. Burgos: But they were ultimately funded, yes.

Commissioner Menendez: I'd like to see, quick points, I know we have to move on. I'd like to see in the future two tiers, lower tier or Little Carver types of organizations not to compete necessarily with Lowes and some of the big boys. Find a way to lower tier so that these smaller organizations can qualify.

Ms. Burgos: Sure.

Commissioner Menendez: They may not meet the criteria, the point system, when they compete with huge organizations, so I'd like to see a two-tier system. The other thing I'd like to ask and I

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think I asked it before, when you do the scoring to identify who gets it, is there a set of points available if you are a Coral Gables-based organization, because if not, I think you should add a point, like five points or whatever the point system.

Mayor Lago: I think that's a great idea.

Commissioner Anderson: It is a good idea.

Commissioner Menendez: And then on top of that, the Mayor made a valid point about tickets available; UM, we have a Development Agreement with UM and they provide free tickets through our Community Recreation Department. I know some of these don't have tickets, they just you come in, you go, but I think we should require them when there are tickets available make it mandatory that they provide X number and maybe through Fred and Carolina's department, make available as a rule, tickets that are open to the public and then finally, well, you know, I think the key for me is the point system and obviously the two-tiers, because I want the smaller organizations to have a chance.

Ms. Burgos: Sure.

Commissioner Menendez: Like if we have a pick-up basketball game, we've got to play against the Heat, but I don't think we're going to win. I want the little organization – I shoot well from outside, but I want the smaller organizations to have a chance.

Mayor Lago: And if I could add something to the Commissioner's comments. I would like to just give you an idea of how difficult it would be to have audited financials, resulting just from this event, not the company's, not the entity's audited financials. I want to see a sole document that says, they received \$2,500 and this is the way it was broken down, certified by a public accountant. When you have to do that, like when you sign and seal documents like plans, its your license on the line, we want to make sure.

Commissioner Anderson: I understand. But I'm going to share with you the cost of doing an audited financial statement is extremely high.

Mayor Lago: We do a threshold.

Commissioner Anderson: And if we follow the criteria that some federal agencies do, they accept under penalty of perjury, I attest that the paper...

Ms. Burgos: Which they do.

Mayor Lago: That's the whole point of the conversation.

Commissioner Anderson: As long as it's sworn to like that, the federal agencies accept financial statements that way, so small companies don't go broke just getting an audited financial statement, we're going to defeat the purpose of this program.

Ms. Burgos: Yes, thank you Commissioner Anderson.

Mayor Lago: That's a very good point.

Ms. Cathers: Can we ask the City Attorney about even if maybe it's a notarized document or if...

Ms. Burgos: The affidavit.

Mayor Lago: Yes. So, we're going to move onto the next item, but I brought this forward and I had a meeting with staff, because I think this is important that we clear, we have a very good idea of how we're moving forward. What else do we have?

Vice Mayor Mena: Can I say one last thing very quickly, please. Just on this topic of Coral Gables-based versus non-Coral Gables-based, I kind of view this a little bit through a different lens which is as a benefit to our residents, and so, I think it's a service to our residents to have, you know an upper echelon organization come do an event in Coral Gables for Coral Gables residents. So even if they're not Coral Gables-based, the event is Coral Gables-based.

Ms. Burgos: Yes.

Vice Mayor Mena: And this whole top group falls into that category so, I think as the residents, they say, oh wow, I can go see the Florida Grand Opera, or the Greater Miami Youth Symphony in Coral Gables, and I think from that perspective it is Coral Gables-based, because the event itself is – I'm okay with that type. I think everybody's point is to try to strike a bit of a balance and have a little bit of both.

Ms. Cathers: Right. So what we're hoping to do is get specifics, maybe through a resolution so we know what changes to incorporate, and I wonder, Commissioner Menendez to your point, whether if we do the additional point system for organizations that have their address, their business address in Coral Gables, if that would fulfill the need for a second for another tier, because I'm not sure how we would differentiate.

Ms. Burgos: We do two tiers right now.

Ms. Cathers: Two tiers – we have quite a few small organizations.

Mayor Lago: But if I may, you can go to UPS, you can go to the mail and you can get a P.O. Box. I want it to be a real...

Ms. Burgos: Sunbiz.
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Commissioner Anderson: I know. I was just thinking.

Mayor Lago: I'm a cynic, I understand, but I want it to be a real, real Coral Gables entity that's gaining from this, that offers tickets to our residents, that offers tickets to our students, to the elderly, to people who want to enjoy this.

Ms. Burgos: Residency aside, I want to reiterate, all of the programming that is funded happens in the City of Coral Gables, all of the tickets are people that are coming in, Coral Gables residents and maybe even outside to bring more funding into the city, but everything happens, and nothing that's funded does not happen in the City of Coral Gables; and the ticket issue actually, thank you for bringing that up again. One of the concerns of the board may have is that, some of these organizations are very small, and so, about 60 percent of their funding comes from earned income and the rest is from actual funding from granting and things like that. So, we have to figure out what would be appropriate for organizations to give out.

Commissioner Menendez: It could be a percentage. Instead of a fixed number, a percentage. So even if it's a big organization or a small, the percentage applies across the board and it should be fair.

Ms. Burgos: To residents.

Mayor Lago: We're not going to iron this out today. We need to come back with some ideas and then we'll have the resolution on the next Commission. The purpose of doing the funding for the consulate, we're trying to do four consulates a year, we've done two. Local consulates, the event is free, "Dia de los Muertos" drew thousands of people here, the event is free, opportunity for people to enjoy themselves, cultural, its immersive, and we're talking about the City of Coral Gables, and that is something that really draws. If we are going to use public funds, it's got to be geared towards that. Either its free or we give a discount to residents. It happens in Coral Gables, its cultural like the Vice Mayor said, and I'm more than flexible, like what Commissioner mentioned, Anderson, about. We don't want to, how is the saying, you don't want to be the enemy of the good trying to be perfect, that was it, something to that effect, so we can find common ground, but let's move in a direction where again, the tax dollars that we're getting from residents are being best used in our city for the residents.

Commissioner Menendez: Answering your question. I still think that my idea of a second tier would be, and I know they have to have events that are open to the public, but schools, small children theater, things like that, that you get a small organization, you get a small school that wants to do something to go against Gables Museum, Lowes, its minor league/major league, and I'm sure we can think of the consulate of a second tier for organizations like that, that aren't the well-established, been around for 40 years that have benefactors contributing. So, I'd like to explore that and see what we can come up with. I want to balance things out.

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Commissioner Anderson: Are you looking at this sheet here as an annual operating budget over half a million dollars, is that what you're directing this at?

Ms. Burgos: So, there are two tiers presently, I'm sorry Commissioners, right now the grant does have two tiers. There's one tier which is the core cultural arts grantees, which is the Actor's Playhouse, that's the one with the \$500,000 and above, and that's the general operating fund grant, and then there's that second tier which is specifically for programming. So, it sounds like you want a sub-tier within that second tier for programming.

Commissioner Menendez: I just think when you do scoring...

Ms. Burgos: Sure.

Commissioner Menendez: some organizations are more, better equipped to maximize the score in certain categories, just because they've been around for 10, 20, 30 years, and you have these smaller organizations, small schools or children's theaters that don't have the staff to put everything together in a certain way. So, I just want to give those smaller organizations an opportunity to qualify because they don't have 100 people staff. They might have a few people that are doing 50 tasks at the same time. I just want to make sure that we help everyone. That's just my perspective.

Ms. Burgos: Sure.

Mayor Lago: We've got a long Commission meeting.

Ms. Burgos: I understand.

Mayor Lago: We've got a long Commission meeting. We haven't even gotten into the bread and butter here. Can we have staff, sorry.

Ms. Cathers: I just want to make sure that we know the direction to bring back to the board.

Ms. Burgos: I don't think they are going to give us --

Mayor Lago: I was going to give you the direction right now, right now I'm going to give it to you. Its going to be really simple. You ready for it. Have a meeting with each one of the Commissioners, we've given you a lot of information, bring us a resolution that crafts what every single one of the Commissioners have said, I've been pretty clear about my comments, and we will put it on the next Commission agenda to get it addressed, okay, if not we'll never get to the end of this meeting today. So, thank you.

Ms. Burgos: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

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Ms. Burgos: Thank you all.

Ms. Cathers: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Beyond grateful for your hard work on this, its very important. Thank you.