

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item D – Public Comment
June 13, 2023
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, Peter Iglesias
City Clerk, Billy Urquia
Public Works Director, Hermes Diaz

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz
Roland Rodriguez
Ed Santamaria
Paul Susz

Agenda Item D [9:30 a.m.]
Public Comment

City Clerk Urquia: The first speaker on public comment is Ms. Maria Cruz.

Ms. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. As to the swales, I'm glad that you're discussing swales. Maybe there's no bridge, but the swale across from the Youth Center is dust bowl. There is no grass. This is my public comment. It was not easy writing it, actually it was very painful, but I have to do it. Once upon a time, not so long ago, in a city by the sea lived the young Commissioner who demanded that the truth be told, and the City Manager had to go. He insisted on civility and transparency for the residents to have a voice, maintain the Gables like no other, move for public comments to be set. Years went by and he became Mayor and was reelected. Now he emulates what other mayors do. Transparency and civility are no more. Lies and untruths became the norm.

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City Beautiful in name only. What happened to our young Commissioner, we ask. Oh where, oh where has he gone. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Mr. Clerk, who do we have.

City Clerk Urquia: Roland Rodriguez.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Rodriguez, good morning, sir.

Mr. Rodriguez: Good morning. Good morning, Mayor, good morning, Commissioners. Thank you for your time. I'm here to speak on C-2, which is Alhambra Circle sidewalk, along with the other sidewalks in the area. So, a couple of months ago, or last year you came by my home, showed us plans on what's happening in the area and we're fine with that. We asked to be kept involved. We then came and spoke about the concern about the funding and that issue as well. And we continue just to ask to be kept informed on what's happening. There's been stakes put out on the sidewalk, we've put in multiple public records requests. We finally got the set of plans showing up to a certain point. It still hasn't gone past our home. What we're asking for is to be kept informed of what's happening in front of our home and the reason I'm here is because Commissioner Castro was in front of my home yesterday with another resident, and there were some comments said by the resident to my wife that I wasn't too happy with. Some of it that...residents compared to his didn't matter, as well as we didn't have a voice, because it was in our right-of-way. We understand its in our right-of-way. We don't oppose the sidewalk. We have made that clear. We just want to be kept involved of what's happening. I'm a civil engineer, so I have 25 years of experience doing infrastructure projects to the tune of over \$450 million dollars for the Department of Transportation, so we understand the public information process of informing residents, informing business owners of what's happening in the property. I understand its not in our right-of-way, but we still have a voice what can happen in front of our property. My biggest concern, obviously, is the way the sidewalk is going, if its going to meander or if its going to be in front with a curving gutter. Whatever is best and whatever works we are open to that, but we also want to have an opinion. Also, a concern are the trees. We have massive trees in front of our property. I think its in the item to have an arborist present or an arborist report.

City Clerk Urquia: Excuse me sir, you mind putting the microphone in front.

Mr. Rodriguez: Sorry about that.

City Clerk Urquia: Thank you.

Mr. Rodriguez: Having an arborist report as well. We are open to providing our own arborist report as well, if its needed, but we did take the design, the diameter of the tree and it shows how much of the impact of the root system. So impacting that root system may also – huge trees may impact our home, we don't want them to go down. So that's also a concern. So again, we just want

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to make sure that we're kept informed and have a voice as to what's going to happen in front of our home, with the understanding that it is public right-of-way and for the record, we're not opposed to the sidewalk, we just want to have a voice of how that sidewalk is going to be constructed in front of our home.

Mayor Lago: So, first off, thank you for coming here. I know its not your first time. We've known each other for some time. I actually walked your house with the Public Works Director and the Assistant Public Works Director, and before I ask him to come up, I also want to say thank you for your service to this country, he's a Marine, besides being a civil engineer, so I appreciate that. Mr. Director, will you come up for one second and can you provide a little bit of an update of where we are. I know we are going to talk about now on the second part, so this gentleman understands that nothing is set in concrete. We are still in the process of working the process out.

Public Works Director Diaz: We are actually working to finalize the proposal with the arborist from...so he can do a proper assessment as to where the best place to put the sidewalk as far as the impact to the tree.

Mayor Lago: What I would like to do is once we have that report, take it back to the community again, like I did when I walked each one of the residents that was affected in that area, right on Alhambra, have a community meeting and present it once again with all the facts. Having the report is important because it takes into consideration, like you said, what if we go in front of the tree or we go behind the tree, whatever the arborist recommends. How will that affect the tree and in turn affect the homeowner, if it potentially destabilizes the tree or if it doesn't destabilize the tree. Maybe he says listen, its perfectly fine to go behind the tree, but the stakes that you saw out there, from what I understand was the survey process, correct.

Public Works Director Diaz: The property line. We actually marked the property lines.

Mayor Lago: Property line – so I guess there'll be a survey or there was a survey that was done, or maybe a secondary survey. I know there was one that was already done a while back ago. I promise you, I give you my word, when I knocked on your door with the director, we will have a public meeting so we can present all this information, talk about the issues one by one.

Mr. Rodriguez: One last thing. There are residents that are on either side, there's a new resident as well that just moved in, so I just asked and I'm speaking for myself, not for him, but that we all have especially since we are directly impacted, there are five homes that are directly impacted. Our voice be heard and taken into account, again, to provide a solution that benefits not only us, but also the community as well.

Mayor Lago: I give you my word that we will.

Mr. Rodriguez: Thank you.
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Mayor Lago: Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Robert Ruano.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Ruano, good morning.

Mr. Ruano: Good morning Mayor, Commissioners. I'd like to also talk on C-2 on the sidewalks, and I'd like to first say, acknowledge the gentleman that said, I was the person out there and I guess his wife mistook for what I said. I said that we've been working on these sidewalks for, I've been living there for 20 years, we've been trying to get sidewalks for a really long time, and they just moved in three years ago, after the project started, so that's what I mean sir, is the project has been going along. I think we first were here in September 2019, all those houses, we are talking about five houses, by the way, we're not talking about a big section, and you've all walked it with me. We are talking about five houses, to the side of three houses, will connect 2.9 miles back to Douglas Road; and essentially, we've been talking about this since September 2019, and I've been talking to you guys for at least two years. We've walked it, whatever. Why does it take so long? What's happening now is some residents said, no, I don't want it up against my property line, so therefore the city has come back and redesigned it 100 percent plans, and Mayor, you've seen it, because I sent it to you, all along the street for no reason other than several neighbors said they didn't want it up against their property line. Okay. I asked for an arborist report back in probably September of last year. The Mayor just instructed the staff in April to do, in March to do an arborist report, I still haven't seen a draft, but I have an arborist report and it says that most of the trees will be better served if the sidewalks are where they should be. And we all know and we can pretend that this is some sort of funky design or whatever to protect the trees, but realistically, we are only going there and we are only going to residents and saying, where do you want the sidewalk. What city does that? We put a sidewalk up against the property line, that's where they go. Since when do we ask where they go? I mean I'll tell you, and this bothers me, and last time I spoke about something else, and Mayor you said, after I was cut off that I was speaking about this, which I wasn't, but the hypocrisy of this city is that a block away on Teragona, two trees and like four palms were cut down, no notice to residents, no public meetings, no displays of plans here or anything like that, instead of enhancing the swale and the area, they just ripped everything out and its been there since April 24th, no trees, no nothing just mounds and therefore we're having such consternation about putting in sidewalks for people. Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speak is...

Mayor Lago: One second Mr. Clerk, I apologize. Mr. Director just want to address this issue and I know the Vice Mayor wants to make some comments on it also. So the reason why this has been a major priority I've been pushing, the Manager has been pushing, the Vice Mayor, Commissioner Menendez been pushing and I know that its important now for my colleagues that are here on the Commission, important for everybody. My understanding of the reason why this hasn't started is

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because there are multiple moving parts. What is that? We are addressing the issue of traffic calming, we are going to re-asphalt the horrible asphalt that's there, that's in much need, we are going to address sidewalks, fix the bridge, the bridge that was an issue.

Public Works Director Diaz: The bridge is already open.

Mayor Lago: I know.

Public Works Director Diaz: We have things that we still need to do.

Mayor Lago: We're trying to save money. We don't want to do things two and three times over, so we waited, we waited till we had all the traffic calming, not only approved by the county and also funded, am I wrong on that?

Public Works Director Diaz: You're not.

Mayor Lago: Okay. So that's why the sidewalks haven't been done. Now, my understanding is also in regards to the meandering sidewalk and potentially in certain areas it could be behind the tree or in front of the tree, and while we've been waiting for this for 20 years is because residents didn't want sidewalks for some time, correct.

Public Works Director Diaz: Correct. What he's referring to, it was a bike land project that was going to include the connection of the sidewalks and the residents didn't want it, so the project died. So, its not that we've been sitting around from 2019. That 2019 project died. So now we kicked it off again without the bike component, simply let's figure out what's the best way to do the sidewalk interconnection. So that's where we are right now. But part of the 2019 project would have include this portion of it, but that's too simple things. That project died due to the residents in the area didn't want it period. So that's where we are now.

Mayor Lago: So, I think what we're facing here is when we allow perfect to be the enemy of good, and while certain people may want the sidewalks at the property line, what I'd like to achieve here and I think everybody would like to achieve is finally getting these sidewalks done. So when you drive by there, you don't see elderly people, disabled people, people with young children walking on the street to get to the bridge. Sidewalks in my opinion, and the opinion of all of us, I think have to be accomplished here. It's a long time coming, and it may not be perfect what everybody wants, but I think its something that will be dynamic and will change the landscape of that area. Now talking about the trees, because this is something that we talked about extensively on e-mail, it's a public record. The trees that were removed, can you talk a little bit about those trees, because Mr. Ruano didn't mention what those trees were, and I want to put those trees on the record. They weren't oak trees, they weren't massive, significant trees that we would never remove.

Public Works Director Diaz: The biggest thing that was removed was the Sapodilla tree, which is a fruit tree.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Public Works Director Diaz: We had several palms, I believe mostly coconut palms that were removed and a Strangler Fig that was suffocating Sable Palm, and the reason those trees need to be removed and we mentioned that to Mr. Ruano several times is, we are doing canal bank salutation project. Its not possible to keep those trees out there as part of that project. Unfortunately, it was an impossibility. The City Commission approved \$50,000 on Deena's budget for us to improve that after the fact.

Mayor Lago: What's the plan after that?

Public Works Director Diaz: Absolutely. It was actually on Deena's, it was on Capital, I believe it was \$50,000 was approved on her budget. She actually has a preliminary design already. We're in the process of sharing it with the four property owners that are abutting Taragona. It is a desire to expand beyond that, but right now we only sharing with the four property owners that live directly abut, that's coming out Deena, some time this week they'll be sent the draft.

Mayor Lago: Are they shade trees?

Public Works Director Diaz: Mostly yes. Some areas get really, really narrow between the bank of the canal, so there are some palms along the way, and again, at this point it's a draft, we'll be more than happy to share it with the Commission as well. Its not finished by any means and we'll take everybody's input.

Mayor Lago: And I appreciate it. Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I was out there for one of the Sunshine meetings with the Mayor and having spent some time with people that move trees, as well as trees that have been removed properly, pruned by FPL and the amount of root damage that can occur. The depth that we have to reach for putting in sidewalks is not just the four inches of the poured cement.

Public Works Director Diaz: Correct.

Vice Mayor Anderson: We have to go below that by six inches, I think.

Public Works Director Diaz: It depends on the material that we find. When you...your typical sidewalk base is four inches, but if you find a little dirt then you've got to remove it. If the top soil is very thin, then maybe you don't have to go that far, because the rock is right there. So it varies, but the standard sidewalk has a four inch base. It's a matter of what the condition of the existing

swale is, how deep do you have top soil as opposed to – but yes, it would be about eight inches, basically, if you are going to do the whole cut all the way down, correct.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So you do have to cut roots if you're going in certain areas and there were visible root systems up there that could be structural in nature necessary to support the tree. So the best decision was made, Deena Bell Llewellyn was out there as well as you were out there to decide the best way to meander the sidewalk throughout the area; and I'll note, as a pedestrian, as a bicyclist, if you always put the sidewalk against the property line that's not necessarily the best visibility for someone backing out of their driveway. You have it set out a little bit, you have better visibility both of the person backing out and the person backing out can see you as well.

Public Works Director Diaz: Correct. And the issue is also, and it goes back to the...not just a sidewalk. The pavement is wider than it needs to be, so part of the traffic calming process is to shrink the pavement and by doing so the back of the tree area is a swale, so the roots are actually high above ground, as opposed to having to go underneath the road base. So, if you're going to put the sidewalk, the area of the sidewalk may end up abutting to the roadway, the roots are actually deeper in that area because you have a pavement, and everything is compacted below. But that's what we are going to go through with the arborist. We are going to walk – One of the reasons you see, we stake the property line, once we have the arborist on board, we are going to walk them through it and we'll go over that.

Vice Mayor Anderson: One last set of questions. Permits were posted along the embankment for the removal of the...

Public Works Director Diaz: Correct. Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: And the reason why we had to do that was because there is erosion from the floodgates being open.

Public Works Director Diaz: Correct. Yes, the embankment is being done. We actually have a grant that's covering a portion of that work. It's a job that has to happen. We don't know how much longer, it could have been another ten years, could have a storm, maybe the roadway could have been undermined. This simply undermined that embankment and that job is necessary and that's what we're doing right now.

Mayor Lago: Thank you Mr. Director. You would do me a favor and the Commission, please keep us informed in regards to when all the documents are ready, so that we can schedule a public meeting with the residents in that area that want to attend in regards to the sidewalk.

Public Works Director Diaz: 100 percent.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. Mr. Clerk.

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City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is Mr. Ed Santamaria.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Santamaria.

Mr. Santamaria: Good morning. Good morning, Mayor and Commissioners, Ed Santamaria. Thank you for allowing me to come on the item H-2 appointments for Boards and Committees. I've e-mailed all of you on this. As you may have read in my e-mails, the Transportation Advisory Board is a citywide board that focuses on one of the most important issues that concerns city residents. If approved as is, the appointments that are being proposed will result in a make-up of the board that will be heavily tilted to one neighbor. I submit to you that this is unfair to other city neighborhoods. Everyone, all neighborhoods should have a voice on this important board. This defacto disenfranchisement creates an inequity that you should not allow to stand. Respectfully, I request that you defer the TAB appointments until the next Commission meeting, allowing all of you to revisit your appointments and afford more city neighborhoods a voice on this important citywide board. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

City Clerk Urquia: That's it Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Can we go back to item C-2.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir. I'm sorry, Mr. Paul Susz would like to speak.

Mayor Lago: Thank you sir. Thank you for joining us.

Mr. Susz: Paul Susz, 723 Biltmore Court, been a resident of Coral Gables for a number of years. First want to thank you all for your time, working for the City Beautiful. It's a big, big enterprise that you're dealing with and doing a very good job. I just had a couple of items I wanted to mention. I saw the one ordinance about the leaf blowers. I'm very in favor of that. The noise that they produce is ungodly. Also, most of them just blow the stuff to the neighbor and then it winds up going back to where it was originally. So that would be one good thing. If its electric, I'm sure its going to be quieter, so I appreciate that. Another item I have was for safety of the city. I am on the Insurance Risk Management. I have a lot of experience in insurance and risk management, but the motorbikes that we have delivering food is a safety issue here in the city, and its something that I think should be enforced more by the Police Department. Maybe you could have licenses for them, training, but it gets into, it affects the insurance because you're going to have some claims as a result of these motorbikes not following the rules of the road, also taking up all the parking spots. So it does not make the city look beautiful when you have a hoard of people with masks on with their bikes. The other item sort of goes along with this is the crosswalks, the pedestrian crosswalks. Numerous traffic vehicles go right through those don't abide by the law of the state to have to stop for people crossing the crosswalk. Same goes with the motorbikes, that's sort of all the same. And

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not wanting to take up that much time, just the last issue. I noticed today was with the amendment for the lease for the Biltmore. One thing that really, I think needs to be looked at and thought about is that the amount of insurance that they are reducing is 50 percent and it's an aggregate policy. Seaway also has a big hotel property; I believe it's in Clearwater out on the west coast. Now, if there is a major hurricane hits both sides, your \$50 million that they are trying to go down to, maybe only 10 for the Biltmore and 40 there. So, it's just an issue, I think that really needs to be addressed. And once again, I want to thank everyone for their time and once again your good work. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: I'll like to address one of your points. The issue of the scooters, the delivery scooters, we put that on the agenda, I put that on the agenda several times, taking photos and shown staff. We are working with the Police Chief and also the representative for Uber Eats, had a meeting with him yesterday. I spoke with him, Mr. Castro, Geo Castro, to discuss the concerns that we have and finding a direct place for those individuals to be located. We all agree with you. It's a major issue. Its only expanding the amount of parking spaces that they are taking. The photos that I showed at the last Commission meeting or the previous one, its not the first time, its out of control, it needs to be addressed. So not only is it costing the city money, again its not aesthetically pleasing, it creates a liability, and we need to address it and find a designated area in the city, working with Uber Eats and those providers, to ensure that they are following the rules and that our team in regard to lease are addressing and giving those individuals tickets as necessary. So that's already being focused on. We have a meeting coming up, probably in the next week or so. Chief is not here today, but when the Chief comes back to sit down and have a conversation with Uber Eats and find that solution.

Mr. Susz: Thank you.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Thank you for coming in.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.