

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting**  
**Agenda Item F-11**  
**August 27, 2024**  
**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, Amos Rojas, Jr.**  
**City Clerk, Billy Urquia**  
**Assistant City Attorney, Gus Ceballos**  
**Development Services Deputy Director, Doug Ramirez**

**Public Speaker(s)**

---

Agenda Item F-11 [4:44 p.m.]

Discussion regarding artificial turf in front yard and ensuring residents are aware of what is permitted under city regulations (Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: I'm just going to do F-11 very quickly. Discussion regarding artificial turf in front of yards and ensuring residents are aware of what is permitted under the city regulations. This is simple. We are getting a lot of calls, a lot of calls and staff is overburdened, overburdened with the rules. You have a lot of subcontractors that are coming and taking advantage of homeowners and saying, hey, you can put full grass throughout your property, even on your front lawn. And then these people get cited by Code Enforcement, which is appropriate, I don't believe we should allow full grass in the front. I don't think it's appropriate unless you have a wall. So, people are having to become creative, either putting hedging, building walls so that they can keep their full grass. We need to figure out a way that either we notify these grass companies and tell them that they can't do this anymore, maybe a pamphlet that we hand to them when they come to get a permit

*City Commission Meeting*  
*August 27, 2024*

---

[Date]

1

and explain to them or maybe we use Martha, and we send to residents. We do all three, please be aware that you are not allowed to put grass, full grass in the front of your property.

Assistant City Attorney Ceballos: So, the issue is the fact that they are not coming for permits and that's the problem. This is basically work without a permit.

Mayor Lago: But no, they are getting the work done throughout the house, but then these individuals tell them, hey, you can do it in your front yard too. So, before you know it, you've got your side yard, you've got your back yard, there isn't a blade of grass, and they come to us. We had two of them last week that I dealt with on Friday, just one meeting and Douglas Ramirez can tell you was over an hour-long meeting with this resident and he's a physician in this community. I never met the gentleman, he came to visit me, and he was just, spent a huge amount of money on this grass, now you're telling me that I can't keep it.

Assistant City Attorney Ceballos: I can read the code section, it's very simple. Basically, a quick two lines that explains where and where it can't be approved. So, in single-family residential and in MF-1 zoning districts, it is allowed within the rear yard with an acceptable buffer as determined by the Public Works Landscape Service Division. Now, all other locations may be approved only if site conditions limit landscape options, as determined by the Public Works Landscape Service Division. So does that mean it can be installed in the front of the house.

Mayor Lago: If you have a wall. If it's not visible from the street.

Assistant City Attorney Ceballos: It's something that is a determination that needs to be made by our Public Service team. So, it's just a matter of getting your permit, go through the process and if your particular situation, nothing else can grow there, it may be permissible.

Mayor Lago: What I would like to see is simple. We have a lot of stuff. I just want to go over these last two really quick. I would really like to have a conversation, get all the ideas, so that we can notify people in this community to not make this mistake, it's an expensive mistake, and also to notify some of these subcontractors who install the grass. Maybe we put up a banner or maybe we put up a handout at the permit department, please do not get caught doing this because they are going to have to remove it. They are going to have to remove it.

Commissioner Castro: But if they are getting caught that means they weren't in the permitting department, because they would have gotten a permit.

Mayor Lago: Let me reiterate what I just said before. I was with Douglas Ramirez with the surgeon who came to visit us. He pulled a permit for his house, but he didn't realize that the subcontractor had said, we are going to do your backyard, we are going to do your side yard, and by the way, we can do your front yard too. The gentleman never pulled a permit for the front yard. He paid him for all that work. He didn't know what was happening. So, to make a long story short, I think we

*City Commission Meeting  
August 27, 2024*

need to have a really educational campaign for the residents and also an educational campaign for the subcontractors, so they don't take advantage of people and add additional work and scope on a permit that is not really there.

Commissioner Menendez: I have a question. When we issue the permit its specific to where on the property the side, the back. If obviously, maybe it's too convoluted but did they get a permit for the side or the back, is there somewhere that we can add, this does not pertain to the front. Meaning makes it clear on the permit itself.

Assistant City Attorney Ceballos: I'll defer to Development Services, but my understanding is a survey is applied and a site plan depicting where the product is going to be installed, so when your final inspection comes up, a zoning official will inspect the property and then obviously you've exceeded the scope of your permit, you are going to get cited for without a permit.

Commissioner Menendez: The reason why I ask is because I think the Mayor made a very valid point. The professionals that are doing the actual installation and work, that's one thing, but the resident is following the guidance of the professionals they hired, and they are the ones processing. So, if in the permit itself in bold, this does not include the front, any resident will see in bold, oh, wait a second, the city says I can't, so why are you...

Mayor Lago: Don't forget to that point, don't forget you have to sign, the owner has to sign the permit, the contractor and the owner has to sign a permit. So, what ends up happening, giving the example of the surgeon. This gentleman comes in with his wife says, I did my beautiful home, his landscaping was amazing, I installed this faux grass in the front, I paid a huge amount of money, I got a permit, but then you hit me with a citation. And we said, it's not allowed, and we can't allow you to do it. So, you are in a position where we have to say, remove the front yard or you've got to build a wall, so it's not visible, because you can have grass in your front yard, as long as it's not visible from the street. You put a wall; you can have it because maybe it's an area where grass doesn't grow. I've seen it done before, as long as you can't see it when you are walking on the sidewalk or when you are driving by.

Commissioner Castro: This is something very simple. If the resident looks at the survey of what was permitted, they would be very easily able to tell what was permitted or not. If this is happening it's because the resident did not look at what was permitted, basically.

Mayor Lago: Let me reiterate. Maybe I'm speaking – I've got to explain to you. Let me give you the example of the surgeon. The surgeon doesn't know anything about faux grass. He doesn't know if it's allowed in the back, in the front. He calls a company, the company says, we're coming over. They give him a quote. He gets two or three quotes. This is what he told me. He said, okay, perfect. I'll go with you. Okay, I'm going to go get a permit in the city. He goes to get a permit, but he never includes in the permit that he is doing the front of the yard because he knows that the city is

*City Commission Meeting  
August 27, 2024*

going to say no, can't do it. He installs all the faux grass and then what happens, six months later, he gets hit, the doctor gets hit with a citation, because the subcontractor installed to make more money installed faux grass in the front, which the poor doctor, accountant, lawyer, engineer, whatever doesn't know what the rules are here every single day.

Commissioner Castro: That doesn't make any sense. I'm sorry, because the process right here would be, if you have a permit, guess what happens after, you get inspections, right or wrong. Exactly. Now if you get inspections, the inspector would be able to tell that there is artificial turf in areas that are not permitted. Therefore, you would not get a final inspection. Therefore, you would not be getting a citation six months after.

Mayor Lago: Let me help you again so you understand. They do the work which is required for the permit which is the side yard and the back, and they come back after they finish their inspection, he's going like this because it's true.

Assistant City Attorney Ceballos: It's after the fact.

Mayor Lago: He comes back, and they do it after the fact. Hey, I had to go order more, let me get the inspection, they finish the inspection, it gets approved, they close the permit and then a week later, two weeks later, a month later, two weeks later, say I finally got the additional grass, let me come to your house and install it. And they pay the difference. And they don't get caught for six months, they don't get caught for a year, they don't get caught for three years, but then the person comes to me and says, hey, you gave me a citation from the city, they call my office. I'd like to meet with you. I said okay. We meet. Bring me your permit, bring me everything, because I don't have that information, I don't have the drawings, but I know that I paid for a permit. You see, you see, I paid for a permit. And I said, you did pay for a permit, but the problem is that it's not allowed in the front. How did they do it. He goes, I wasn't there during the day when they did it. I don't know if they called for an inspection. These are people who work every day. They are not staying on top of it. They are not running this project. All I'm saying is, I'm not here to argue. I'm just saying this is a problem that we're facing in the community. I've gotten multiple people, I've brought them to your attention that we just need to be more vigilant, and we need to potentially do like what the Vice Mayor said is, on a permit say, you cannot install faux grass in your front yard. When we have permits and you have a certain amount of 20- and 40-yard receptacles, bins for the garbage, you know there are rules. People know what the standards are, we tell them. There are certain caveats that we abide by when you fill out a permit. You know that you can't do certain things. You know you have to call for inspections. I'm just saying that maybe we put a little dart board with a pin and say, listen, be careful in regard to faux grass, you can't put it in your front yard. I'm not asking to right a law. I'm not asking to do anything out of the normal. Just educate people. You don't have to go against me on every single thing.

Commissioner Castro: A communication campaign.

*City Commission Meeting*

*August 27, 2024*

Vice Mayor Anderson: It's like pet waste bags.

Mayor Lago: Yes, that's it.

Commissioner Menendez: And by the way again, there are people that human nature will have it done knowing that they shouldn't and there are people that they are focused on their life and let others do it, and no fault of theirs, they got done. I want to protect those people and if we do something, you know, like I mentioned earlier, in bold somewhere, this does not apply to the front. What happens is with that simple effort you avoid 99 percent of the headaches later. Instead of spending resources on trying to fix or how to deal with a resident, we don't have to do it, because we already on the front end already made it more clear than ever. So just that effort alone clears up your time and your resources on the back end.

Mayor Lago: Excuse me, sorry about that. I sat down with a lady in Coco Plum, very nice lady, she's a doctor, she's from Africa, amazing woman. She came to me and said, why are you singling me out when everybody in Coco Plum has faux grass in the front, you can see it. She goes, I thought that was okay. That's what I was told. There is just lax information. It's not staff's fault. I think its subcontractors who are taking advantage of people, and you've got to write to them, in the sense of you've got to educate the people so that when they sit down and say hey, I know you can put grass on the side and in the back, but in the front I can't, right. You're correct. An inspection is not going to fix this. This is very simple. Its people doing it after the fact just like you said.

Vice Mayor Anderson: And the reality is probably something will grow there, because Deena has amazing talent on finding things that can grow in the worst conditions and how to improve the soil conditions when they are poor to get something to grow. So, I'd rather have the homeowners educated before they get taken advantage of by contractors and that's the bottom line. I mean I had the same suggestion too when I reroofed.

Mayor Lago: You mentioned Deena. You mentioned Deena and she was in the meeting with the doctor, and I felt bad for the guy. He was like, what do you mean? He was like taken aback by the fact that we were coming after him over the faux grass and we had to tell him no, correct.

Landscape Division Director Bell: Correct.

Commissioner Castro: If you're not able to see it on the plans that it's not permitted, I think what would be most effective would be a communication campaign outside of the permit, because if you are not looking at the permit anyway, because its more than clear on the survey where the artificial turf is permitted, you would know. Something on the plans is not going to do anything if you are not looking at the permit. So maybe a communication campaign in the newsletter, any other way of communication.

*City Commission Meeting  
August 27, 2024*

Commissioner Menendez: But if they have to sign something and it says it in bold, whatever they need to sign off on.

Commissioner Castro: It's the application that they sign. It's not the plans. They don't look at the plans.

Commissioner Menendez: What I'm saying is if we can come up with something that they, the owner, property owner has to sign.

Commissioner Castro: Like an affidavit.

Commissioner Menendez: I think that's more effective than a campaign because we've done campaigns for a million things and it doesn't hit everybody, but the individual owner they have to like sign something that it makes it clear, just one piece of paper, one sentence. I think it resolves a lot of the headaches later on.

Vice Mayor Anderson: And it pops up on the permitting process, hey, by the way faux grass is not permitted unless it's blessed by the...

Commissioner Castro: So maybe something like an affidavit when somebody is applying.

Development Services Deputy Director: If I may.

Mayor Lago: Of course. I was going to say work with staff and figure something out.

Development Services Deputy Director: Doug Ramirez, Deputy Development Services Director. We actually have a recurring media message that we prepared some time ago, it isn't only about this, but it's about a number of similar things that tend to come up from time to time where the contractor might not have educated the resident. The same exact scenario we have here. It could happen with multiple other things, and we try to provide a laundry list. I can revisit it to make sure that we did in fact mention the faux grass. I believe its in there already, but I'll make sure. So that is already in our recurring messages with media.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes, but I'm sorry to interrupt you, but media doesn't hit everybody and unless they have something in the pipeline that they are going to work on, they are not paying attention to that. They won't look at it, perhaps until they come in making a request. So, I don't think that reaches the residents that we're talking about. The ones that are basically focused on their job and their kids and everything else. I think that might hit the folks in the industry, but not the actual resident who doesn't know any better. I mean, how many people actually look and read the media effort. It doesn't hit everybody.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, on the YGreene Board we have a number of disclosures that people have to sign to make sure that they understand what the impact is of these loans that they are taking out.

*City Commission Meeting  
August 27, 2024*

So, there's got to be something additional that they can sign, faux grass not permitted in the front yard.

Development Services Deputy Director: We can look into providing an extra piece of paper that the owner has to sign.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Electronically or somehow, they can get help on the phone.

Development Services Deputy Director: Acknowledges the fact that you are only approved to do what's on the site plan.

Commissioner Menendez: And later on, they can't come back and say I didn't know. Well, you signed it.

Commissioner Castro: So maybe for the category that you are applying for artificial turf, maybe apply it only to those applicants and not to everyone. Is that a possibility?

Development Services Deputy Director: Yes, absolutely. We can look into the different options.

City Manager Rojas: We'll take a look at it and see whether electronic version or a hard copy when their application or the permit request is for grass. We'll take a look at it.

Commissioner Castro: By the homeowner would be essential, only by the homeowner.

Development Services Deputy Director: Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Electronic so they get it in their inbox.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor before you move on, I have a request from a member of the public requesting to speak on the item, Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: You know what, it's been covered.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'm glad we saved you.

Mayor Lago: Perfect.