

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item I-4
August 25, 2015
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Jim Cason
Commissioner Pat Keon
Commissioner Vince Lago
Vice Mayor Frank Quesada
Commissioner Jeannett Slesnick

City Staff

City Manager, Cathy Swanson-Rivenbark
City Attorney, Craig E. Leen
City Clerk, Walter J. Foeman
Deputy City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Alex Palanzuela, Special Counsel

Agenda Item I-4 [4:36:25 p.m.]

Update regarding enforcement of City regulations as to abandoned properties.

Mayor Cason: Let's take up I-2, 3, and 4, which are City Attorney items.

City Attorney Leen: Thank you Mr. Mayor. Let me go right to I-4, since we have counsel here, if its OK Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Cason: Yes.

City Attorney Leen: I-4 is an update regarding enforcement of City regulations as to abandoned properties. If you look in your packets, your agenda packets there is an updated list of the properties that are being monitored by the Commission, and I'm just going to briefly go through

a before and after montage, before and after presentation of the different properties. So as you know, and this is for the public at home, the City Commission has directed City staff, the City Attorney, basically everybody to find these houses, residence that are abandoned that are often vacant, I think all of these are vacant, and that are in deteriorating condition to take action to either get them demolished or if they are a historic property to get them fixed, and we've been working on that over the past year and-a-half or two and I'm happy to come to you today and show you the fruits of our efforts. Before I begin, you probably shouldn't thank people before you even show it, but I just need to acknowledge Code Enforcement. They have really put a lot of time into this. I need to acknowledge Special Counsel Alex Palanzuela, Will Ortiz, Alex Palanzuela and Code Enforcement officers, this is all because of them, and I want to thank the City Manager for working with me on this. Here we go: Code Enforcement Update on Abandoned Properties, by the way, I will note that the City Manager told me that pictures are worth a thousand words, so that's how we have these photos today.

Mayor Cason: Few words and a lot of pictures.

City Attorney Leen: Yes. 624 Zamora Avenue: This was the before, some of them may be a little hard to see, I believe there is a tarp in deteriorating condition, this is after -- much better. We have 1009 Columbus Boulevard: This property had a hole in the roof. We were getting a lot of complaints, it had been like that for years. Commission made the direction that we have to address this, it was addressed. Its in fact an empty lot now and the residents are very happy.

Commissioner Lago: I was about to say...

(Laughter)

Commissioner Keon: I knew it was demolished.

City Attorney Leen: One more time just for the residents at home. This was a house that was causing a lot of problems, it needed to be removed, it was demolished. 1021 Wallace Street: This

is before, and again some of these are hard to see, but its in deteriorating condition. This is after, a very nice house. 1044 Cotorro Avenue: 1044 Cotorro began everything, Mr. Mayor remembers this very well. This house is a historic structure and we are not done yet. This is before, this is in the French Village – after and its in process.

Commissioner Lago: And we've also got a lot of residents, a lot of e-mails from residents in regards to this. They are happy – it's a continuing process.

City Attorney Leen: And let me tell you, its not that easy to get this done. I just want to be clear. There are a lot of legal issues with these properties – bank foreclosures, there are liens, there are all sorts of things. What we are doing is going to court, we are also using the Code Enforcement power of the City to get the property owner or the bank to take these actions.

Commissioner Lago: Its very difficult to get these out of state banks attention.

Commissioner Keon: We have.

Commissioner Keon: Of course now. Now we have them. For a long time there was a lack of attention.

City Attorney Leen: 1248 Sorolla Avenue: This is before; you can see that there is a lot of deterioration, look at the roof. Now its been removed, no longer here, demolished. 1433 Mendavia: This is before and this is after. Can you talk a little bit about this Alex?

Mr. Palanzuela: The owner pulled the permits and started working on correcting all the violations. They have the time that they are allowed under the Florida Building Code in this case, because they complied so promptly. So they are doing what they need to do to pass final inspection on the permits to fully renovate the home. It's a beautiful home.

City Attorney Leen: Remember the ones that are empty lots are not historic. Dona Spain, our Historic Preservation Officer will not allow and rightly so. 3500 LeJeune Road: This is before; you can see the blue tarp, a lot of issues – much improved. 3933 Riviera: Before – it’s a recurring theme, these tarps – after – much better. That’s the presentation.

Mayor Cason: How many “befores” you have left?

Mr. Palenzuela: There is still a few other properties on the list, but the difference – there are nine that were part of the presentation and a total of 19 on the list, but all of the other ones are all under plan reduction agreements or court orders or in receivership with the exception of two that were just added. So basically, they are all moving toward compliance.

Mayor Cason: So hopefully we’ll get to a point where there is no light under the tarp.

Mr. Palenzuela: Right.

Mayor Cason: We’ll get to the point where we don’t have any of these.

Commissioner Lago: So how many properties are left on the list?

Mr. Palenzuela: On this there were 19, 9 were part of today’s presentation, 2 were recently added, 8 are either receivership or final reduction agreements with the owners...

Mayor Cason: Are there other ones that as you drive around and Code Enforcement that you see might qualify coming up?- or are we more or less at the worst cases.

Mr. Palenzuela: Currently, we’ve referred all properties that we spotted – Alexander Palenzuela, we are working with Craig and Alex on the issues and as they come up we assess and we add it to the list as needed.

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: But Mr. Mayor the neighborhoods have been wonderful alerting us to houses that were not already on the radar and so we would encourage homeowners if they do see something in their neighborhood to let us know and we'll follow up.

City Attorney Leen: I would just like to mention, this is in tandem with the squatters ordinance. We've got many successful uses of the squatters ordinance recently and for that I have to thank the City Manager's office, the Police Department, Code Enforcement, our outside counsel, we were very successful with squatters as well making sure that there are no squatters in Coral Gables. Hopefully, one day soon we'll be able to come to you and say there is none, and that there is no properties on this list, that's our goal.

Mayor Cason: Super – great goal. Great work.

City Attorney Leen: Thank you.

Mayor Cason: Thank you.

Commissioner Lago: Just one comment. Today when I was speaking with the City Attorney, he gave me a great idea and that was maybe we look at this list of, he mentioned about 300 homes on the Abandoned Properties List, and maybe we take a look at that and see which homes are currently under foreclosure and as a City go after those homes and deal with the bank and potentially buy them, because like you mentioned before, we have an issue with parks. It would be a great opportunity to maybe, I hate to use the word, "buy them on the cheap," but they are still going to cost money, but deal with those banks where there basically the only requirement is whatever is owed on the note.

Mayor Cason: See if you can find three or four that might be together in an area like North Gables that could then become the park that we don't own. Some of these vacant lots you'll never build a pocket park because they are too small, but you might be able to find a clump of them that would be...

Commissioner Lago: Even if you we get one or two that are next to each other, property in the middle that we can use some of the funds that we've been allocating over the last few years. Madam City Manager, you think that maybe we could have somebody from staff just briefly look over the list of 300 and see pieces, like the Mayor said that are adjacent to each other, that are areas of need and see if we can potentially speak with those banks and they would entertain selling those properties.

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: We can load them into our GIS so we can see where they are and what neighborhoods that are where we could move in and really take some direct action.

City Attorney Leen: Mayor Cason and Commissioners, the City Manager gave me that idea.

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: We are a team.

City Attorney Leen: Yes – and I just spoke with them and them to do that, and they are going to be working with the City Manager's office.

Commissioner Lago: I thought it was a great idea when you told us.

Mayor Cason: Super. Thank you.

Commissioner Lago: Thank you very much. Great work gentlemen. I appreciate it.

Commissioner Keon: Thank you.

[End: 4:46:05 p.m.]