

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-19
May 9, 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
Parking Director, Kevin Kinney

Public Speaker(s)

Claudia Miro

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Discussion regarding Freebee.
(Sponsored by Commissioner Castro)

Mayor Lago: Moving onto item G-19. This is one we've been waiting all day for. Madam Commissioner Castro.

Commissioner Castro: Yes. Good evening now. This is a major concern because I have a lot of residents reaching out to me and I would like an update. I know I've asked for an update myself, but I want this communicated through the residents and I have some questions, maybe I've asked before, and I'm pretty sure the residents would like.

Director Kinney: I'll just give a general overview and then you can ask any questions. So, last year we completed a three-year pilot project with FDOT. After that the Commission did approve moving into a month-to-month continuation with Freebee and the zone that we have. Just last week, we submitted for a new grant with FDOT that would fund a new, relatively new pilot project,
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so we are awaiting news from FDOT whether that grant funding will be available. But in the meantime, we are continuing on a month-to-month till we find out what happens then. Once we find out what FDOT is willing to help us fund, there's two steps that will have to happen. One is, we will have to go to the county to get an interlocal agreement. In our previous iteration of the grant program that was not part of what happened, because we were not allowed to use PPP funds to support the Freebee service when we did our previous grant program, and now PPP funds are available to help fund this. Once we get through the county with an interlocal agreement, then we would bring back a contract to the Commission for approval. Right now, the funding that is available from the state would be available for us next summer, the summer of 2024, which is the beginning of this state's 25, Fiscal Year 25. And I believe the state tells us we will know the answer by September/October, but in the meantime, essentially the service level would remain on a month-to-month basis at the level we have currently, which is for the city about a \$40,000 a month expense.

Commissioner Castro: If the grant that's accepted, what percentage of that gets funded?

Director Kinney: 50 percent.

Commissioner Castro: 50 percent, okay. That's important to know. So right now, we're out of contract, right.

Director Kinney: We have an extension based on the Commission's resolution to go to a month-to-month, but yes, there is not a long-term contract in place for any kind of new service, and that's what will happen once we find out what funding the state is willing to offer.

Commissioner Castro: So, it will be month-to-month until, if possibly the funding gets approved till when?

Director Kinney: Well, the state funding is not available until next July, however, we would put together the interlocal agreement and a proposed agreement with Freebee within months after we find out what the FDOT is willing to fund. So, I would say towards the end of this calendar year, if the county helps us out and moves quickly with the interlocal agreement somewhere towards the end of the year, the first of the new year, we would bring action to the Commission.

Commissioner Castro: Why was the train station removed from the Freebee service area?

Director Kinney: The train station was never part of the zone. When we received money from FDOT, they came to us and they said, we're willing to fund this, but we need you to pull out the Freebee to go to Douglas Station. It was part of the requirement for that pilot project. We are back to what our historic contract zone is which is down to University, on the south side, and up to Alcazar on the north side, I believe, Minorca maybe.

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Commissioner Castro: The reason I'm asking that is because I have residents call me saying that they had children that were using Freebee as a form of transportation after they got to the train. So, is there any possibility, at least until the school year ends, that we can extend it?

Director Kinney: Well, okay, there's a couple of issues. One is, historically, I mean for the last almost 20 years now, students use the trolley because it goes from Douglas Station up and back much further north than Freebee. So, we actually staff an extra trolley or make sure we have maximum trolleys on route when school gets out so that there's space for students to travel. So, that is our preferred method for students and anything coming from Metrorail Station. In fact, our theory on the interaction between Freebee and trolley is, if you're final destination is the Douglas Station, Freebee will get you to Ponce and it's the trolley that should transport you to Douglas Station and the trolley right now, we're running six trolleys on the Ponce route, and our headways are in minutes or less.

Commissioner Castro: So, is our trolley on Sundays?

Director Kinney: No trolley on Sundays.

Commissioner Castro: So, how are we planning on transporting the people on Sunday?

Director Kinney: Sunday Freebee traffic is negligible. In fact, moving forward one of the cost-saving measures that we are considering and has been suggested by a consultant is that we no longer provide service on Sunday.

Commissioner Castro: And I had a lot of actually – we were in the Activity Center, and they had a lot of residents come up to me requesting to please have Sunday available in Freebee, because a lot of them can't see, can't drive.

Director Kinney: Well, currently there is Freebee on Sunday. What I suggested was, because there is nominal traffic on Sundays, one of the cost-saving measures that was suggested and is being considered is not to have service on Sundays. I don't have the numbers in front of me, but it's a tenth of what a normal day is.

Commissioner Castro: I think one of the bigger questions here that I've gotten is, can we expand Freebee into the neighborhoods?

Director Kinney: There are a number of things we need to look at, but that would definitely have to be one of the things we would have to speak with the county about, when we are going through the interlocal process. I can tell you, I'm 99 and nine-tenth percent sure we're going to have to have specific public meetings related to that topic, and we may have to have some sort of certification to satisfy the county on a couple of issues. But we absolutely can look at that when we're dealing with the county on the interlocal agreement.

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Commissioner Castro: Is the city considering reducing Freebee services, less cars, less days of service?

Director Kinney: Well, one of the discussions that came up from Freebee in the discussion of the possibility of moving to Freebee sedans, regular EV cars was that because they would be standard vehicles, not the Gem vehicles, that trips could be much quicker, they would be allowed to be on the highways with the faster speed limits, and so that we would actually gain efficiencies. So, if the zones stayed the same, in theory we could transport more people with fewer vehicles. So that is something we may look at. The grant we requested from the state was to maintain five vehicles, but just because the state agrees to fund the program that we offer, doesn't mean we have to put five vehicles on the road. We will do whatever is most cost-effective and efficient for the city, based on what we negotiate with the county and what the Commission agrees to.

Commissioner Castro: So, it could be in consideration?

Director Kinney: An expansion, absolutely could be a consideration, but we would have to make sure we can identify the funding for you guys and justify our – get the agreement with the county to do what is the vision.

Commissioner Castro: We're having a problem with parking and we're having a problem with traffic. While I was campaigning, I think one of the over development, traffic, parking, and I feel that if we expand to the residents, I mean, you could leave your cars at home and we're not driving them, and we don't have to park them, Freebee could really help out in that sense, not only the fact that it drops you off in front of wherever you are going, and you can drive safely if you're going to have a glass of wine or so, but Freebee drops you back off at home.

Director Kinney: I agree with everything you just said. One of the locations where Freebee is the busiest just down here on 600 and 700 Biltmore Way, because its high density residential and those folks want to go downtown, they don't necessarily want to drive downtown, and that's the purpose. Five years ago, when we started Freebee, that was the reason. We have a mess in the Central Business District. We knew we had taken out 197 parking spaces, but we were trying to help people deal with that without driving their vehicles downtown. So that's absolutely part of theory. When we start talking about a significant expansion, we actually have a number of vendors that have talked to us about services that could possibly fill that slot. So, if we start talking about expansion, we probably have to have a broader discussion about how we provide that service.

Commissioner Menendez: Commissioner, I have a quick question, if you don't mind, piggyback on what you're saying. I think we've all been resident after resident after resident wanting us to expand the footprint of Freebee, I mean for years now. So, I think there's a lot of support here, because there's a lot of support. A couple of residents have asked me, about the possibility of extending Freebee to, I guess it's going west, Biltmore, Venetian Pool, the Country Club, and if

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we're able to expand Freebee there, it really starts to connect the city in an amazing positive way. Just in terms of three points on the west end and in places that our residents would like to go to. Go to Le Parc, go to the pool, spend an afternoon at the Biltmore. So, residents have asked about connecting those three points.

Mayor Lago: If I may just add something Commissioner. So, I've worked on this for some time with staff, meeting with the Manager, talked to our friends for Freebee. What I recommend what everyone does is just have a sit-down conversation with the Manager. Understand the costs associated with Freebee. Sit down with my friend Claudia Miro and the Manager and understand the grants, understand moving from the electric vehicle to a new Tesla vehicle, understand the cost, and the grants that are available over the next three years. We applied for grants last week, I think we've done that work on Friday, correct?

Director Kinney: Yes.

Mayor Lago: And hopefully, we get those grants, and they can show you the cost associated with the upgrade of Freebee which would allow us to go to areas like you mentioned, Commissioner. But I think we need to understand the cost implications and the commitment that after three years, we have to assume that commitment and what it cost. We're happy with doing that and also the cost of ridership per rider. I like Freebee. I'm in favor of Freebee, especially if we have this grant. If you're talking about paying more today, if we get these grants, than we're paying right now. That's my understanding from what I've reviewed from the documents that Ms. Miro gave me.

Director Kinney: It depends on how quickly we get them.

Mayor Lago: Understand. So, we're talking about kind of in a vacuum right now, and I think we need to sit down and talk about the cost, how expansive it's going to be the foot coverage, the coverage of the service. Do we get these grants or we're not going to get these grants. Are we going to upgrade to Tesla vehicles? If not, this becomes very, very, very expensive. We're talking about a lot of projects. Want to make sure that if we make a commitment, a three-year commitment.

Director Kinney: And just so everybody is aware, essentially what we've committed for the next year is a half-million dollars that the city is paying.

Commissioner Castro: We also explored the ideas of advertisement on the vehicles.

Director Kinney: That is going. The last call I had was for last year, we made \$40,000 on advertising. So that almost paid for a month.

Mayor Lago: But you speak to Ms. Miro, who is here, maybe we can all sit down and have a conversation because this is a much broader conversation. It's the issue of, I'll give you another option. They'll take all the revenue and they give you a credit in regards to the fees. Would you

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like to come up here and say a few things? I think the best thing to do is sit down and have a conversation where we're moving with Freebee together. I don't think we're going to resolve this issue tonight.

Ms. Miro: Thank you Mr. Mayor. Claudia Miro with Freebee, with offices at 671 N.E. 31st, and I just wanted to chime in a little bit about some of the things that have been said. So yes, absolutely when Freebee started here over five years ago, we were coming to fix a problem with downtown. We were doing the streetscape project, and so, it was brought in to really just help people connect them to the local businesses. Over the pandemic, we did have a change in ridership and now we have seen, even in last month and this month. Originally before the pandemic, we were at around 8,000 riders a month. Last month we hit 6,000, over 5,000. So now, we keep on climbing and we're confident that we are going to continue to do that. So, like Director Kinney said, at first, they didn't start with the grant, but once they applied for the FDOT grant, they required the train station. Now that's the same grant that has just been applied for last week. FDOT have not been able to give us any indication if they are going to have the same requirement of tying it to the train station, so we're not sure yet, but the reason that the city was able to apply for this grant a second time, because its only for maximum of three years, is because there has to be a change in the program. So the change in the program was the Tesla vehicle was to bring that Tesla vehicle; and then as the Mayor was saying, Freebee has provided options, funding options where, if you do upgrade to the Tesla vehicle and you participate with the advertising, but instead of taking the risk, like you said, \$40,000 we made last year, but the first year that we started was like \$180,000, \$187,000 in revenue. So, as revenue keeps increasing, the city doesn't want to take that risk and say, what if we have another \$40,000 year, we'll take on that risk and offer an up-front advertising discount, which would basically mean going from five Gem vehicles to five Tesla's, you'd be paying about \$12,500 more per vehicle to upgrade to the Tesla; and then the other recommendation that we have made would be, because you're now in the Tesla, the Tesla is not limited to moving on those back roads. You'll be able to have a Tesla that can go on LeJeune. It's a safer vehicle, it's an air-conditioned ride, and because it can go 10 miles per hour faster, that will reduce the wait times. It will get people to where they need to go a little bit faster. We also have – the other issue I think is very important when you talk about ridership numbers is that whenever it rains, and of course, as you know, here in Florida for six months of the year is rainy season. Whenever it rains it starts pouring, Freebee stops operating. We won't have that problem with the Tesla, so your ridership will just naturally increase. What we have seen in other areas like City of Doral, FIU, that have a Tesla, ridership immediately increases by a minimum of 20 percent. And so, what we're asking for the city is definitely consider the proposals that we have to upgrade to the Tesla and we're not, we're just asking, we're not asking for a long-term commitment, it's 12 months. Give us 12 months. It's low risk for the city because we are going to be investing over half-a-million-dollars. We are 100 percent turnkey, so we own the vehicles, we'd go out and buy five brand new Teslas, wrap them, do the charging stations, do everything, and let that pilot go through

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12 months, and see, and let us prove to you as experts in our business that the ridership will skyrocket. We are funding in per capita cost, it won't even be an issue for you anymore, because we're confident that you're going to have the ridership numbers. And if you decide not to expand into the residential areas upfront, you can do what Commissioner Menendez was talking about where we will just geo-fence these points of interest. You won't have to include the neighborhood that surrounds Venetian Pool or that surrounds the Country Club or the Biltmore. You would just geo-fence those particular areas as zones, so that they would be qualified rides without having to serve the rest of the area. Now, if you do decide to include the residential area, and I'll be brief because I know it's been a long day. We have proposed, like an inner zone and an outer zone where the outer zone would be the residential area that you include, and the inner zone would be the existing area. So, the goal would be to avoid those house-to-house rides and really have the rides just be to start or end your ride in your business district, in your downtown areas where you want people to shop, dine, etc. Thank you, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Can we do something Madam Commissioner, can we get all the documentation together and maybe, if you'd like we can schedule a Sunshine meeting or you can schedule a Sunshine meeting and you can lead the charge, to see what is the next step in regard to Freebee and what is going to be the will of the Commission. You feel comfortable doing that?

Commissioner Castro: I know that you were going to provide us with some numbers as far as data.

Ms. Miro: Data – but which kind of data? I have data for instance...

Commissioner Castro: Peak times.

Ms. Miro: We can definitely bring you the data of the peak times, and I also wanted to say that when we started the service to the city, our agreement with the city was that we wanted to stay around a ten-minute wait time. Now we're about 14 minutes and I will say that Mr. Kinney is absolutely correct that since we took out the station, the wait times have gone down, now we're about 11, right, but average is about 15 minutes and always keep in mind that folks are waiting at home in the air-conditioning. They are not at a bus-stop, they are not at a trolley stop. It's a door-to-door service, but we're happy to provide whatever data that you want – ridership has been affected, peak times, all of that information we will be happy to provide.

Mayor Lago: You want to schedule that. You want to work on that.

Commissioner Castro: Yes.

City Manager Iglesias: Commissioner Castro, we can provide a meeting and give you all that information.

Mayor Lago: You can report back to us.

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City Manager Iglesias: Commissioner Fernandez, we'll brief you all and bring you up to where we're at now.

Commissioner Fernandez: There was one question that you asked which was the station that our students were using the Freebee service as a way to get home. Is there any way to at least keep that location open until the end of the school year?

Parking Director Kinney: The most efficient transportation service in our arsenal is the trolley and it actually goes much farther north than Freebee, but I mean the short answer is, if the Commission asked me to connect...

Commissioner Fernandez: I'm not saying as a permanent solution. I'm just saying since we are currently three weeks away from the end of the school year, and they have been relying on this service throughout the year, let's just finish the year off. We don't have to extend it next year, but let's just finish the year off.

Parking Director Kinney: The only thing I would say is, the wait times, the level of service of Freebee, our goal has always been to be under ten minutes, and I do think going to the station has been the cause of extended wait times, but if the Commission wishes us to continue it for the rest of the school year...

Commissioner Castro: Three weeks.

Commissioner Anderson: So, I'm going to give you my observations, because I've ridden both Freebee and the trolley to and from the station, pass the shopping center of Merrick Park, and there's a lot of students on the trolley. In fact, the trolleys are packed where we're standing. So, as far as demand, going up and down Ponce itself, I frankly think we need another trolley, preferably electric and we can circulate them in and out.

Parking Director Kinney: We are trying to buy the very first fully functional electric trolley we can.

Mayor Lago: We'll figure that out. Make sure its American made, please.

Parking Director Kinney: Wisconsin.

Mayor Lago: Make sure its not a Chinese subsidiary.

Parking Director Kinney: Even the battery is from Wisconsin.

Mayor Lago: Okay. Commissioner Castro, please.

Commissioner Castro: There is only three weeks left. Could we or could we not do this? It's not temporary. It's not permanent, it's just for the kids that are used to getting on the Freebee, for the last three weeks.

City Manager Iglesias: We can extend it for three weeks.

Commissioner Castro: Sorry?

City Manager Iglesias: We can extend it for three weeks.

Commissioner Anderson: And train them how to use the trolley because it's quite efficient.

Commissioner Fernandez: You need us to take action?

Mayor Lago: The Manager can handle it. So, let's do this. Let's extend it for three weeks and move on. Let's schedule time with Commissioner Castro so that she can take the lead on this point, give her the information, have a sit-down conversation with your team, obviously with Claudia's team. Let's move forward to find out if we get these grants and see what the future of Freebee is here in the City of Coral Gables, okay. Alright.

Parking Director Kinney: Sounds good.

Commissioner Castro: Thank you so much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

Commissioner Fernandez: Thank you.