

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-14
May 23, 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

Development Services Director, Suramy Cabrera

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item G-14

Discussion on a resident concierge service for Development Services.

(Sponsored by Commissioner Castro)

Mayor Lago: Moving onto G-14.

Commissioner Castro: Discussion on a resident concierge service for Development Services. Resident concierge service, a department that picks up the phone, returns calls, and replies to e-mails. This department will answer questions and provide guidance regarding permits, plans submissions, code violations and related processes, as well as an online live chat for the ones that are a little more tech savvy that could support residents with information during open office hours only. I recommend Tony Silio, he's already partly doing this job, to be in the front of the house during office hours and if it's not him, then we can probably, I don't know, somebody that's cross-trained and well equipped to help residents. Residents should feel welcome and that we are eager to assist them through the process. The person should be cross trained in all departments and should not have to rely on another department for an answer, as well as have the knowledge to assist a resident on how to fill out an application on a city computer. During this demonstration they should also show them how to look up comments. I would love for us to have a separate resident phone

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number that residents can call, and we need to enforce return calls and e-mail times. We also need user-friendly and how-to videos that are short with visuals of how to apply for a permit, how to look for comments, how the round of reviews works and submitting corrections or revisions. Is this a possibility?

Mayor Lago: Madam Cabrera, come up and talk a little bit about this. I think that we do a lot of this already.

Director Cabrera: Yes, we do.

Mayor Lago: And as a matter of fact, yesterday, and I think it's a great idea, anything we can do to add more to the residents' experience is great. Completely by coincidence, I think it was today or yesterday, I forwarded to all of you literally, I got a buddy of mine, he's a buddy of mine because I work out with him, and he's a Marine, lawyer, lives in North Gables, and I didn't ask him to, he literally said, hey, I'm going to write you a note thanking you. I said, I didn't do anything for you. He said the guy that you introduced me to, Tony Silio, did an incredible job. I forwarded that to you, I think I copied you and the Manager, because I knew that we were going to have this discussion today, and I wanted you to get an understanding. Tony is an incredible, incredibly capable person, and every time that I've called you, every time that I've asked you to come during my office hours, every time that I've asked you for a resident, I know the resident is going to speak to you. I don't know what we could do to kind of provide more concierge services. I'm all for it, but I want to understand a little bit about what we do already.

Commissioner Castro: How about a person that's in front of the house so that when somebody walks in, a resident little desk that's not inside, that they know that they are welcomed and that's the person that will help them if they are confused.

Director Cabrera: We have a sign-in that if you're a resident you sign in as a resident and then you have priorities.

Commissioner Castro: Okay. So, can we have somebody outside welcoming them on a desk, like a little concierge service.

Director Cabrera: You mean in the lobby?

Commissioner Castro: In the lobby.

Director Cabrera: Sure. I can move somebody to the lobby.

Commissioner Menendez: And Commissioner, I want to echo – I just want you to know, I think it's a great idea, and personally, I think, if I'm wrong let me know, I don't think it has to be a permanent thing, but we're getting the new system, new building off the ground and I think the perception of the community to have somebody there goes a long way in terms of, I don't know,
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for people to embrace the good work that everybody is doing. I think it's a resident-friendly move and I think if we can find a way to, obviously advertise it, I think all the misunderstandings that have been circulating and still to this day if we show that we have somebody there greeting them is probably, even if its for a six-month period, window, as long as things get off the ground, I think it's a step, a positive step.

Commissioner Castro: I just want a specific person as far as accountability. Like this person is responsible and if it doesn't happen it's on this person. You get what I'm saying?

Director Cabrera: I do. I'll put it in the budget.

Commissioner Castro: Okay.

City Manager Iglesias: We can have a person in the lobby. Let me say something about Mr. Silio. He has almost three decades of experience in the city. He's a Code Enforcement officer, he's a certified building inspector, he's worked in Public Works also, so he is a very unusual person. He's got experience throughout the entire city, and that's very difficult to find, and that's why he's so effective. He knows everyone, has worked in almost all departments, and he's even a certified building inspector. So, to find somebody like him is going to be difficult, however, I think what we can do is put somebody in the lobby, which we have discussed.

Director Cabrera: I'm usually that person. I do that. I do that now.

City Manager Iglesias: So, we can have somebody in the lobby as a greeter, somebody that can go and help people, especially residents when they come in.

Commissioner Castro: But can we put a desk that says Resident Concierge Service, so that when a resident walks in, they know, oh they could help me.

City Manager Iglesias: We actually talked about that putting it next to the stairs. So, let's move forward with it.

Commissioner Menendez: And market it in a way even with a photo online, the person sitting, and the sign says, welcome, whatever, and by the way, I agree with Tony. Whenever I have a question or a resident has an issue that sometimes its different areas of the city, Tony is probably the first guy, one of the first people I call to help find solutions for residents. He's phenomenal. But in this situation, I think it goes beyond just providing information. I think it really does create the atmosphere that we're trying to create in terms of our friendliness and if we do it right, I think it's going to be a great thing.

Mayor Lago: Let me add something to that. Besides the fact of an incredible job that you're doing, and I deal with the City of Miami every day, I deal with the Beach, I deal with Miami-Dade County.

I'm also in the permitting business as a result of my business, having to go and pull permits and
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all kinds of things, inspections and deal with inspectors and reviewers every single day myself. No other city has a mobile permitting service like we do. We invented it and other cities have now gone and mimicked it, but we see close to, what, about 300 people a year doing that.

Director Cabrera: In the mobile permitting.

Mayor Lago: Yes, mobile.

Director Cabrera: Yes.

Mayor Lago: That is a service that we provide already that is concierge, concierge, concierge, okay, we come to your house.

Director Cabrera: Tony Silio is fantastic.

Mayor Lago: But also, I have to give credit to your staff, George Pino.

Director Cabrera: Exactly. I really can't...

Mayor Lago: They do an incredible job.

Director Cabrera: George Pino, Virginia, Max, Analyn, Maria. There are so many of them that do give, but I will be happy to put a desk that says, "Residents Only" and budget for a position for somebody to do that, but right now we have a fantastic staff that does that for the residents every day. If you visit the lobby there is never anybody waiting to be seen. When that lobby was packed with people, I would be the one down there asking people what is it that you need, what is it that you need, and we had a resident we would give them priority. I don't want it to go unnoticed that I do have a staff that does take care of people.

Commissioner Menendez: And through the Mayor. My participation has nothing to do with the amazing work that you all do, considering the volume of work, and everything you had to overcome with technology and the changes in the system. You all do a fantastic job, trust me, I did the tour, and I was in awe of what everybody does. I just think, at least for me, on a temporary basis, this is a nice layer coating to the cake, you know.

Director Cabrera: Absolutely be there.

Commissioner Menendez: But the cake itself, you all are the cake. You're the foundation of that cake. This is just an additional layer that I think people will perhaps appreciate as well.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner, if I may, and I want to put this on the record, we're talking about this, when we come back six months later or four months later, or three months later, to talk about this, I want to put on the record, because this is what we need to really address, because we're doing a lot of concierge stuff already with Tony, we are doing already with the mobile, we are

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doing with every time I call George Pino, he follows up, Max, Virginia, the level of follow through is incredible by your team. The biggest problem that we're having here, the biggest problem that we're having here is not transparency. Everything is online. You can see where your plans are. We are having incredible turnaround times for reviews. The problem that we are having here, most of my meetings with Suramy and with Doug and with the team members when I have to bring a resident is the person who's gone seven times to have their plans reviewed because they are not correct, they are not correct. There is a code, there is a code that has to be followed and when they are not designed accordingly, they come and they say, why isn't this approved. I go, because it doesn't meet code, it doesn't meet code. Well, we scheduled a meeting with the zoning director, we've met with this individual, they need to go and get a variance, or they need to go and do the following. These are setback issues, there's this. You don't understand how many times in the last ten years that's all we've done, and it's frustrating for the residents, I understand, but there are rules and guidelines here in the City of Coral Gables. That's what sets us apart from every other city. Driveways – how many times have we had conversations about a driveway, the width of a driveway. I'm sorry, you can't have that driveway, that width, we're not that city. So, what I want to put on the record is, I agree with you. Let's do whatever you think is appropriate to move and be even more hands-on, but you have to acknowledge that our staff goes above and beyond, above and beyond and it's been a hard six months with the new technology, with the new building, with training every single person. It's been difficult. Getting rid of over 7,000 expired permits that you've addressed. I'm excited to see where we are in the next four or five months moving forward, but I know where we're going to be. We are going to be with people who call your office, call my office, call her office, and say hey, I can't get my permit done. Oh, how many times have your plans been reviewed? – seven times. Why can't you get it reviewed? – It's not that it's not being reviewed. How fast were plans turned around the other day where I said, I want my colleagues to know how fast things turn around, but you said, listen Vince, if we do that, they are going to expect it to be turned around in three days like that.

Director Cabrera: The turnaround for your project was 48 hours. The average turnaround...

Mayor Lago: Not my project, not for my project, please.

Director Cabrera: For somebody you brought to us whom George Pino helped.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Director Cabrera: Was 48 hours, but the average turnaround for that type of work is five days.

Mayor Lago: So, the resident was like ecstatic, they were like wow, this is incredible, you know.

Director Cabrera: We've been at this for six months. There is nobody that is more frustrated what the system used to be. If the system worked, I wouldn't have spent the last five years fixing it.

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Commissioner Castro: I think one of the problems that we're having is that residents are contacting me about is lack of communication and the fact that they don't know what to expect next, okay. There is a process and I think every city has to go through it, if you get denied, you do all the corrections, and the whole review process, but as far as expectations and having that concierge service to guide them and tell them, oh, some people don't even know there's different departments, okay, and they get lost and they don't even know how to put the little arrow down to look at the comments and they think comments haven't been given to them. So, this concierge service would be to guide them, because this is probably the first time they are permitting, these are residents. Maybe you could choose one of the employees you already have, one of the clerks you already have, but specific one person, not lay the responsibility within the whole counter.

Director Cabrera: We'll change the process to be just one person and we'll see how that works out.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Yes ma'am.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Some of the complaints that I've gotten from residents when I went to research them why there was a delay for pool permit, why there was a delay for other permitting issues. It turned out really to be the contractor was blaming the city for the delays. The contractor didn't comply with the notes that were provided, and this was before we had the speedier service, that they didn't follow through on their end and yet they are telling the resident that it's the city's fault. Had someone come in and tried to get a metal roof, they missed the deadline for notice of appeal. The contractor did fail to tell him that the city declined the Board of Architects declined their roof, otherwise they could have timely appealed it. Communication goes both ways, so the contractors themselves – the city is an easy scapegoat, but we have to realize the problem is not the city, it's the contractors as well. I think you've done magnificently in turning around an old paper system, getting it all documented. The amount of backlog that we had going in such a short period of time. It was such a long ordeal and hopefully, with having the designated person there, the learning gap that residents need to understand that this is the process. Very few residents though are doing these jobs without a contractor, so we're still going to have that disconnect with contractors. If you have some ideas on how to tackle that, I'm all ears.

Director Cabrera: So, we do. We have been working on videos to teach people how to use the system. We've been looking at incorporating a QR code that when you submit a permit application, you get a QR code, so you don't have to know how to use the website, you just scan it, but you know, I don't think people have any idea what it takes to take a Building Department from where the city was, to where it is today, or to where it has been for the last month, because in reality we had to start by paying back the General Fund for all the money that it has subsidized the Building Department and we did that by doing a permit fee study. Then we had to start a new system,

InterGov. We had to find a space to put all these people and these computers so that's the 427 Building. So, there had been many, many steps.

Mayor Lago: Sorry Director, when you took over, we were in the negative.

Director Cabrera: Yes, we were. We were paying back the General Fund.

Mayor Lago: Now we're in the positive by millions.

Director Cabrera: Yes.

Mayor Lago: That's you and the Manager.

Director Cabrera: And the 427 Building was funded more than half of it by those permit fees from the permit fees that we changed. That was step number one.

Commissioner Castro: I think that's a great job and I'm very proud of you, but when I provide input its not to say that you're not doing a good job, its to say we could improve, and we could do better things at a certain way. I just hope you can be receptive.

Director Cabrera: I understand, but I also get the e-mails.

Commissioner Castro: The e-mails of what?

Director Cabrera: During the campaigning. I got them too. So, forgive me.

Commissioner Castro: Of what. What e-mails?

Director Cabrera: Not from you.

Commissioner Castro: Okay.

Commissioner Menendez: Just critical. E-mails about ---

Mayor Lago: People take pride in their job and...

Director Cabrera: Yes, I do, and my staff.

Mayor Lago: And staff and people when they get criticized and they work very, very hard. Sometimes I leave here at 8 o'clock at night and I'll see Max working there till 8 o'clock at night, I'll see Suramy till 8 o'clock at night or I'll see George Pino who'll call me at 6:30 in the morning about a resident and I'll be walking out getting dressed and he's already calling me about a resident issue that was from yesterday; and you guys don't realize it. I'm getting a text message right now from Omar Hassan about garbage cans right now. I'm serious. I can show you – look.

Commissioner Fernandez: I get e-mails and texts all the time.

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Mayor Lago: No, no, I'm saying Omar is one of our best guys calling me about, hey, we've got to do this. They are giving me ideas about garbage cans. Our employees are incredible. Nobody's perfect, nobody's perfect. So, what happens is that when they're attacked over an issue, and this is the point that she's trying to make and she's taking it personally. I told her not to, because she's an exceptional employee. I love how hard she works, and she takes it personally because she loves this city and she's made immense, immense dedication and change in the city. Sometimes I think that we have to be, including myself, we have to be a little bit softer in the way that we approach things, and we have to move in a different light, to come together and work as a city and address issues, even in disagreement.

Director Cabrera: They don't need to be softer; they just need to be accurate.

Commissioner Fernandez: To your point, Mr. Mayor, the Manager is here, we had a conversation the other day, and I offered to sit down and find a path forward. There are a lot of issues out there that residents have with your department. I would say that the number one department that I heard complaints about was your department, that's a fact, and you and I have had many communications over the past and I told the Manager the other day, many times we had a very quick resolution and I appreciated that, but we can't have people here calling residents stupid, because that's completely unacceptable.

Director Cabrera: Who called residents stupid?

Commissioner Fernandez: You did last Commission meeting.

Director Cabrera: I did not say that.

Commissioner Menendez: So, if I may.

Commissioner Fernandez: Just allow me two seconds to finish my comment. What we're trying to do is give some constructive criticism. You've done great work. You've gotten things to where they are today and I think the suggestions being made are not something crazy, you know, adding somebody...

Director Cabrera: I agree with her suggestion. I already said I would implement them.

Commissioner Fernandez: Right. And as far as – I think you were the one that came up with a recommendation at the Town Hall for the communication issue where the residents aren't finding out, maybe sending having a resident e-mail on the platform so the resident is notified when there is an update to their file, whether it's a denial or what have you, so the resident is informed, that may be a quick and easy solution to the problem, because its not just the contractor or the architect or whoever is being notified, the residents are also getting a notification from the city, and they know hey, I've got to call my contractor to see what's going on.

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Director Cabrera: Of course, they have to provide their e-mail address for that.

Commissioner Fernandez: I agree.

Commissioner Castro: It's an IT thing.

Director Cabrera: We do that now. If you're contacted, you get the information.

Commissioner Fernandez: Okay – good.

Director Cabrera: If you don't give us your e-mail, we can't contact you.

Commissioner Fernandez: I agree. But again, we've got to find a path forward, you know, residents have concerns and that's why we're bringing them up here, and if you want to have a sit-down conversation, I'm more than willing to sit down, we can air out our differences, that's fine.

Director Cabrera: I have always been open to that.

Commissioner Fernandez: Okay – good. Alright.

Commissioner Menendez: So, if you don't mind, sorry, through the Mayor. So, this goes back to a conversation we had multiple occasions when I got elected and this was almost exactly two years ago, and it's not anything about anybody here. It's the cycle, and unfortunately, when people express their frustration with things, they don't do it the way we do it in a public forum using the wording that we use. People sometimes misunderstand, don't have the right information, sometimes they do have the right information, but they express themselves in a way that sometimes for many people it could be very hurtful, and she oversees a great many hardworking employees that perhaps some are minimum wage, some are just doing the best they can and when that type of communication via verbal, via e-mail, via text, reaches those people that are working their butts off every day, coming to work in their cubicle, it's like a beating.

Mayor Lago: Its demoralizing.

Commissioner Menendez: Its demoralizing, but it's a beating and it could be inhumane. So Suramy is in a position where she is, besides supervising them, she is sort of their protector, so when she sees her people hurt, I understand why she would get upset because its almost like you're a parent and your kids are being bullied, you know, and so, it's a very emotional, very sensitive issue. So, we need to make sure we focus on the issues, on the points that need to be addressed and do our best to take out of the equation the personal, the emotional. If there is something that needs to be addressed and improved upon, let's focus on that, not on the person who's associated with that or the person who's asking for it, but let's focus on that and let's stop doing things that demoralize, like the Mayor said, and create division because we're not here for that. We're here to make our city better and it starts here on this dais.

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Mayor Lago: And I'll give you an example. You took a tour the other day of Code Enforcement, right.

Commissioner Castro: Me?

Mayor Lago: Yes, you took a tour.

Commissioner Castro: Yes, I did.

Mayor Lago: And you brought Maria Cruz with you.

Commissioner Castro: No, actually I didn't bring her.

Director Cabrera: At the open house.

Mayor Lago: The open house.

Commissioner Castro: I didn't bring her, no.

Mayor Lago: She went.

Commissioner Castro: She was there.

Mayor Lago: She went to the open house.

Commissioner Castro: And I bumped into her.

Mayor Lago: What I'm saying is that I heard from employees that she was having conversations about Suramy and that she was basically being a little bit not positive about Suramy and things like that, and to me, that is just not the way to conduct yourself.

Commissioner Castro: Who me?

Mayor Lago: Not you, not you.

Commissioner Castro: I didn't say Maria Cruz, maybe...

Mayor Lago: My point is that, if we're going to do things, let's have conversations, let's elevate the conversation, let's address issues. I'm all day, we can disagree on things, and we can have it as long as its constructive, not a problem. All day we can have it, but I'm going to stand up for the employees every single day and until someone can show me how to do something better, and show me, roll up their sleeves, roll up their sleeves and show me how to do something better, bring the legislation, ordinances, resolutions, I'm all for it, because as you know, I've written a lot of ordinances and resolutions in the city and I'm not afraid to put my face in front of anything and address issues, but I'm not going to allow as the Mayor of the city for employees that work for the

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Manager to feel that they are being mistreated or they are being talked down to, or they are being disrespected, because in my opinion, we can have a disagreement on issues without a problem, all five of us we can argue about it, but this is a good woman who has done an incredible job. She's more than competent, and she deserves the respect and if you want to have a conversation, have a conversation, in private with the Manager, sit down and have that conversation and talk about it, and see how you can do things in a better way, bring ideas. For example, I had an employee that came to me during office hours and came to talk to me about mobile permitting, I had a great idea. Pino came to me and talked to me about issues, and I said hey, let's sit down with Suramy and the Manager and let's see how we can do it. The Manager has had ideas, the Vice Mayor, the Commissioner, bring the ideas, but let's not parade the ideas up here to take shots at somebody. That's not the way that I do things in the private sector, and I don't think that we should do it here like that.

Commissioner Fernandez: It isn't about parading ideas because I actually had a conversation with the Manager. I actually asked the Manager if I should sit down with the director and the Manager said it wasn't necessary. I have tried, I mean, we brought up issues at the last meeting and we brought up recommendations and I thought they were very respectful recommendations.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor.

Commissioner Fernandez: If you have a different opinion of it let me know.

Mayor Lago: I do. I have a very different opinion, but at the end of the day it's been a long meeting and out of respect for the employee who is here before me, that's a conversation that again, we'll have another day, but I just do things very differently. I do things very differently. I just do things very differently. I don't come in guns blazing and shooting up a place. I like to be very thoughtful and methodical and see how we can address issues and sit down and understand what is really happening before me, before I make a decision. Yes ma'am, go ahead.

Commissioner Castro: I have zero tolerance for bullies and any government, private sector, public sector, okay. So, I'm lost somewhere, because I don't know what e-mails you're talking about. I don't know anything about what you're saying about campaigning, and I guess everybody else does. I don't know. If I've ever made you feel uncomfortable, please I would like for you to let me know, because that's not my intent. My intent here is to work together and do better things. And if I'm coming off wrong, please call me out on it.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I think this is just constructive conversation. I do sit down with staff and brainstorm ideas. I call it brainstorming, you know. I can always think of some way better I could have done something I did yesterday, because that's how we, it's kind of like a layering like an onion, you build upon each other's experience and make it better and make it better.

Commissioner Castro: Do I make you feel uncomfortable?
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Director Cabrera: No. None of you make me feel uncomfortable.

Commissioner Castro: Do you feel like I put you on the spot?

Director Cabrera: Do I get frustrated when I hear lies? – Of course, I do. But I don't feel uncomfortable.

Commissioner Menendez: Commissioner, you don't, you don't. Its just the public sector and they are on occasion targets from members of the public who want to express their frustration for whatever the reason is, but they're sometimes an easy target, because they are here in a public television or they are being discussed publicly, but these are private people and its not the two of you. I'm just saying it comes with the territory, but if we aren't sensitive to their predicament, it can only get worse. I'm just bringing attention and awareness that employees in the public sector sometimes they are treated as if they are public figures. We're the public figures. They can say stuff under the First Amendment, or they are celebrities, but they are not celebrities, and they are not public figures. They are real human beings that come to work and go home to their families, but they are targeted because they are an easy target when people get frustrated; and I think today is a day where we can move forward with that understanding and we'll focus on the issues and we'll do our best to make sure that while we are making changes for the better, we are going to make sure that the people that work for the City of Coral Gables under the guidance of the Manager, his team and under our guidance, that we're going to make sure to give every opportunity to make the system better, but we're going to make sure that they are protected, because to be in that predicament and you feel you have no one to turn to, it's a horrible way to live and a horrible way to come to work.

Mayor Lago: Madam Director, thank you very much. I appreciate you a lot, a lot.