

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item 2-1
December 12, 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
Marketing Manager, Solanch Lopez
Community Recreation Director, Fred Couceyro

Public Speaker(s)

Winnie Chang
Maria Cruz
Marlin Ebbert
Estelle Lockhart
Joshua Goodman
Alejandra Milian
Cecilia Slesnick
April Jones
Sam Joseph
Cecile Melanie

Agenda Item 2-1 [10:11 a.m.]

City Commission Meeting
December 12, 2023

Agenda Item 2-1 - Resolution of the School Community Relations Committee requesting that the City Commission direct staff to conduct a statistically representative survey of Coral Gables residents regarding education and public schools and include education in the 2026-2029 Coral Gables Strategic Plan.

A Resolution of the School Community Relations Committee requesting that the City Commission direct staff to conduct a statistically representative survey of Coral Gables residents regarding education and public schools and include education in the 2026-2029 Coral Gables Strategic Plan.

Mayor Lago: Moving on to the 10 a.m. time certain, Agenda Item 2-1. Good morning, Solanch. Thank you for being here.

Marketing Manager Lopez: Good morning, Mayor, Vice Mayor, members of the Commission. Item 2-1 is a resolution by the School Community Relations Committee. This resolution is requesting that the City Commission direct City staff to conduct a statistically representative survey of Coral Gables residents regarding education and public schools and including education in the 2026 through 2029 Coral Gables Strategic Plan. The SCRC chairperson, Dr. Winnie Chang, is here to speak on the item.

Mayor Lago: Okay. Doctor, how are you? Thank you for being here.

Winnie Chang: Good morning, Mayor, Vice Mayor, Commissioners.

Commissioner Castro: Good morning.

Ms. Chang: Thank you for this opportunity to address you all here today. After the July Commission meeting, we, the SCRC, took your instruction very seriously about wanting to craft a strategic plan, working with the City to really elevate our education in our City Beautiful. Through multiple meetings, data requests with the District, you know, lots of voices from the citizens, some louder than others, we know that we all think that education is very important in our city, but I think there are some details of our educational landscape that maybe are still unclear. For example, we're not very sure the number of our residents that attend public schools versus making other educational choices. And so, in wanting to craft the most efficacious and effective strategic plan for our city is why we have these two details of this resolution, which is one, wanting the City to put education as part of the strategic plan for the 2026-2029 iteration. And aligned with that, to do a needs assessment of our community, specifically on education so we understand as a city, as a committee, what the actual needs are of our city so we can then craft a strategic plan to address whatever those needs might be.

Mayor Lago: Perfect, thank you. Mr. Manager, I had the pleasure of meeting with several members of the board. I think it was two weeks ago, we met in my office during office hours to discuss this legislation and this additional addition to the strategic plan. I think it's a great idea. My question to you is how do we positively achieve getting as much information as possible? For example, we're trying to get as much of the census in regards to students that are from Coral Gables that attend public school. Should we --? Is it really a survey or is it more dealing with the School

Board and getting the information that they must have in the files of all the students to find out where these students actually go.

City Manager Iglesias: Yes, Mayor. The reason that we don't have it in the strategic plan is because this is a School Board item.

Mayor Lago: I know.

City Manager Iglesias: And the School Board works independently. We also -- 37 percent of our budget goes to the School Board.

Mayor Lago: I understand.

City Manager Iglesias: And which is over 20 percent more than what the City gets to function. So, having really no say in what the School Board does and they've been very adamant about that, that they are their own entity, that's why we don't have it in the strategic plan, and it's information that we have not been able to get. The last information that I received a number of years ago was that the Coral Gables High was about 14 percent residents, but that's the last information we have.

Mayor Lago: So, what I think that we should do is, again, I think adding education to the strategic plan to me is a non-issue. I think it's something that we could do together. Again, I don't -- I'm not willing to make a financial commitment right now. I was very clear with the individuals that came to see me. But I think that we can work together on many different fronts, like we already do with Mari Tere Rojas, a School Board member who for years now has had her office hours here in City Hall. You know, we have multiple different meetings with representatives from the School Board. But I think we can continue to expand on that role without having to make a financial commitment. So, like you said, we do make a pretty significant financial commitment already as a city, 37 percent of our budget. But what I would like to see, just to get like concrete numbers, is I would like for our School Board members to provide us with comprehensive information in regards to the schools here in Coral Gables. How many of those students are actually Coral Gables students? And I don't know if we've ever done that. I think it's important to have that conversation, put that con -- put it in concrete, put it in writing, and have them provide that information. Have it come from the School Board, and we could even have it something where it's year over year, where it happens every single year, and they provide us with an update. Who's graduating, who's moving on, who's coming in as new Coral Gables residents. I think it's important for us to have that information because we're providing exceptional resources, police officers, a lot of money from our budget, over \$100 million, and I think it's important, it's important that we know how many of our residents are engaging in the public school system.

City Manager Iglesias: And Mayor, I believe that we have a very good rapport with the School Board.

Mayor Lago: Great, great.

City Manager Iglesias: Chairman Rojas, we have a very good rapport with her. She's excellent. Superintendent, also excellent. So, we have very good rapport with them. We will contact them and get further information. And so we can look at it from a strategic plan perspective, from a kind of a cooperative perspective.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So...

Mayor Lago: Commissioner.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Mayor, (INAUDIBLE).

Commissioner Menendez: I just want to -- I'm good with having education be part of our strategic plan. We always tout the quality of our schools in trying to draw people to live in our communities. So, I think it's just a common sense move. It's something George Merrick obviously helped establish several educational institutions. I asked for Fred Couceyro, our Director of Community Recreation, if he could, to talk just briefly about the things the City has done with regards to education in the past. I know that we've had some after-school programs working with the schools. And Fred, sorry to put you on the spot, but you had -- I remember you once talked about the City's efforts with regards to education in the past?

Community Recreation Director Couceyro: Yeah, so one of the big things that we've worked on -- we worked on with the School Relations Committee is right now we're focused on the literacy part. We do have a Literacy Fest that we've worked in conjunction with the School Board helping us. We also -- we do assist them with certain things, Phyllis Park, you know, we do a joint use with them. I work with their physical education teacher. I know they had a field day the other day, so we try to get things done for them there. So, we've tried to do some things there. In terms of, you know, educational programs, we don't try to do too many that would compete directly with the school. But what we do is, we do have an after-school program. We work with our schools. We do have a transport system where we're able to bus them in. They come to our after-school, so we do work with them in certain ways. We try not to step on their toes and do things that they're already doing.

Commissioner Menendez: Was there a point in time where we did perhaps step on the toes that you recall? I think you mentioned it once. Well, put it this way...

Community Recreation Director Couceyro: Go ahead.

Commissioner Menendez: It was an overlap of some sort, I believe.

Community Recreation Director Couceyro: We did have some overlap, but this was many, many years. This was back when I might've had a little bit of hair.

Commissioner Menendez: I've been around a long time and I remember.

Community Recreation Director Couceyro: Yeah, no, we did do a few things where we had some -- well, we had some, you know, programming where people were coming in and we had contractors that wanted to do certain things. Then when we talked with the school, it was like, maybe we'll leave that to them. What we found is a lot of the instructional stuff, we do get some requests for educational things, you know, learn to read, tutoring, that kind of thing. So, we've worked with people when we're able to get them, but there was some -- back then there was some concern about homework and whether the tutor was following the school curriculum and things. But so we do -- we actually, you know, in our after-school, we do have homework counselors that help with homework and things like that, but we're trying not to get into the educational space. Unless I get a contractor that has a good connection with the School Board or something where they're offering the services that would help for test prep and stuff, but we really haven't gotten that.

Commissioner Menendez: And that might be an area down the road to partner if there's a need since, you know, the City has some experience or history with that, you know, that might be something to consider looking into.

Ms. Chang: Yeah, absolutely. And if I might, just to add a little bit to this dialogue here is I -- the committee totally understands the financial commitment as citizens of the City and to the public school already. And I think more than just the data and numbers through the board, like through the School Board, which I think is also really important, I think getting a snapshot, collecting information from our residents, not only just about where their students attend school, but perhaps what are things they're looking for in schools and if we might be able to infuse that into our public schools and drive more of our students to feel like they can be served by our public school and put our tax dollars to better use, right? Because they're going to the school, whether our students go there or they go to a charter or they go to a private school, right? And so I think more than just the numbers and the data, I think it's really getting some feedback from our residents about, well, what do you expect from your education, from your public education? And then we could better move and strategically plan in that direction and then maybe feel like we're using our funding to the public school better.

Vice Mayor Anderson: If you -- Mayor, if I may.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: And as much as both of my children went to public schools and I had a personal experience with the schools and when I was knocking doors, I, you know, got the

feedback from many residents where the deficiencies were in our schools. I think the feedback from residents is not only where we have deficiencies, but why are you choosing not to go to a public school? What would it take for you to want to choose that public school? Why is it that Ponce Middle, although it has an IB program, hasn't been chosen by you to send your child to that school? What is it that we need to do to make this a viable option for you? Because this indeed is a service for our residents and it would give us the information that we need to take to the School Board member and say, listen, this is what we need. Here's our deficiencies. Our teachers are not being paid enough. This is why you can't attract good talent. We need additional security because these kids are walking across the street to go to the Burger King instead of going back into the school. So, I made that round around Ponce Middle to make sure my girls went back. You know, were going into school as opposed to hanging out with the kids across the street. There are deficiencies. I even heard from, you know, folks about individuals with disabilities, that there wasn't an adequate program at the Coral Gables High School. Now, this goes back for years when I was knocking doors, but I do think a survey of some nature to get the feedback from people as opposed to doing this door knocking routine that I had to do would provide us valuable information to deliver to our School Board representatives and say, listen, we pay all this money. We would like some return on our investment. And this would also -- would showcase for our city to make it an even more viable place to live because you don't have to send your kid to private school if you -- you know, because we have an excellent IB program. Both of my girls participated in it. Both of them are, you know, professional career people now. You know, I went to the Coral Gables High celebration -- what did they call it? The...

Commissioner Castro: Hall of Fame.

Commissioner Fernandez: Hall of Fame.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Hall of Fame. You know, you had doctors, rocket scientists, you know, people that really just were admirable and people would say, oh, you came from a public school. Well, I had the same thing said to me when people thought I went to a private school. Oh, you went to a public school? So, there's this image that public schools are not as good, but it's not true. It depends on the drive, it depends on the tutoring, it depends on, you know, the things that the schools can deliver. And having -- because I know some public school teachers that address some of the salary issues and disparities within the School Board system. That's part of the problem as well, you know.

Commissioner Castro: Yeah, I like the idea of the survey. I do think it's needed for the feedback and not only the numbers. If it was the numbers, I think we'll have like a different method to obtain the numbers, but the feedback is necessary to know what to work on or what not to work on, right? The thing with that is the cost implication. How are we going to survey? Or who is going to survey? Are we going to contact the School Board? But if we do it, how much is it really going to cost us? We're already putting 37 percent into the School Board. So, I think let's

brainstorm, if that's the way we want to go, what the process would be. Is it going to be through email, or is it going to be through mail? Or maybe both. I mean, mail is a little costly, right? So...

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, I'm going to make a suggestion. We do surveys for other things. We can use the same system, just add some questions to it.

City Manager Iglesias: We can use the same survey that we do yearly, and we can add questions on the School Board in that yearly survey. We've already finished that, but we can certainly add it next year and get feedback directly from the residents in our -- as survey questions.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Manager, so I think that's a great idea. But how do we control the person that's actually writing -- is actually an individual whose children actually attend a public school. So, you're going to have people who are going to potentially write things that are not appropriate and don't really have any experience in regards to public schools. So, I'm all for the survey, you want to do the survey, but those surveys, again, are not scientific. They're not. Anybody that tells you they are, it's not the truth. The facts are the facts, they're not scientific. You have to provide the data, you have to get the people's individual phone numbers, addresses. What I think we should start off with, which I think is the most critical thing, is go to our School Board member. And if you'd like, I'm more than willing to meet with our School Board member. I have a great relationship with them, with the Manager, and make a request to get all the information, and I can -- I would love to have you there, Doctor, as a representative of the board. Say, please provide us with all the information as a public record of all the individuals who are Coral Gables residents. Get that information, and then we can contact them through a letter that we can send to them and say, look, we'd really appreciate, as we're trying to do better work, we're drilling down on how we can provide the best service here in the City of Coral Gables. And let's not forget, the City of Coral Gables has always stepped up when we had issues here in this community. The City of Coral Gables was the first to put police officers immediately into the schools and make sure that our students were safe, costing the City money. And I know that because I passed that legislation. We were the first city in Miami-Dade County to do it, until the resource officers were there a year later that was provided by the School Board. And then our police officers were streamlined, even though they're still engaged with the schools. So, we do our fair share, and we've gone above and beyond. But if you want to do this the right way, my opinion is, deal with the School Board member, have them provide through a public record all the information. It'll be -- it'll go through the Manager, so that we can directly contact these individuals, and the process is not tainted by outside influences or other entities that are, again, maybe don't have the experience that you have as a mother of an individual who is in public school. So, I just want to make sure that the information we get is the best, most adequate information and that we engage the School Board because my involvement with Mari Tere Rojas has been that she likes to be lockstep on everything that deals with the School Board.

Ms. Chang: Absolutely, so it is my understanding that some of that data potentially has already been provided to the SCRC. Now, I'm not privy on how they did the data, but what I do know is

it was zip code based, which I think only gives us a partial snapshot of that, right? And so I agree with you, Mayor, that talking directly to those families I think is really important. I also think that capturing the expectations of educational needs in our city from non-public school families is also really important, right? Because I think that's where the driver of if we can meet some of these educational needs that are expected by some of our families that are current, non-public school families would also give us a better picture as well.

Mayor Lago: Just add more -- more kind of information to the process. You also have parents that send their children to schools that are not in Coral Gables. For example, the arts school in downtown, you have DASH, you have other schools that, you know, the parents say, I want to send my kids to these particular schools because they're focused on science, they're focused on dance, they're focused on art, whatever that may be, they're focused. But at the end of the day, I just think that we need to take the first step, should be speaking with Mari Tere Rojas, having a person on your board with the Manager. I'd love to engage in that process and be able to, you know, make sure that she's aware of everything that we're doing so that we can get the utmost cooperation from the School Board. And I think that that would be the most appropriate thing as our representative to do.

Ms. Chang: I agree, I completely support that.

Mayor Lago: We can bring it back to the Commission in the next Commission meeting in January to show the progress. We can bring Mari Tere Rojas here to show a little bit about what we've been doing. We can have a meeting in the next month to have a conversation about how -- what would she -- at least get her feedback on the most appropriate way to move forward, which is something that I think is just the appropriate thing to do and gives her consideration as our School Board member.

Commissioner Fernandez: So, just, I think there've been a lot of great comments up here. I think everybody has made very valid points. I agree with the Vice Mayor. I think it's important to also gauge what has kept some people from sending their children to some of our phenomenal schools. I think we're a community that's blessed with some of the best schools in all of South Florida. Coral Gables Senior High School is one of the best high schools in the country. And I think a lot of people haven't found out about that. I know in the SCRC, we worked for a while to try to get that on the City's website. I have to check with Martha Pantin to see if we finally put the schools on the website. But I think getting that information is only going to help us hold the School Board accountable when it comes to the compact that we have with Miami-Dade County Public Schools. So, I agree with the Mayor. I think we do need to incorporate the School Board members, both Mari Tere Rojas and Monica Colucci, who represents the North Gables, and get them involved. One thing that I would recommend, maybe we can hold a Sunshine meeting with the two of them to discuss this and find a path forward where it's not just the City involved, it's also a buy-in from the District in order to make sure that we have the biggest bang for our buck, so to say, and make sure we get the best data. And the Mayor's right, these surveys are not exactly scientific most of

the time, so we want to make sure that we get data that is based on the facts and not, you know, somebody told me that this is an issue that we have in our schools. We want to make sure there's a way to find out what the actual issues are. And the SCRC has done phenomenal work for years. I know we worked on trying to get the PTAs involved. Parents would come in to address issues. And we really built that relationship with the District. One of my first meetings on the SCRC, the City and the District weren't even in speaking terms, but thanks to the prior Commissions and the work of the SCRC, we were able to build on that relationship where we work cohesively today on addressing some of these concerns. And I think it's important to find a path forward working with the District to make sure that we address the concerns our residents have.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Manager, will you do me a favor, please? Will you, over the next month, coordinate with the Commission, the Board, and obviously, the School Board members so we can have a meeting as required?

City Manager Iglesias: Yes, Mayor.

Commissioner Castro: You know...

City Manager Iglesias: Does the Commission wish a Sunshine meeting?

Mayor Lago: That's fine, perfectly fine with me.

Commissioner Fernandez: It would have to be a joint sunshine meeting because for the two School Board members, they have to Sunshine it as well.

Mayor Lago: Vice Mayor.

Commissioner Castro: You know, I hate to ping pong people and telling them, oh, go do this, do this, and come back for -- I hate that. But I don't know if you guys would be open to it. I know you were mentioning a Sunshine meeting, but I was thinking to let you guys put the questions in our survey option after -- I mean, to determine that now. To let them do it after you guys speak to the School Board and obtain the data sufficient to target the correct audience, right? Because that's practically what we're talking about. So, I would like to make a motion to include the questions in our survey option after you have spoken to the School Board and obtained the correct data to target the people we want to target.

Commissioner Fernandez: So, what you're saying is to have the SCRC come up with a list of questions?

Commissioner Castro: Well, that's what the survey was about, the questions, right?

Ms. Chang: Yeah. And, you know, the SCRC was really hoping for a similar statistically significant survey kind of in line with what the City already, I think, on an annual basis does through, you know, direct mailers and email to make sure that there is an adequate snapshot statistically speaking to make sure that our numbers are accurate. And so, based on what I know about developing the survey, I don't know if just adding a couple of questions to the existing survey gives us enough to work with to capture the information that we're looking for, which is why in our resolution, we're actually asking for an education specific needs assessment.

Mayor Lago: Hold on. That's what I'm -- I'm sorry, that's what I'm trying to explain.

Ms. Chang: Yeah, right.

Mayor Lago: That's why I think a meeting is important with the School Board and your board...

Ms. Chang: Absolutely.

Mayor Lago: And the City. And if it's a Sunshine meeting, it's a Sunshine meeting, it's fine. Because I think that you have to provide -- you know, come up with a set of actual stand-alone questions that deal with education and that are really geared towards individuals who have their children in the school system. Not, for example, individuals like myself, who my children are not in the school system. So -- or, you know, individuals who maybe didn't send their children to the school -- you know, to Miami-Dade County Public Schools or people who don't have children. They're going to be writing comments on a survey that deals with a whole host of issues in the City and may not have an actual experience or knowledge in regards to what's actually happening in the school system in those schools. So, I would -- I -- I'm of the belief that we have a meeting, we sit down, we have a conversation, everybody comes together, and we have a conversation about, okay, is it five questions, ten questions? What are the questions going to be? What are we going to address? What are we looking to find out? What is the best form to get the most feedback and the best bang for our buck? And then put those questions together and send it out to a group of individuals in the City that are directly affected by their interaction with the School Board. So, I think that's what -- I mean, I think that's the best way to get information instead of having 51,000 people potentially filling out a survey that if you're telling me it's 14 percent of them are only School Board, you know, engaged with the School Board, you're talking about maybe 7 or 8,000 people, but you're potentially giving another 42,000 people the opportunity to write something on a survey and they don't have an actual experience or engagement with that. Not saying that their information is not warranted, but I want to hear from people like you who can tell me, hey, Vince, look, lunch is not good, or we need more school security, or the crosswalks are inadequate, or we're seeing issues with, you know, electrical issues or whatever it may be. You know, we want more extracurricular activity. We want more after-school programs for math or English or reading to focus and drill down on certain needs for children. I think that's the most effective way to get a response.

City Manager Iglesias: Mayor, and if I may say, our current survey is accurate, but it's accurate on a citywide basis for citywide issues. It doesn't deal with if the board is looking at something specific for schools and it can have various questions, but it's limited in the number of questions that it can have because it's generally -- it's statistically correct, but for general citywide issues. If we want something for the School Board issues alone, then you are correct, we would have to have some type of survey that would be geared for School Board issues only and statistically geared towards that. Our current survey is not -- doesn't deal with specific School Board issues. It deals with general municipal issues.

Mayor Lago: I just want it to be as effective as possible. You were going to say something, ma'am.

Ms. Chang: Yeah, you know, even just with my limited survey development background, if we did have a standalone survey, we would be able to start off with, do you have children?

Mayor Lago: Yeah.

Ms. Chang: Where do your children go to school, right? And then we'll know subsequently any feedback that they're giving, where that feedback is coming from, right? And I think that's how we capture the needs for public families and for non-public families.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, the problem with surveys is it's random sampling. So, you're never going to hear from some people. So, I think let's start with a meeting...

Ms. Chang: I agree.

Vice Mayor Anderson: And let's drill down on what it is that we need to do.

Ms. Chang: Yeah.

Vice Mayor Anderson: You know, it may not be a survey. Instead, it might be, you know, a listening session. I know the Mayor's done a listening session before. People can email in their suggestions, such as the person whose door I knocked and said, hey, listen, we really need this at the high school. We don't have this at the high school. I don't remember even who that person was. I know approximately where their street was, but I remember the issue, that we did not have adequate facilities at the high school three years ago for them to be able to send their child to the closest school possible, and why don't we have it? They had to, you know, truck them all the way across the county. So, these are the types of things, and I think perhaps a listening tour, if you want to call it, and meetings -- the meetings to drill it down would be the best way forward.

Mayor Lago: So, if I may just...

Ms. Chang: Of course.

Mayor Lago: If you can tell me what your opinion is, I'd like to know. So, what I think we should do moving forward is have the meeting...

Ms. Chang: Yes.

Mayor Lago: In the next month or so before the next Commission meeting, we'll put the item back on the Commission for a meeting in January. Do you think we can get it...?

City Manager Iglesias: Mayor, it's going to be very difficult to have it in...

Mayor Lago: No, I know, I know.

City Manager Iglesias: In December.

Mayor Lago: So, I just want to say...

City Manager Iglesias: I thought we would have -- try to have the meeting sometime in January.

Mayor Lago: (INAUDIBLE) we'll have it in the late January, probably maybe early February Commission meeting. We'll have it sometime in January so we can make sure everybody can attend and get all the -- make sure we get the interested parties. One other thing I want to say, and I'll say it on the record, I want to cover the City because what ends up happening is, and you know this, my colleagues will tell you, we get these calls, we get these calls, hey, nobody reached out to me. Oh, I didn't get a survey. And it happens, it happens. What I would like to have is the School Board send me on a zip drive, the Manager can have it, we don't need to see the addresses, you know, we don't need to have that sensitive information if nobody wants to give it. Actual list of people, you know, who are these individuals, what is their address and what is their email, whatever they have. They have to have something when children enroll, you know, contact for emergency or anything. And then we can reach out to those people and then nobody can say that we didn't reach out to the most affected parties. And then we can have like a big symposium. We can ask UM to lend us one of their large facilities and we can invite everybody to come and we can have a conversation about what are we trying to achieve. What is the goal of adding the education into the strategic plan? Which I think everybody here on this Commission is in favor of, but I don't want to be in a situation where we're randomly selecting who gets surveys and then you have people who are filling it out that don't have any experience. I can't tell you about the public school system because I don't send my kids there, but I know it's critically important to the future of our city and it's, you know, it's building tomorrow's leaders, but at the end of the day, we need to get the right people engaged.

Ms. Chang: Absolutely. Mayor, Vice Mayor, the Commissioners, I thank you all so much for your openness in including the education as a strategic initiative in the next strategic plan, as well as this brainstorm of how we might want to collect the information. Because to me, I don't -- how we collect this information, I'm at the will of experts, right? However, I do think the outcome of what we find so we can strategically move on some of those initiatives, I think for me is the important thing. So, as a Chair of the SCRC, as a citizen in our community, as a family of public schools, I appreciate all of you and your continued support for our community engagement.

Mayor Lago: I'm going to ask the Clerk to put this back on the agenda for the first meeting in February and ask the Manager to move forward as we discussed with interacting, engaging with the School Board, getting the information, start working with the SCRC to start, you know, getting as much information so that we can have them at that -- we can have a meeting at some point in January to flush things out. And then the Manager will send all the information -- the information requests to the Commission. The Commission will engage with the Manager and talk a little bit about what we want to see in that meeting and the SCRC will also provide their input in regards to what they want to see in that meeting. Is that fine? You okay with that?

Ms. Chang: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Ms. Chang: Absolutely.

Commissioner Fernandez: The one thing I would ask is the SCRC in the next meeting or next couple of meetings prior to this, start brainstorming some potential questions that you think would be important. Just so once we have that meeting, we're ready and we can kind of give the School Board an idea of what information we're trying to gather.

Ms. Chang: Great, we can do that.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for being here.

Ms. Chang: Thank you so much.

Mayor Lago: Appreciate you. Thank you so much. Moving on to Item E-7.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

City Clerk Urquia: You have members of the public...

Mayor Lago: Oh, I apologize.

City Clerk Urquia: Who want to speak on the last item.

Mayor Lago: I thought we had caught that. I'm sorry about that.

City Clerk Urquia: First speaker, Maria Cruz.

Maria Cruz: Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. I guess because I was a teacher, a public school teacher for over 40 years, I have some comments about this conversation. Number one, every child that goes to a school located in Coral Gables is our child, every single one of them, whether they live here or not because our children benefit from knowing those kids. Those kids benefit from knowing our kids. That's what this society is all about. And I'm tired of -- we're spending money. In this country, well-to-do communities spend money to cover those that cannot afford it because that's the basis of this country. And yes, the third comment is, our kids carry their money with them. So, if our kids go to David Fairchild, or Sunset Elementary, or MAST Academy, their money, our money goes with them. So, we're not throwing money away. I get insulted when we start talking about, oh, we're putting so much money, what do we get for it? We get a better society. We get educated kids. We get educated families. And that's what this is all about. Some people send their kids to private schools because they think that's the right thing to do. Some people send them to public schools because they think that's the right thing to do. It's up to the parents where the kids go. But I will not sit here and accept the fact that, you know, we're wasting our money because the money is going. No, no. Our money is not wasted when we're helping one child, whether he lives in Coral Gables or he doesn't because we're going to have contact with that child somewhere along the line. And if that child became a doctor, an attorney, a teacher, that child is going to be a good citizen and our money served the purpose. And let me tell you, one of the things that make this community so good for real estate agents is that we brag and they know we have good public schools. Because not everybody that moves to Coral Gables expects to send their kids to private schools, okay? Some of us believe in public education. Some of us are proof that public education is good. Some people went to private school and they're no good. Some people went to public schools and they're no good, and they're reverse. Going to public school or private school does not make a person a good person, and we need to consider that. The next thing, we keep talking about working with the school system. Last time I spoke, I talked to you about how Miami Beach was able to do that. They still do it. They have what could be what you have, an education committee of the City of Miami Beach. And when the city comes up with ideas, they see it once a month, the city comes up with ideas, their parents come up with ideas, and they sign compacts, and they come up with wonderful things. These children that go to a Miami Beach school have access to ballet, music, anything you can think of because what the schools cannot provide, the city steps forth and does it. And this business of only asking people that have kids in school is wrong because the whole community needs to be involved, and the whole community needs to say what they want to see in the schools. Because you know what, perfect example, once again, Miami Beach. We had more elderly people than we had kids. We were closing schools

because we didn't have enough school children. And yet you can knock on any door and say, that school, you know, we have a series of kids that don't have money, how much do you need? The adults, the grandparents, the uncles, the people that do not have kids also care about the kids and the education provided to those kids. And you need to involve the whole community because if not, your community is going to come and say, okay, we are the taxpayers, we put the money in, why didn't you ask us? We want to have a say. Everybody that lives in the City should have a say on what the education is that's available in this city, what our kids and all the other kids can get. The more kids we cover, the more opportunities we give to every child, regardless of where they live, a better society will happen. And you all need to get off your high horse and just compare the money that we give, because you know what, then let's just fix the streets that we travel on and don't let anybody else come this way because, you know, we paid for the road. No, wrong.

Mayor Lago: Mr. City Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Marlin Ebbert.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Commissioner Castro: Good morning.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Morning.

Marlin Ebbert: Morning, everybody. I haven't been here for a while. For the record, my name is Marlon Ebbert. I live at 6510 San Vicente Street, and I'm here to speak in support of this. I think you have demonstrated that you're on board, but I would like to see -- you know, I heard this presented at a Commission meeting a couple of months ago. And I made a point of going to the School Community Relations Board and offering my support. I'd like to just give you a little history. Thirty-five years ago, my husband accepted a job at Southeast Bank in Miami, Florida. I had never left Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My husband -- we were both born and raised there. This was a big move for us, coming with three children ages 14, 11, and 8. And I knew immediately that I was going to hit all three schools. And I wanted the option of public school. I can't remember -- there wasn't any Internet. I don't remember how I did my research, but somehow I found out -- Coral Gables was never mentioned to me. It was Miami Shore -- no, it was Coral Springs and Pinecrest. So, I met with a realtor, took me -- came from Coral Springs, took me there for the day. We weren't on I-95 for five minutes when I knew my husband could not commute an hour and 15 minutes to Miami to Coral Springs every day. I spent extensive time in Pinecrest. Big houses on big lots, but no sidewalks, and I didn't feel any sense of community. And so, looked at one or two houses in Coral Gables. We bought on University Drive. My child -- my older daughter could walk to Coral Gables High School. The two younger children took a bus to Coral Gables Elementary. My point in saying that is, I don't think that the perception has changed very much. I think that anybody moving to Miami still hears that the combination you would want is Pinecrest, Palmetto, Palmetto. And I think you said that, Commissioner Menendez, exactly, that it's the

realtors that really drive it. And I think we are missing the boat not really helping our public schools. All three of my children graduated from Gables. I was PTA president in the mid-90s when the School Community Relations Board got started. Commissioner Jim Barker appointed me to that board. Coral Gables High School was the only school that was part of that at the time being -- at the time. And it grew out of that the Mayor at the time, the City Manager, and the principal at Gables High School had a hard time being in the same room together without fireworks. So, they -- we were a buffer. We met in the basement of the police station, and I'm delighted to see how this board has blossomed since. So, I'm here to just say thank you. I know that you're on board. I heard Maria Cruz speak at that same meeting a couple months ago, talking about what Miami Beach does for their students. I think that that's something that, you know, really hit home. Anyway, I loved my time in the public schools, and I hope that -- I look forward to really adding this to the strategic plan and really investing in our kids. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Estelle Lockhart.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Estelle Lockhart: Good morning. Thank you so much for all of your time devoted to this issue. It's super important and super passionate for me as well. My name's Estelle Lockhart. I'm a -- I reside at 1515 Capri Street, Coral Gables resident. I've also been an educator for over 30 years, both in private practice, public school, private school. I'm a mom of a public school student and a private school student. And I'm also a business owner in the education landscape. I had a bunch of things planned, but the main thing I want to say is you have to have a plan. Right now what I'm hearing a lot about is the County should have a plan. The County oversees over 300 schools. Coral Gables has eight public schools. We're asking for a plan, a local plan. Right now, if there's an issue at my daughter's public school, we have to jump to the county level where they oversee 300 schools. We're asking for a local plan. What is the plan? Now, the strategic plan, obviously, that's what we want, but I just really encourage you to dream big.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, I'm just going to interrupt you. I think we all want to add this to the strategic plan, but we need to build it. We need to...

Ms. Lockhart: Yes, we need to build it.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Just like...

Ms. Lockhart: And I agree with Maria Cruz in that this is a community. We all are living here. This is about grandparents. This is about businesses. This is about everybody. This should not just be a survey that goes to public school parents. Absolutely not. This is about people living in a community that values education, period. That means the Youth Center, the library, the City

events, all of that is coordinated. Right now there's gaps, redundancies, right? If you -- when you got elected, you said I'm going to have a program for Coral Gable seniors who are doing what -- there might be five other plans that already have that and you just haven't heard of before, right? There's Coral Gable's Community Foundation, there's the public schools. There's a lot of redundancies and inefficiencies.

Commissioner Menendez: And for the record, I did do it.

Ms. Lockhart: You -- I know you did.

Commissioner Menendez: Thank you.

Ms. Lockhart: I know you did. I'm just saying there's so much goodwill here, but it can't just be, I had a great idea when there might be ten other things that are already kind of doing that. They're just published in different ways. So, I encourage this Commission to dream big. This is not just about public schools. This is about living in a community that values education and what is that plan and getting that plan done. Thank you.

Commissioner Menendez: I just want to add, because I agree with everything you said, but the way I look at it, it's not our dream, it's your dream.

Ms. Lockhart: Exactly.

Commissioner Menendez: We can be the facilitators to make the dream come true. So, that's why I agree with my colleagues and I know you're in agreement. We need to know what your dreams are so that we can find a way to get there.

Ms. Lockhart: Which is why the survey's important. Exactly.

Commissioner Menendez: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Joshua Goodman.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Commissioner Castro: Good morning.

Joshua Goodman: Good morning, Mayor, Vice Mayor Anderson, City Commissioners. We kind of got around -- the conversation changed a little bit. Estelle was supposed to present to you some

great economic data about how investing in schools, investing in public education is a great return on investment. We have a presentation that was prepared. Oh, thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: The clicker is (INAUDIBLE).

Mr. Goodman: This was prepared by the Gables Education Initiative, which is just a grassroots group created by eight PTAs. It's been formally endorsed by the boards of all of those PTAs from schools in the area. And I just wanted to quickly go through -- oh, with mouse, sorry.

Mayor Lago: Right there.

Mr. Goodman: Ah, thanks. These are the schools that have endorsed it. I just want to quickly go through it because I know our time is valuable. These are some of the basic data that we've already collected. I want to point out there's seven public schools in the City boundaries and then four schools that are preferred by City residents. For example, Sunset technically falls outside of the boundaries, but is attended by 25 percent -- 25 percent of its enrollment are residents. And then, of course, you have at the upper end range, Coral Gables Prep Academy, almost 60 percent. Carver, where my two daughters attend, 45 percent. I want to emphasize, though, that there are issues with this data. We collected it directly from the School Board, but we do feel, we agree with you, it's insufficient. There are gaps. We don't know the methodology exactly. So, there are issues that can and should be addressed and how it's evolved over the years. We've also noticed, and we see it again today at the meeting, there's a great deal of unawareness and misinformation surrounding about how schools are funded in Miami-Dade and nationally, to be quite frankly. I mean, we frequently hear that these are City -- the City is devoting 37 percent of its budget to schools. That is incorrect. There is not a single dollar from the operating budget that goes to Miami-Dade Public Schools. What does go to school is our taxes as property owners. But this is a -- this is everywhere. This is what the law says, and every community in Miami-Dade, of course, because we have higher property values, we contribute more as taxpayers. But it's incorrect to say that the City budget is spending on schools. And the other thing that's really important here is the district has over 400 schools to take care of, and they are addressing, obviously, the greatest needs. I was in a meeting with Mari Tere Rojas where she mentioned an incredible statistic that this year alone, 20,000 new students from immigrant families have enrolled in Miami-Dade Public Schools, many of them who don't speak any English. The School Board has a mandate to lift all boats, and those are obviously going to be their top priority. But as Estelle had said, you know, we have a smaller universe of schools that we can take more ownership of. I just also just wanted to, you know -- again, this is some of the statistics that we collected. Quality of schools is one of the top, right after the home values, when people are moving to a city. The spending in public education directly correlates to an increase in property value. So, this does benefit all of us. I know that the time is short, but you know, right now among the cities, I want to just make sure that we all know that Coral Gables is in a unique position to do more for schools. Our operating budget of \$206 million is 20 percent higher than it was just three years ago, due obviously to the near-record jump in property values. And while those windfalls are unlikely to

continue, we are in a place in Coral Gables where we can determine our future and not let others determine it for us. Despite this, there's not a current line item in the budget devoted to education, nor is there a single staffer in the City's 900 full-time employees, 60 more than before the pandemic, assigned to coordinating education initiatives across departments, promoting our schools to prospective residents and businesses, and working with the School Board to address the issues that we're all aware of. It doesn't have to be this way. I know there's a lot of concern about overstepping our authority, and you know, the millions that we already as taxpayers channel to the School Board, but I would point out that in other communities similarly affluent like Coral Gables, they're already doing this. The gold standard is Miami Beach, which spends \$2 million a year from its general fund on everything from training for IB teachers, mental health professionals in every school, funding free music education, and implementing a No Place for Hate program with the Anti-Defamation League. As part of the Gables Education Initiative's research, we interviewed Dr. Leslie Rosenfeld, a parent, a former school administrator, and for 20 years, the chief education officer of Miami Beach. It would be great to have that sort of position here in Coral Gables. You guys have all expressed an amazing amount of willingness to engage with the School Board, but you're all very busy, and you know, these relationships matter a lot to us and to the School Board, but I think it's time that we go to the next step and have someone whose full-time job it is to actually be that liaison. The reality, though, is that the Miami-Dade Public Schools is overburdened. Nationally, Miami-Dade Public Schools ranks 51st among the 100 largest school districts in terms of per-pupil spending, which is usually a good barometer for educational outcomes. Chicago Public Schools -- that's a district very similar in size to Miami-Dade Public Schools -- they spend \$18,000 per pupil annually. Palo Alto, California spends -- and the town I grew up in outside of Cleveland -- spend \$25,000 per pupil annually. Anyone have an idea how much it is in Miami-Dade?

Vice Mayor Anderson: Well, you have it up in front of us.

Mayor Lago: Right there.

Mr. Goodman: Oh, there it is. I gave it away. Around 11,000. And you know, teacher pay also similarly lags. And if you drill down to those numbers, again, they're focused on the urgent needs, not the better off schools, which, you know, all of our schools are A or B rated. So, we are in a better position in the smaller pond that is Miami-Dade. Luckily, the challenges we face in Coral Gables aren't as daunting. We can and frequently do go above and beyond. Many of our schools are top-ranked in the county, but that doesn't mean there aren't serious gaps that we need to address and enrichment programming beyond the basic curriculum that we should support. The point is, Coral Gables aspires to be a world-class city and we are in a position, a unique position, to provide world-class education. All it takes is the will to start. Thank you.

Commissioner Menendez: I have a quick question, sorry.

Mr. Goodman: Sure.

Commissioner Menendez: Hypothetical, maybe reality one day, if there wasn't a line item for education, where would those dollars be best used?

Mr. Goodman: So, I heard a lot of conversation, but it was interesting about the survey. And you know, I'm on the SCRC, I'm an all board appointee, thanks to you all. We are all very passionate about education, but we are not experts, or at least I'm not an expert in education. And I think, you know, the idea of doing a survey, you know, attached to the satisfaction survey would not be sufficient. We really need to bring in a consultant. There are a number of educational consulting firms around the country who know this area very well, and they can be the ones to design a survey and orient us in how the money should be spent if we need to spend money. But again, it's also just about elevating it to a strategic priority. I think once we make that step, a lot more -- a lot of other actions can follow. So, I don't want to give an answer, and I don't want to prescribe solutions. I don't know what the answers are. I wish I knew. But I like the idea of all of us coming together and seeking out the answers together.

Commissioner Menendez: This is the path forward, without a doubt.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Right.

Commissioner Menendez: So, thank you, and I appreciate it.

Mr. Goodman: Yeah, and I...

Commissioner Menendez: And I agree with you.

Mr. Goodman: It needs to be an educational expert. It can't be done by us or you or in a -- you know, the Resident Satisfaction Survey. I really strongly believe that that would not be giving it the attention it deserves.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Mr. Goodman, appreciate it.

City Clerk Urquia: Alejandra Milian.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Alejandra Milian: Good morning, Mayor Lago, Vice Mayor Anderson, City Commissioners. My name is Alejandra Milian, property owner at 1261 Aguila Avenue. I am both a Coral Gables owner and Sunset Elementary's PTA president. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today in support of this important resolution for the School Community Relations Committee, a first step transforming our City Beautiful into City Brilliant. I would like to add to what my fellow PTA colleagues statements were shared that this is not about prescribing solutions. It's about creating

a process by which the residents and families can provide their own suggestions about what they want for our city and our schools. We need a survey. Currently, we don't know what the parents want. We don't know how many send their kids, as it's been discussed, to private versus public, or their reasons for sending the kids to private school instead of public school. Oh, and I like to see that from our city to our schools, what can be done not only for our schools, but also for the Youth Center, the library. You know, like, for example, the library now is closed on Sundays. Parents have expressed to me that they would like to go to the library on Sundays, but they can't because the library is closed and that's the only time that they have available to go, just to give you an example. This is not just about our schools, but it's also about our community as well. The facilities that we have, everything that we have that we can share with our community is really important, as well as the education. And I wanted to say thank you all for allowing me to speak to all of you today.

Mayor Lago: Can I ask you a quick question?

Ms. Milian: Yes.

Mayor Lago: First, I'll make a point. I wish the library was open on Sunday. I've taken -- my mother-in-law takes my kids there all the time. My question to you is a simple one. As a mother of children who are in the public school system, has the School Board ever sent a survey home, like in one of their binders, or sent you an email with, can you fill this survey out? I'm asking you because I just want to get educated on what their process is. Do they do a yearly survey with you? Do they ask you for your input in any form?

Ms. Milian: They do. They send out a yearly survey towards the end of the school year. My son is at Auburndale Elementary and they're a Title I school. And there they send a paper for you to fill out, bubble in the questions as to how the school is doing and what can be improved. The same thing with Sunset. Sunset, they send a link out where you can fill it out online. Because of the two schools, they have different socioeconomic balances. Auburndale uses paper, Sunset uses electronic.

Mayor Lago: And the reason why I think it's important, because I think it's -- we should get that information and see -- and that we get that obviously through the School Board member, because that would help us craft, potentially craft some of the information that we're going to be asking the residents in one form or another.

Ms. Milian: Okay.

Commissioner Castro: I got some...

Vice Mayor Anderson: Sorry, go ahead.

Commissioner Castro: I got some emails regarding the library, but it's a Miami-Dade -- and I don't think we have much...

Ms. Milian: Oh, it's...

Commissioner Castro: It's Dade County.

Mayor Lago: We own the land. We own the land and we own the building, but we don't actually control the facility. But there are multiple different cities in Miami-Dade County that run their own library system, but we don't.

Ms. Milian: Okay. Is that something that can be changed or...?

Mayor Lago: We can have a conversation with the library system and find out if they're willing to be open on a Sunday. We worked on for a few years for the first time in over, I can't remember how many decades, to actually have the library renovated, which is a project that was finished last year, something that took a lot of effort and a lot of work.

Ms. Milian: It's amazing.

Mayor Lago: And it's to be commended. It took a lot of work. The Manager did a great job with that. So, that's something that we can have a conversation with the library system to see if they have an opportunity to open on a Sunday. I think it's a good asset to be open on a Sunday.

Ms. Milian: I appreciate that.

Mayor Lago: Let's see if they have the resources.

Ms. Milian: Yes.

Mayor Lago: That could be one of the reasons.

Ms. Milian: A lot of parents also schedule tutoring sessions in the library. They take their kids there, they take the siblings to one end, and then the other one goes to tutoring. So, the library does have many, many uses. And also, our public schools, you know, they need a lot of love.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

Ms. Milian: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: I appreciate you being here. Thank you for your insight. Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Cecilia Slesnick.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Cecilia Slesnick: Hi, good morning, Mayor, Vice Mayor, Commission. So, first of all, I want to -- so, Cecilia Slesnick, 71 Navarre, Coral Gables resident for...

Mayor Lago: Ever.

Ms. Slesnick: Many days. So, I am a product of the Miami-Dade County Public School System, as is my husband and his father before him. But I'm not only a product of the Miami-Dade County Public School District, I'm a product of the Coral Gables schools. Coral Gables Elementary, Carver Elementary, Carver Middle, Gables High. And my children are also going to be products of the Miami-Dade County Public School District, currently enrolled at Coral Gables Prep and at South Miami Middle, with the fullest intentions of Gables High. Come on magnets. So, I'm also a member, a longstanding member of the School and Community Relations Committee. And we have been having this conversation for a long time. But I think one thing that is important for everyone to know is how the conversation even got started, which is because the City did allocate funds to a program in the education landscape, which unfortunately hasn't been used and that can be a conversation for another time, but that triggered a conversation of, well, if this money has been allocated and it's not being used, is there another way that the schools can benefit and the students can benefit from it. So, that's where the conversation got started. Schools, as you all know, are listed under the economic tab of the City website. And as Joshua pointed out, this is a massive economic driver, right? As a realtor, people ask me about the schools and I boast about our public schools because I firmly believe that education is up to the individual family, but we have the best public schools at our fingertips as Coral Gables residents with incredible programs. The thing is that the education landscape, as it was when I was little, and as when Marlin's children were in school at Coral Gables Elementary with me, is that the magnet system disrupted the community schools, right? So, you all -- which a lot of you have children in the private sector and went to school in the private sector, you have to think of the private sector as a system of magnet schools, just like the magnet schools work in the public sector. You select the school that your child is going to go to, not necessarily because of the location, but because of their interest, maybe it's family tradition, maybe it's a religious endeavor, whatever it might be. So, for us, it's a little bit of both. It's the location and it's our family tradition of where we went to school, right? It's lovely to see my children walking through Coral Gables Preparatory Academy and knowing that I walked those halls and knowing that 100 years ago, 100 years ago, children were walking through those halls. So, all of that in mind is the SCRC is so thankful for the Commission to give us this time and give us this platform because this is so important, not only to us as the Commission that we are, but to you all in the community as well. I have a background in education. I have a master's degree in education. Winnie has a doctorate degree in education. So, we're coming from a place of some professional understanding. I wasn't always a realtor. I spent many, many years in education. So -- and we do love what Miami Beach is doing, but we also understand that Miami

Beach is literally an island. So, it's a little easier for them to control, right? But we do think that there is a way for Coral Gables as a city to be able to enhance and enrich what may not be out there. Coral Gables Senior High no longer has a marching band. It used to be the band of distinction that won over and over and over again. So, maybe there's a way to, you know -- not to put Fred on the spot -- but maybe there's a way to have music programs for high school students in the city because they currently aren't there. My husband is currently the substitute teacher of music at Coral Gables Prep because there was no music teacher. And it's lovely to hear all the parents giving positive feedback about that. But we know that the students are getting music once a week. They're getting art once a week. And that doesn't start until second grade. So, maybe there are ways that that can be enhanced through -- so we do need a plan. But as Estelle said, it's about a local plan because every municipality through property taxes pays into the district. What we're looking at is a curated plan for our city that's going to benefit the whole from birth through -- you know, it's the alpha to the omega. It's about adult learning just as much as it is about children learning, teenagers, collegiate students, whatever it might be. We're looking at the whole cultural landscape of education and how it can play and continue to be an economic driver for the City. So, again, as a product and a parent of the public school district, I want to thank you all for considering this, and we're excited to work with you all and participate in this ongoing matter. And happy holidays. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for being here with us. Merry Christmas.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, based upon...

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is April Jones.

Mayor Lago: The Vice Mayor was -- excuse me, Mr. Clerk.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'm sorry. I thought we were done with...

Mayor Lago: No, no, go ahead.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I mean, I think there's pretty -- you know, each one of us expressed support to having it added to the strategic plan. Building out the strategic plan is something we can work on next year as for the details, just like with the cultural arts that we voted in favor of. So, I'd just like to make a motion so that people understand that we are supportive of adding this to the strategic plan, but we need to do some work on the details.

Mayor Lago: Can we do --? Do you mind if I, Madam Vice Mayor, which I think we have one more person to listen to...

Vice Mayor Anderson: Sure.

Mayor Lago: And then we'll take up your motion, which I will second. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: So, next speaker is April Jones.

April Jones: Hi, good morning, everyone. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak via Zoom today. My name is April Jones. I reside at 50 Minorca Avenue. I'm speaking as a member of the Coral Gables Preparatory Academy PTSA and a member of the Gables Education Initiative. Thank you, Mayor Lago, Vice Mayor Anderson, and Commissioners for the opportunity to speak on this agenda item and the resolution that was submitted by the School Community Relations Committee. Others have shared the economic impact and the opportunities associated with this resolution as well as benchmarks for what the City Brilliant can be. I'd like to spend a few moments sharing how a group of parents from various schools in our city came together to envision a City Brilliant for our kids. Two election cycles ago, this journey began as schools came together to host a candidates' forum, which many of you participated in. This forum served two purposes. First, it allowed voters the opportunity to hear from candidates, and second, it provided a real-world learning opportunity in civics for our students. This group came together again in early 2023 to host a second candidates' forum. Throughout the forum planning, we realized we had common concerns in regards to education and saw a vision of what the educational landscape could be in Coral Gables. From this vision, the Gables Education Initiative was formed. It's a nonpartisan grassroots effort with representation from schools serving our Coral Gables residents. The Gables Education Initiative has the formal endorsement and support of eight PTA groups representing hundreds of Gables families. We appreciate the support of and partnership with the School Community Relations Committee that has allowed the Gables Education Initiative to see the first phase of its vision become a reality at today's Commission meeting through this resolution. This is a vision that extends beyond the initial ask in the resolution. It will require commitment from all constituents. With that in mind, we proactively shared the Gables Education Initiative's vision with the Commissioners, the Community Foundation, the Chamber of Commerce, the School Board, our PTA membership, and school communities. Together, we will make the City Beautiful, the City Brilliant. Thank you all for the opportunity.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, next speaker is Sam Joseph.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Joseph.

Sam Joseph: Good morning. Good morning, Mayor, Vice Mayor, Commissioners, Madam City Attorney, and Mr. City Manager. Thank you for giving me a moment to speak on this issue. Couple things. I had some prepared remarks, but I definitely want to talk to a couple things that I heard as part of the conversation. First of all, I want to thank and highlight the School Community Relations Committee and its -- and the work that they've been doing, especially since their reauthorization. I thank you, Marlin, for helping to give us the institutional history of where this

all started, when the City Beautiful decided to start looking specifically at education and its educational landscape. And in that over 30 years, it's been quite a journey. And I want folks to remember that this committee at one point was going to be sunsetted because they could not meet quorum as far back as 2014 or 2015. In fact, when the City was going through the issue of trying to get rid of controlled choice with the school district, it was not the School Community Relations Committee that led that effort. That was a grassroots community-led effort that was backed by the City Commission and the City staff. The SCRC was nowhere around in those conversations. It wasn't until its reauthorization in 2015 that the committee really found its legs and understood what its mandate really is. And that is to provide overview and just some community access to the educational landscape and assuring that it's at the highest quality that we can possibly make it. And we're not just talking about public schools, because we've done this before, even in the SCRC, where we've had people come in and say, oh, really, do we have to talk about public schools? It's not just about public schools. It's the full educational landscape of the City Beautiful. And that includes both formal and informal venues where we offer those educational opportunities. First of all, I'm glad it's been mentioned, the City does not spend on education. The 37 percent that comes from our ad valorem taxes is just that. It's our taxes that you collect, but we shouldn't even talk about it being City money or the City spending on anything because that -- by law, you're not allowed to anyway. Your only job is to turn it over to the educational institutions that do that work. But beyond just that, let's talk about the high property values that you and I have enjoyed. Most of that comes by way of our schools and our educational landscape that is among the best, not just in the county, not just in the state, but also, nationally, and with our IB programs, internationally. So, it's important to us as residents that we see that we get a good return on investment on that money that we're putting out for those education -- that landscape and to have a say around that. The SCRC, I think, has been very thoughtful since 2018. We visited Miami Beach and learned -- and saw firsthand what they were doing and heard directly from staff about why it became important for their municipality, among 20 or 30 other municipalities around our county, to be involved in education on more than just a turning over the rolls of ad valorem taxes, of putting your money where your mouth is and getting the results, driving the results that you want. I thank the Commission for being forward-looking and understanding that this is necessary and that we do -- we set a benchmark today. We say, yes, this is in our strategic plan from '26 to '29. But we also need to hear from all 50 thou -- 51,000 residents, because whether you have kids in the schools or not, you're paying for them. And you ought to have a say in what's there. And you ought to have a say in how it affects your community and your neighborhood and your homes. Look, part of the issue -- and I heard this a lot on the SCRC. Sam, we have the best schools. I live right across the street from the best school in the nation, and I can't get my child in it. Well, those were decisions that were made in the past. Sixty-one percent of our kids go to private schools. We chose other places. Use it or lose it. Those seats were gone. Those schools are magnets now. The only way to rectify those issues and to come back -- because we do, a lot of residents want to come back, but that option isn't there. Now they have to be part of a lottery again. The only way we address those issues is if we have somebody on staff at the City who's working directly with the school system to say, here's who we are, here's what our goals for what we want for ourselves and our children, and how do we work together, rolling up our sleeves to

get there. And I think you started that process today once you approve this. And I hope 10, 20 years from now, we're even much further beyond where we are here. But thank you for what you've done so far.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is Cecile Melanie.

Cecile Melanie: Hi, my name is Cecile Melanie, and I'm a Coral Gables resident. I live on Minorca, 2030 South Douglas Road. I'm a mom. I used to work in the Gables for 20 years, but I lived in Miami Beach. I moved to Coral Gables because of schools. And yeah, it's really like many said before, and Joshua and Estelle, I would like to support education as part of the strategic plan. We -- you know, education comes before school, after school, during the school. I remember 20 years ago when I worked in the Gables, you know, I would never imagine to send my daughter to Coral High. Twenty years ago, it was a bad time for the school. Now it's an IB and it has a lot of potential. I just want to say that I support all this initiative, and I think it's very important to have a plan for the City. We need walkability, bike-ability -- I don't know if it's a word -- after school. So, a lot of folks, children in general, that live in the Gables -- and there are many and many. But just want to thank everybody for putting so much time, all the presenters. And we need to keep on going, the dialogue with everything, the development around the school, the traffic and everything. Thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

City Clerk Urquia: That's it, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Alright, perfect. Are there any other further comments? We have a motion and a second.

Commissioner Menendez: I'll move it.

City Attorney Suárez: Can we just clarify the motion, please?

Vice Mayor Anderson: It's already moved.

Commissioner Menendez: Oh, sorry. Did we second?

Vice Mayor Anderson: The motion is to add the school to our strategic plan, as requested by the SCRC. The details of the plan, we'll have to work out through meetings, Sunshine meetings, you know, hearing input from the community.

Commissioner Menendez: I read the resolution again, and I think it's, like you said, we can work on the details. It's a good platform. It gives us the ability -- the way that it's written, it gives us the ability to make the adjustments that are needed, so I agree with you.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Right. It's already had a first and a second. We just need to vote.

Commissioner Menendez: Yeah.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes.

Commissioner Castro: Yes.

[The audio ends here.]