

City of Coral Gables

*405 Biltmore Way
Coral Gables, FL 33134
www.coralgables.com*



Meeting Minutes

Thursday, December 11, 2025

8:15 AM

<https://coralgables.zoom.us/j/89943974263>

Youth Center - Conference Room

Parks and Recreation Advisory Board

CALL TO ORDER

Meeting called to order at 8:19 a.m.

ROLL CALL

Present:

Richard Smit
Vanessa Gutierrez
Michelle White
Maite Halley
Kirk Menendez

Absent:

Jennifer Marques
Erik Rodriguez

APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES

A MOTION TO APPROVE THE NOVEMBER MEETING MINUTES WAS MADE BY BOARD MEMBER KIRK MENENDEZ AND SECONDED BY BOARD MEMBER RICHARD SMIT. ALL IN FAVOR; PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

DIRECTORS REPORT

a. General Updates

Director Couceyro provided a concise "lightning round" update on recent and upcoming special events and departmental operations. He reported that the Tree Lighting event was successful, with attendance comparable to or slightly higher than the previous year, and noted that the event was well attended. He stated that Holiday Park was currently underway and indicated that this would be the final year for the current Holiday Park format, with a new Holiday Park anticipated next year pending completion of design efforts.

Director Couceyro also provided updates on recent events, including Hot Chocolate with Santa, Saturday at the Cinema, and the Centennial concert at Venetian Pool, noting that the concert was sold out and well received. He highlighted upcoming events such as Twinkle and Toast at the Country Club, the Adult Activity Center holiday luncheon at the Palace, the Festival of Lights Hanukkah event at Ponce Circle Park, the Junior Orange Bowl Parade at 5:30 p.m., the Menorah Lighting at City Hall, and the Pancakes and Pajamas event at the Country Club.

Additionally, Director Couceyro reported that Venetian Pool reopened on Tuesday and that staff were transitioning operations following a year-long closure.

He concluded by noting that the department was preparing for the upcoming year and emphasized the Community Recreation Department continues to maintain an active schedule throughout the holidays.

b. Special Events

Friday, December 5 at 5 p.m. – Christmas Tree Lighting Event at Merrick Park,
Saturday, December 6 at 11 a.m. - A Saturday at the Cinema, December, "The Time Machine" at the Coral Gables Art Cinema, Saturday, December 6 at 9:30 a.m. - Planting Pollinators Dedication and Reception at Coral Gables Library Garden,
Sunday, December 7 at 9 a.m. - Hot Chocolate with Santa at Merrick Park, Sunday, December 7 at 6 p.m. - Centennial Grand Finale at the Venetian Pool, Tuesday, December 9 at 5:30 p.m. – Twinkle and Toast at the Country Club, Friday, December 12 at 1 p.m. - Annual Holiday Celebration 2025 at the Adult Activity Center, Saturday, December 13 at 10 a.m. - Pancake and Pajamas at the Country Club, Sunday, December 14 at 1:30 p.m. – Festival of Lights Chanukah Celebration at Ponce Circle Park , Sunday, December 14 at 5 p.m. – JOB Parade, Tuesday, December 16 at 5:30 p.m. – Menorah Lighting at City Hall, Friday, December 19 at 6 p.m. – Movies Under the Gables Moonlight at Ponce Circle Park, Sunday, December 20 at 9 a.m. - Hot Chocolate with Santa at Merrick Park.

c. C.I.P Updates

-Final Presentation of the Park Project on Galiano Street

Director Couceyro explained that the overall division of activities within the park,

with the play area located on the west side of the site and revisions to the east side intended to provide more open lawn space and improved sight lines. He noted that these adjustments to address safety and security considerations. Director Couceyro stated that the corner area of the site would feature artificial turf to maintain a consistently green appearance, with planters located along the perimeter. He further explained that the design continues to include seating areas, pedestrian walkways, and a designated space for an art installation, and that the overall intended use of the park remains consistent with prior designs.

Board members posed clarifying questions regarding site access, entrances and fencing. Director Couceyro discussed the proposed perimeter fencing, a separately fenced play area for safety purposes, a double maintenance gate, and iron fencing along the property lines.

NEW BUSINESS

OLD BUSINESS

DISCUSSION ITEMS

a. Discussion regarding the proposed dog park across from the Coral Gables Library

Director Couceyro reminded the Board that the meeting was open to the public and that residents in attendance were permitted to observe the meeting and provide public comment. He clarified that discussion must remain at the Board level, as members of the public are not permitted to present agenda items or make motions. He further emphasized that the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board is not a policy-making body and serves solely in an advisory capacity.

Director Couceyro stated that the item had previously been brought before the City Commission and discussed as the potential use of the city-owned property located directly across from the library for a dedicated dog park. He explained that the Commission discussion included identification of the site and direction to proceed with the next steps, which would include the park design process and community input.

Board Member Menendez expressed concerns regarding prior community reactions and inquired about the level of community engagement that occurred prior to the Commission's direction. He further noted concern that park-related decisions appeared to be advancing without the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board being made aware. Director Couceyro responded that the discussion originated at the City Commission level and noted that park initiatives may at times begin at that level. He added that as the project moves forward, the item would be brought before the Board and the community through the standard design and outreach process.

Vice Chairperson Halley recognized community members in attendance and invited them to speak, requesting name and address for the record.

Resident Jose Antonio Val Cohen, who resides at 520 Cadima Avenue, Coral Gables, Florida 33134, addressed the Board regarding the item under discussion and stated that he lives directly in front of the site. He expressed that while he supports the initiative and loves dogs, he was deeply concerned that the proposed dog park had been approved without notification to or input from the surrounding residents. He explained that one of the primary reasons he moved to Coral Gables was for its green spaces and noted that he regularly receives City notifications on various matters and therefore expected similar outreach regarding a significant change adjacent to his home.

Mr. Val Cohen stated that he first learned of the proposed dog park through a close friend and subsequently through social media and news reports. Following this, he went door-to-door to speak with neighboring residents and noted that none were aware of the proposal. He raised concerns regarding potential traffic, safety, and parking impacts and commented that a dog park does not constitute green space, noting that artificial turf is not equivalent to natural green space. He emphasized that residents would have preferred a neighborhood meeting prior to any approval rather than one-on-one outreach after the fact and referenced discussions with Vice Mayor Anderson regarding the matter. He further stated that he spoke to approximately 20

to 30 homes who would be directly impacted by the proposed project and questioned reports indicating that there were 250 signatures in support, noting that such support did not appear to reflect the immediate neighborhood.

Board Member Menendez questioned who the proposed park would primarily serve and whether residents would realistically cross LeJeune Road and University Drive to access the park. He referenced Catalonia Park and Salvadore Park as examples of neighborhood parks where residents are able to walk their dogs due to the parks' locations within residential areas.

Vice Chairperson Halley clarified for the record that Catalonia Park was not designed as a dog park, but rather as a pet-friendly park where dogs are permitted only when kept on a leash.

Mr. Val Cohen expressed concerns regarding patrons who may drive to the proposed dog park, citing the lack of on-site parking and noting that parking at the Youth Center is frequently fully utilized due to ongoing activities. He further stated that, based on his experience working in real estate, a parking analysis is typically conducted prior to the commencement of any construction project.

Director Couceyro responded that parking considerations would be reviewed as part of the park design process should the project move forward. He noted that parking, buffering, landscaping, and overall site design are evaluated during the planning phase in order to minimize impacts to surrounding neighborhoods. Director Couceyro further stated that the project is in its early stages and that multiple discussions and design reviews would occur before any final determinations are made.

Board Member White inquired whether there was an established process to allow for community input on the matter, noting concern that the item appeared to advance toward approval without prior community involvement or engagement.

Director Couceyro explained that community input is typically solicited when the City is considering the purchase of a property for use as a park, at which time the community is informed of the intent to acquire the land for that purpose. He stated that when the property is already owned by the City, community input generally occurs during the design phase of the project. Director Couceyro further noted that community consensus is not always unanimous when creating parks and emphasized the importance of considering the needs of the community as a whole. He added that while greater consideration has historically been given to adjoining or directly affected neighbors, the City must ensure that parks are ultimately designed to serve the broader community.

Vice Chairperson Halley inquired about the process used to determine the intended purpose of a park, including whether it is designated as a dog park, children's park, or general green space. She then invited the second community member to address the Board and provide comments.

Resident William Rivenbark, who resides at 3616 Harlano Street, Coral Gables, Florida 33134, addressed the Board regarding the item under discussion. He stated that he has lived at that address for 20 years and confirmed that he was not notified of the proposed project. He described observing markings on the site and encountering surveyors, who informed him that the markings in the center of the property were related to the proposed dog park. He further stated that after speaking with neighboring residents, none were aware of the proposal, indicating that the City did not communicate with residents within the immediate vicinity of the property.

Mr. Rivenbark stated that he reviewed a petition related to the project and recognized many of the names as not residing in close proximity to the site. He expressed that residents were particularly frustrated that the City did not seek input from nearby neighbors prior to the City Commission's vote. He asked whether there was a mechanism to reverse the decision.

Board Member Menendez suggested that the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board could serve as a forum for neighborhood residents to collectively express their concerns. He proposed that the Board consider hosting a special meeting at or near the proposed site to hear directly from the community, so that when the Board reconvenes, it would have the benefit of resident input for its discussion.

Vice Chairperson Halley inquired whether, from an administrative standpoint, hosting such a meeting would fall within the purview of the Board.

Director Couceyro explained that, historically, the Board has conducted site visits and then returned to a subsequent meeting to discuss its observations. He noted that there is no suitable location at the site to host a Board meeting and reminded members that Board meetings are public meetings that must be properly noticed and recorded.

Board Member Menendez suggested that, if feasible, the special meeting could be held at the Youth Center Theater to allow the community an opportunity to provide input on the proposed dog park.

Director Couceyro stated that he would need to confirm with the City Clerk's Office whether such a meeting would fall within the Board's purview, noting that it may be considered a community input meeting rather than a formal Board meeting.

Board Member Smit inquired whether the proposed site was City-owned property and whether parking would be provided for park users. Director Couceyro responded that the property is City-owned and parking considerations would be evaluated as the project advances through the design process.

Board Member Menendez further inquired whether the property is subject to restrictions related to surface parking. Director Couceyro reiterated that such constraints would be reviewed and considered during the design phase of the

project.

A MOTION DIRECTING CITY STAFF TO INQUIRE AND LET THE BOARD KNOW AT THE NEXT BOARD MEETING WHETHER THE PARKS AND RECREATION ADVISORY BOARD COULD HAVE A SPECIAL MEETING WAS MADE BY BOARD MEMBER KIRK MENENDEZ AND SECONDED BY BOARD MEMBER VANESSA GUTIERREZ . ALL IN FAVOR; PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

ITEMS FROM THE SECRETARY

Next meeting date Thursday, January 8th at 8:15 AM

ADJOURNMENT

NOTE