

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item H-2
August 23, 2016
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
Director of Economic Development, Javier Betancourt**

Public Speaker(s)

**George Hernandez, University of Miami
Rodolphe Khoury, Dean of School of Architecture, UM**

Agenda Item H-2 [9:46:20 p.m.]

A discussion regarding a conceptual proposed use of the H. George Fink Studio and Office building located at 2506 Ponce de Leon Boulevard.

Mayor Cason: Now we are going to go out of order and we are going to take H-2. Javier?

Economic Development Director Betancourt: Good morning Mr. Mayor, Mr. Vice Mayor, Commissioners, for the record Javier Betancourt, Director of Economic Development. As you recall, the H. George Fink Studio and office building, located at 2506 Ponce de Leon Boulevard was purchased by the City earlier this year in order to preserve, honor, and celebrate this iconic historic building that played such a critical role in the City's early development and continues to inspire the City's architecture today. The City has since received informal proposals from various organizations for use of the building, however its staff's belief that any long term use

should closely align with honor and celebrate the building's heritage as a space for design, architecture, and historic preservation. It is in this light that we present for City Commission discussion with items a conceptual proposal from the University of Miami to operate and manage the building as a community oriented center for historic preservation architecture and design, and that concept is included in your packet as Attachment C. At this point, I'd like to ask Dona to introduce the University.

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: I'm very happy, very excited about this. The intent is to have my office be the liaison with the University of Miami. We are fortunate enough to have one of my employees Elizabeth Guin if you could come up here. Elizabeth has a Ph.D. in Historic Preservation from University of Delaware, a Master's Degree from the University of Pennsylvania, Historic Preservation she was Chair of, she didn't know I was going to do this today, she was Chair of the Professor Heritage Resource Program at Northwestern State University in Louisiana, and I think she is the perfect person for the counterpoint with the University of Miami, so I'd like her to be the lead. And let me call George Hernandez up, he has people here from the University, come on up guys, so he can further explain this proposal.

Mr. Hernandez: Good morning Commissioners, it's a pleasure to be here. Actually the opening acknowledgements were inspiring. I'm glad that we were here to witness that. But I have with me Dean Rodolphe Khoury, the Dean of the School of Architecture and Brian Gitman who is with the real estate, he is with the department at the University. We are present here to show our commitment and our enthusiasm for this report. I'd also like to acknowledge back in the halls faculty members, Sonia Chow, who is the Director of the Center for Urban and Community Design. Sonia could you please stand?- and Professor Richard Lopez who is the Assistant of the Center for Urban and Community Design. Rich Lopez is currently involved in an important project of cultural research stewardship mapping, which involves technology developed at the University that uses the iPhone to actually do what used to be called Windshield Surveys. This technology which we developed at the school facilitates, greatly facilitates the surveying and mapping of historic resources. We are right now engaged in that work, or he is right now engaged in that work with our students and the City, and this will increase a database of our resources. Sonia Chow has been an active member of the faculty and this community and has managed, in fact many, many projects which are our outreach arm of the university. With regards to, in this case, she is recently involved in resiliency and cultural stewardship, a project that has brought together many of the historic preservation officers of the metropolitan region, and she is in conversations with Dona's office. These examples are part of the kind of work that we may be doing if these conversations are fruitful. Part of the kind of work that we may be doing that will be involved with heritage stewardship, one that is aimed at the protection, the preservation, and the advancement of the legacy of Coral Gables through a better care and understanding of its architecture, planning, and natural settings. As you well know, the university has a long history

of an inextricable link with the City in the vision of George Merrick by his mutual founding of both University and City or I should say City and University, and across the 90 years of time, the University has had shared and collaborative leadership with the City and also the School of Architecture from the beginning of that time has had a relationship, because Merrick deployed his architectural team to give instructions in architecture in the young university, and since then there have been many faculty engagements, as you well know with the City. So we see this center as a natural next step in this relationship, and in this growth, but we also see it as an opportunity to create a portal of engagement, and research, and learning where we will better protect the extraordinary legacy that we have in the City of Coral Gables, and I'm here, we are all here to answer whatever questions you might have. Thank you.

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: Thank you very much George. And just to frame this, we started having these conversations and we realized its appropriate to bring it forward to the Commission to see, would you like us to continue these conversations? We have said its important for the public to know this is their building, and that they can come armed with plans and armed with questions about what do they do with this historic building or how do I or how do we make it better? We've talked about nationally designating this building, we've talked about bringing it back to its true form, although the interiors are very correct in the front and in the lobby. It took some creative expansion that the idea of turning that back to the time that H. George Fink was in full control of the building and the City was really shaping to the special Mediterranean style that has been its signature. So today is not for you to sign a document, today is not for us to have ironed out all the hold harmlesses and things that legal do and real estate people do. Today is a time that we wanted to bring forward this concept, bring forward this opportunity and see hear from the university, hear input from you to see, do you want us to move forward with this concept and then bring back to you a fully vetted arrangement for a long term period. We talked about shuttles to the downtown with the Hurricane, we talked about different aspects also and further strengthening our shared history. So the university, we appreciated – Dean it was such an honor to walk you through the property, and have you so excited and to look at it. Your history has been in very significant facilities and to see the excitement that you have in this 4,000 square foot facility, we were really, really honored. So if the Commission has questions, if university has comment, this is the start of the dialogue.

Dean Khoury: Actually, I'd like to add one thing. In addition to the preservation efforts, the research, the outreach, we also envision exhibitions, workshops, lectures, that will engage the community beyond the research community. So we are very excited about it. We think of this as the our front porch, our living room on main street, and we are very excited about pursuing this opportunity.

Mayor Cason: Let me ask. Of all the possible uses for the building and I'm sure you went through other options. Is this staff's recommendation that this is what you think would be the best use?

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: Yes sir, absolutely.

Mayor Cason: How far along are you in discussions?- what's left to be discussed?

Mr. Hernandez: I think the details of a very preliminary outline we'll share with you, but as the City Manager said, we wanted a nod of approval from you so that we can roll up our sleeves and really iron it out and bring you the best proposal we can for you.

Mayor Cason: I would hope that in a concept of preservation, you also see if the university can help us with preservation of our newspaper collection of Coral Gables, which we've been trying to find some way to preserve those. They were in the kitchen of the Merrick House....

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: Downstairs of the Merrick House garage.

Mayor Cason:...Merrick House bound volumes which I think is the only copy...

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: I believe so.

Mayor Cason: And we are trying to find a way to preserve those too. So, I hope that preservation can expand a little bit and maybe find a way to help us with that.

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: Very good point.

Mr. Hernandez: Well, I should say that this center is not meant to stand as an island. It will work very closely with the Cultural Resources Department, which Dona Spain heads, and also with the Coral Gables Museum, which is another one of your facilities that deals in this kind of mission driven work. But yes, in other words, we are open and anything that fits the mission we are happy to advance.

Mayor Cason: Great.

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: And what's important about that is we now have a full time archivist in my department, who is cataloging and preserving all of the items that we have, the old maps and the newspapers and so it's a good fit.

Commissioner Lago: I think this is exciting and great synergy, especially with a partner like the University of Miami. I happen to be on the Mile on Saturday, and even though we are in the process of revitalizing our downtown with significant construction, it was incredible to see the amount of people that are in downtown, and how the businesses and the restaurants are thriving, and I think that like Mr. Hernandez mentioned, with the Museum on two streets down, and this type of symbiotic relationship with the Museum, I think that we can have cultural events, I think we can have architectural discussions, we can have historical discussions, we can bring in speakers, and I think that's what, I don't want to say downtown is missing, but I think that's what besides the massive financial investment we are making in downtown, if you can have two or three or four different locations in downtown that on a weekend, or on a weekly basis are having these types of open cultural discussions and are drawing people to downtown, it will take us to another level. Even though the City of Coral Gables is already known as a cultural hub, in between the art scene, in between the Museum, in between the theater, in between now hopefully this new opportunity, I think its just continued to add layer upon layer upon layer, and you see the type of individual that we are asking to come to the City. There are options, there are opportunities for everybody, opportunities abound. So, I think it's a great idea. Again, we haven't finalized all the finite details, but I think it's a good opportunity.

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: We have the original plans of the building, and there was a very large drafting area in the back, there was an image of the living room that was actually H. George Fink's office, and then in the back you had this huge drafting room and its been chopped up into various offices. One of the discussions is possibly bringing that back, because it would be a good lecture space. So there are endless possibilities.

Mr. Hernandez: Lecture and community meetings and workshop area, its just a big hall, it would serve multiple purposes.

Commissioner Lago: My understanding was, and correct me if I'm wrong Madam City Manager, that location was going to potentially become another restaurant. Don't get me wrong, the City can always have another restaurant, we want our restaurants to thrive. I think we have, Mr. Betancourt can tell us, 200 something restaurants, but thank God it didn't become a restaurant.

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: Thank you.

[Laughter]

Commissioner Lago: No. Again, if the sale would have happened...

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: Commissioner Lago, Dona is right. Thank you because you all acted very quickly. You identified the “Pennies from Heaven Fund” which we called it which were the trash bills that had come in...

Commissioner Lago: And I’m sorry to interrupt you, but you’ve got to give credit where credit is due. That credit goes to the Mayor because the Mayor about four years ago really found out about that, he really pushed and made sure it was a priority for the City to finally get that corrected after closely 30 years, 20 years of being neglected.

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: So that brought in millions of dollars and the commitment was, we would recommend something that was very significant to the City, this purchase being in the 90th year. You allowed it to come together very quickly, otherwise we would have lost it. It was that kind of weekend discussions that your ability to act quickly secured it for the future, and it is, as Arva Parks said, one of the two most significant intact early interiors in the entire City, this and the Congregational Church. So it truly is a gem. We are very interested in respecting the soul of the building and so we are having these early discussions. We wanted to have the Commission weigh in to make sure that you would want us to continue these discussions. It will come into, we’ll bring any formal document back to you, but this is the first presentation to you all.

Mayor Cason: For my part, go forward, keep those discussions going. Anybody else have...

Commissioner Keon: No, I think its wonderful. I think the efforts to preserve and honor our past, to maintain it, and to evolve into a modern day City, along with all that is a wonderful, wonderful opportunity and to have the expertise that you bring to this and the academic piece that you bring to this can only serve us better. I think its wonderful.

Mayor Cason: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Commissioner Lago: Thank you. Great work.

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: I think your input was what we wanted at this point. We will come to you with a formal vote when we’ve drafted an agreement.

[End: 10:01:57 a.m.]