

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-2
August 25, 2020
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Raul Valdes-Fauli
Vice Mayor Vince Lago
Commissioner Jorge Fors, Jr.
Commissioner Pat Keon
Commissioner Michael Mena

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias
Assistant City Manager, Ed Santamaria
City Attorney, Miriam Ramos
Assistant City Attorney, Naomi Levi-Garcia
City Clerk, Billy Urquia
Commission Aide, Chelsea Granell

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item F-2 [10:25 a.m.]

A discussion regarding extending the Donald R. Hopkins and William A. Cooper Scholarship program to include grants for graduate students who meet a pre-determined scholarship criteria and reside in the Macfarlane/Golden Gate community.

(Sponsored by Vice Mayor Lago)

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: F-2.

Vice Mayor Lago: Thank you, Mayor. This is pretty simple. As many are aware, my office, Chelsea Granell, has been doing a wonderful job, through the Manager, really extending and addressing the Donald R. Hopkins and Willie A. Cooper scholarship program over the last few years, and she's here to give a little bit of a recap in regards to possibly -- we want you to just consider the extension of the scholarship criteria in regards to the MacFarlane and Golden Gate community, and giving the opportunity for students who have now transitioned from a four-year degree now to a graduate degree. So, I ask Chelsea to give us a little bit of recap of where we stand and just for your consideration on this issue.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you. Chelsea. Chelsea, you're probably muted.

Commission Aide Granell: Can you hear me?

Vice Mayor Lago: Yes.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Now we can, yes.

Commission Aide Granell: Okay, perfect. Thank you, Mr. Mayor, and thank you, Vice Mayor. The discussion item that Vice Mayor Lago sponsored today, as he mentioned, is to gauge the Commission's interest on extending the current scholarship fund to include students who would like to attend graduate school. I know some of you are familiar with the Donald R. Hopkins and William A. Cooper scholarship, but I would like to provide you with some background on the current scholarship and elaborate a little bit more on the existing program, in addition to the discussion item itself. The City's scholarship fund, known as the Donald R. Hopkins and William A. Cooper scholarship, was founded in 1989 by the City Commission to assist students who reside in the historic MacFarlane community. The intention was to help them meet the financial demands of higher education. The program has thus far been administered by a committee which comprises of members of the Lola B. Walker Homeowners' Association. Each year, students are eligible to apply for the scholarship prior to its submission deadline. During that time, we work closely with

the Coral Gables Senior High School's CAP counselor, in conjunction with the scholarship committee who helps promote the scholarship to potentially eligible students in the neighborhood -- in the MacFarlane neighborhood. Scholarship awards are distributed on a competitive and annual basis with a maximum amount of \$5,000 per year. To be considered for the award, a student must reside in the MacFarlane Homestead or Golden Gate neighborhood, demonstrate financial need, academic performance, be enrolled in Coral Gables Senior High School, and maintain at least a 2.5 GPA. The original award amount can be renewed for up to three additional years, so basically a student can have four years of the award, provided that residency, GPA and full-time enrollment criteria of the scholarship continues to be met. Once the Commission approves the committee recommendation of the scholarship recipient for that year, funds are sent directly to the recipient's college or university to defray college expenses. In order to continue receiving the scholarship, each year students must submit documentation showing that they continue to meet the establish criteria. Although we do our best to work with students on personal issues that may arise, we revoke the scholarships if the requirements are no longer met. In terms of funding -- just so that you understand -- each budget year, there's a \$5,000 allocation that goes towards the scholarship and it rolls over. So, to date on the City's budget, there is a -- there's \$20,000 in that fund. No students have met the recertification process as of yet for this year, so there are no active recipients. However, the committee met in July of 2020 and have made a recommendation to award a student with the scholarship in the amount of \$2,500 a year. That will be coming before you during the next Commission meeting. Since its inception, the Hopkins Cooper scholarship program has awarded over 20 students to date, and we're very proud in the assistance the scholarship has been able to provide. Now, specifically relating to the discussion item that is before you, the scholarship committee has been discussing extending the scholarship to include students who are interested in attending graduate school. This conversation was sparked because there had been a few students who have completed the scholarship program and were interested in attending graduate school and have inquired on the possibility of extending the program. The Committee discussed the criteria and ultimately agreed that the requirements would be very similar to the current scholarship application that's enclosed in your agenda packets, except the recommended differences would be that the student -- the amount would be less, so they would

receive up to \$1,000 a year, which is \$500 a semester. And the idea is to help them with -- to help the students with books for grad school. And most importantly, the student would have to have been a former Donald Hopkins Cooper scholarship recipient, so they would have to have received the scholarship beforehand to be eligible for the graduate scholarship. And the recertification process will remain the same, which means that every year they have to submit a copy of their driver's license proving that they reside in the MacFarlane or Golden Gate community and the GPA requirement, and they would also have to prove that they're full-time enrollment -- their full-time enrollment. So, if the Commission would like to move forward and approve the committee's recommendation to extend the program to grad students, we can work with the City Attorney's Office to draft legislation and formalize the process to allow funds to be administered towards the graduate scholarship. So, next Commission meeting, we could include a copy of the draft graduate application for your review with the comments that the committee made, and of course, we would integrate any comments or suggestions that you may have today. And that pretty much concludes the presentation. I'm happy to answer any questions.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you. Thank you very, very much. Appreciate it. And I think it's a great program, but I have two concerns, two very different concerns. And one is residency. I think -- and I have seen several times students from other areas or parents from other areas getting driver's licenses in places where they don't live in order to qualify for a particular school, Coral Gables High, Sunset Elementary -- which is a great school too -- and falsifying driver's licenses or residency documents in order to qualify for schools. And let me tell you where I'm coming from. I -- in my two last campaigns, in '19 and in '17, I went to homeowners' meetings, and half of the people there were young, non-African-American couples that had moved into the neighborhood to -- because the houses were cheap. That's one issue. But the other one is that I don't want for there to be falsified documentation trying to approve residents to qualify for not only these scholarship -- which I think is a very good idea on the part of the Vice Mayor or whoever came up with it to continue the graduate school -- but I'm just concerned that the population of Golden Gate and MacFarlane is older to the point that they don't have kids in high school, and they're very few young people there. So, I'm concerned about enforcement and the legitimacy of residences. And

the second is, do we make this available in the future, I mean, I guess you're going into graduate school because there are very, very few young people there now, but do we make it available to the non-African-American students from these young couples that have moved there because of the favorable price of residences. I think it's a good idea, but I'm concerned with the implementation of that idea, very concerned.

Vice Mayor Lago: Mayor, I think your concerns are obviously valid. You know, this came to our office -- and I should also mention Commissioner Fors. You know, it came to our office because a gentleman by the name of Willie Gibson, who was a past recipient of the City of Coral Gables William A. Cooper scholarship program, had finished his...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Well, excuse me a second, but this program was started when I was a Commissioner in 1989, so...

Vice Mayor Lago: No, no, I understand. No, no, but I'm saying -- I'm not doubting that. What I'm saying is...

Commissioner Keon: I think it came to everybody's office from that gentleman, from the young man.

Vice Mayor Lago: But the issue...

Commission Aide Granell: That is correct.

Vice Mayor Lago: Again, but the issue...

Commissioner Keon: Yeah.

Vice Mayor Lago: But the issue is that Chelsea's the one in our office that has been dealing with that issue. So, we had a conversation and gentleman's concerns were, he was talking about the fact that he had gotten a bachelor's degree in accounting at FIU, and that he wanted to continue his education, and he was going to do that at -- he was doing that at Florida Atlantic University. And we had a conversation about how do we spur young people in this community to stay in this community and to get educated and to continue making MacFarlane and Golden Gate the wonderful historic place that it is. And I think that we need to continue to invest in the future of these young professionals, these young kids that are growing up, that hopefully they'll stay in this area. And to do that, they need to be able to afford to stay in this area. They need to get good jobs. They need to increase their profile. Increasing your profile is obviously getting as educated as possible. So, I understand your concerns and it's up to your consideration. Chelsea, can you give me a little bit more background in regard to when was the last time that we actually handed out a scholarship and how difficult it's been for us to find qualifiers, qualifiers in the neighborhood who can take advantage of this wonderful opportunity. And that's the whole concept of it.

Commission Aide Granell: Thank you.

Vice Mayor Lago: (INAUDIBLE).

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: I am for -- don't misunderstand me. I am for the program. I just would like for this advantage to be given to residents of the neighborhood.

Vice Mayor Lago: Of course.

Commission Aide Granell: Mr. Mayor, if I may. I'd like to answer your concerns to the best that I can. So, just so that you know, the committee is mostly comprised of members of the Lola B. Walker Homeowners' Association and residents that have been residing in that area for a very long time. So, just so that you are aware, the residents that are on the committee, they're very familiar with the applicants that apply to the scholarship, so in a way that in itself is a vetting process in

addition to the driver's license that -- and I understand the concern for falsifying documentation. So, they are very familiar with the individuals that are applying and the families in that area. There have been multiple instances that there'll be a student that applies to the scholarship and they live one block outside of the border, which just so that you know, the district that it comprises of is Jefferson Street, Frow Avenue, Brooker Street and Grand Avenue, and it's specifically within that area. So, the committee has noticed that that's not within an area, and it's a block north, let's say, and they have automatically disqualified the application. So, they have been very selective and very particular that these students reside in the Golden Gate neighborhood. And the other concern that I wanted to address was the scholarship is -- and actually clarify, it's an extension of the existing scholarship, so the students would have to have received the undergrad scholarship to be eligible. And also, Mr. Mayor, you are correct. There aren't a lot of students that are -- we don't receive a huge amount of students every year that do receive it, but there is a middle-aged community that are having children that are in Coral Gables Senior High School. And for example, about three years ago, and I think -- well, you were on the Commission when we had awarded four students with the scholarship about three years ago. Regretfully, and unfortunately, those students, not a single one of them have made it throughout the duration. They have not resubmitted their certificate -- they haven't recertified their scholarship, so they haven't been able to receive the award. So, presently, there are no students that are actively receiving the award. There is a student that will be coming before you for your review and approval next Commission meeting so that we could -- we would be presenting the recommendation of the board -- or the committee rather, and then you would have to improve that. It's for \$2,500. So, Vice Mayor Lago's right; the scholarship has not really been -- we have had challenges with the students fulfilling their entire undergraduate career. So, the fact that that's a challenge, it's going to be extremely challenging for them to continue to pursue their graduate degree or to be an applicant for the graduate scholarship. So, I hope that answers some of your questions.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you, Chelsea. No, thank you very much. I think it's a great program, and I'm just concerned about, you know, the mechanics of it, but I think it's a great program and I'm all for it.

Vice Mayor Lago: So, I think at the end...

City Attorney Ramos: Chelsea, can either you or Naomi speak to the criteria regarding heritage, if that was removed.

Commission Aide Granell: Oh, yes.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: That's a good word.

Commission Aide Granell: That is correct. So, just so that you know, heritage does not -- is not part of the scholarship, so you do not have to be African American to receive the scholarship. You just have to reside within the boundaries. So, for example, like we -- there is one student who didn't recertify this year, but was a recipient for last year, who -- her name was Kayla Martinez, and she was able to receive the scholarship as well. And so, there is no requirement for that. And Naomi, you could kind of clarify, if you'd like, but right now, I mean, it's open to people that solely reside within the boundaries.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you. That answers one of my questions.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Yes, that's correct, Chelsea.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Are there any other...

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Well, Mayor, formerly, that was a requirement. Race was a consideration in awarding the scholarship and that was removed because -- you know, for obvious reasons. But the residency requirement remains, so I think the intent of the scholarship, which is to benefit the residents of that historic neighborhood, continues to be present in the scholarship award criteria.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you.

Vice Mayor Lago: So, with the recommendation of the scholarship program and the discussion that we've had here, I'm willing to make the motion to expand the program to allow for funding of master's programs for individuals that live and reside within this community, taking into consideration the Mayor's concerns that we really make sure and we focus and we continue to focus that these are students that live within these boundaries of Macfarlane and Golden Gate.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Is there a second?

Commissioner Keon: I'll second it. I would also like to -- and I'm sure that Dexter also works with Chelsea on these. So, it kind of is -- they do it jointly, and he has...

Commission Aide Granell: (INAUDIBLE), Commissioner. (INAUDIBLE).

Commissioner Keon: Definitely well abreast of what is happening as well as the two Commissioners that he serves of this whole issue because the young man that sent the email, I think sent it to the entire Commission, and everyone, I think, responded...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Right.

Commissioner Keon: Hoping that it would -- that they would expand it and allow him to, you know, continue his master's so that -- he wants to be a CPA, and we know that in the state of Florida, you have to have a master's in accounting in order to sit for the CPA exam, so...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you very much. (INAUDIBLE)...

Commissioner Keon: (INAUDIBLE) everyone (INAUDIBLE)...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: What?

Commissioner Keon: I think everyone is very happy to do that and to assist him in any way we can.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you. Billy, you want to call the roll, if there are no other comments.

Commissioner Mena: Yes.

Commissioner Fors: Yes.

Commissioner Keon: Yes.

Vice Mayor Lago: Yes.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Yes.

(Vote: 5-0)