

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-3
March 8, 2022
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Michael Mena

Commissioner Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Jorge Fors

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Attorney, Miriam Ramos

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Community Recreation Director, Fred Couceyro

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item G-3 [Start: 4:21 p.m.]
Discussion regarding Catalonia Park.
(Sponsored by Commissioner Menendez) (Sponsored by Commissioner Anderson)

Mayor Lago: G-3.

Commissioner Anderson: Catalonia Park.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes, thank you Mayor. I think a lot of you know that Catalonia Park has been a challenge, I think for the city and for our residents. Its beautifully situated, it's a beautiful park, and as a Commissioner I get calls and e-mails concerned, parents of small children that take their kids to the park, and their dog is sometimes bigger than their toddler kids, obviously, they are little, that are not on leashes. So, we have on one hand residents that want to have their dogs at the park, and then on the other side we have parents that want their young kids to be able to use the park without the concerns of dogs on the loose. If you don't mind, I could have Fred Couceyro, to come up. We've been at this for a while and I'm ready to propose, at least an idea,
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to see on a temporary resolution or temporary solution. I know that we are going to be discussing at 5 p.m., the referendum issue, the bond money, and hopefully if that moves forward, we could use that, some of those funds to acquire land for dog parks. So, my idea, I guess what Commissioner Anderson, you always said something about the baby, kiss the baby, split the baby, I think it is, right, split the baby.

Commissioner Anderson: Split the baby. I'm going to add in some of the things that were shared with me.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes. So my thoughts with Catalonia Park is, would it be possible to designate with a gate system part of the park to make it exclusively for dogs, and then the rest exclusively just for families and kids and not the dogs, so that we buy time, we lower the temperature, because some of those confrontations I've heard of have been heated and it gives us time to find other areas to create dog parks. I'm just looking for a solution, because people are unhappy on both sides.

Commissioner Anderson: Typically, there is more than one solution and that's why I'm especially happy that you're here, because we've been having this conversation since the summer, I believe, about looking for locations for off-leash dog parks. There is no point having an on-leash dog park and just keep on walking. So, solutions such as splitting the baby, if you want to try to have a section of a small park segregated off for children and the rest with dogs, being able to run off-leash. We have other options that are close by. I don't know if you've had an opportunity to look at them yet, such as the one near Salvadore Park. I haven't taken a tape measure to it yet, between the tennis court and the sidewalk, but people want something, and they want it off-leash within that walking radius. I've been working on this since before the election, and you run into various issues, such as, they don't want people parking on the swale, so we need to address that with a handicap parking spot, with landscaping that prevents that type of stuff, and perhaps some signage as well. And building the park in a way that it doesn't turn into a mud pit. So that's the other concern. Believe me, I have dogs that like to run, as you well know, and a Greyhound can go up to 45 miles per hour, but they don't need to have the biggest plot of land in the city, nor do the other dogs that want to chase after them. Have you looked at the Salvadore Park possibilities to put in a fenced area there?

Director Couceyro: A private lot across the street on the eastern side.

Commissioner Anderson: Not the private lot, because we don't own it.

Director Couceyro: Right.

Commissioner Anderson: But I'm talking about between the tennis courts and Valencia there is a meandering sidewalk.

Director Couceyro: Oh, the swale area next to the street.

Commissioner Anderson: Its not the swale. Its between the sidewalk and the tennis courts. Its wider there.

Director Couceyro: Okay. I have not looked at that. So, I will look at that. We were looking at possibility of that lot across the street. I thought that was...

Commissioner Anderson: I would love to get that lot across the street.

Director Couceyro: Its privately owned. But no, we can look at that. I don't know what the size is. As you said, the big challenges are, even if we are looking at splitting Catalonia, once you do that, its more than just putting a fence. We've got to look at surfacing because, if you've got a small piece of land, a lot of dogs running around, there is no way you can keep that grass going. There are solutions and all it is, is funding. You can do artificial canine grass and that kind of stuff, and you can do certain things like that. And there are – we've seen some setups for smaller dog areas, they call them dog runs, or they call them dog relief areas, different companies call them different things, and they have setups for it. You have to have a special kind of fencing; you have to have the turf. So, you can do that, we just have to, if that's the direction that we want to go we can. We would have to identify certain spaces and make sure that we're able to split it to the point where we don't have the issues that you are talking about.

Commissioner Anderson: Okay. We started this right after I got elected.

Director Couceyro: Right. As we've talked about, we've identified a couple of different areas. Our plan was to have bigger ones to have throughout the city, you know our city is long and linear, and you know we have a couple already in the south. Eventually, we are going to get the one in the middle, just under the rail, and then the ones we have to look at are in the north. There is a possibility with one looking at a possible transformation of a lot, as I've talked about with the City Manager, the Lot 13 that's being used right now for the Public Safety Building once that garage is up, I have continued to stump for a dog park there, and I know there has been discussions on that north end spot that was going to be an entryway, that piece of land, that would be another one. You can have beautiful entryway signage and do some sort of dog thing behind it. That's for the big ones. That's what we talked about eventually.

Commissioner Anderson: That's nice.

Director Couceyro: The big one is practical and that's where we, I guess what we need to have is, we need to look at what direction we want to be from the city, because if we are going to go into parks that are already designated for their use, and we are going to go in there and change it. Obviously, we have to go to community input and everything else.

Commissioner Anderson: But that was opened up as an off-leash park, that's the way it was opened up. It had a water fountain.

Director Couceyro: Which one?

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Commissioner Anderson: Catalonia – it was opened up as an off-leash park.

Director Couceyro: No. It was not, I'm sorry.

Commissioner Anderson: That's the way it was signed. You have a dog way spin in there. It was used for a substantial period of time that way, but it wasn't designed properly.

Director Couceyro: Commissioner, when we went to the community, they wanted a dog-friendly park, they didn't want it to be unleashed, off-leash, and I understand what you're saying about, well why have a leash park. When we went to the community, they wanted a child park. They were okay with families being able to bring their dogs, as long as they were on leash.

Mayor Lago: Fred, could I ask you a quick question, I'm sorry to interrupt you, because we could be here for hours, and we have 30 minutes. As a matter of fact, G-4, Mr. Clerk, which is my item, I am going to pass it unto the next Commission meeting. We are in the process, its already out there, we discussed it at the development agreement meeting with the University of Miami. I've been working on for the last few years. We are going to start sitting at the table with University of Miami in regard to a massive piece of property that we hope to bring into our portfolio. This is a legacy item for this Commission. That could be a great home for a portion of it to be a big dog park.

Director Couceyro: You're correct.

Mayor Lago: Why don't we have a Sunshine meeting to talk about dog parks, just dog parks, not parks, just dog parks.

Director Couceyro: Sure.

Mayor Lago: And we can talk about, we can analyze all existing parks, we can have a conversation. We bring up dog parks here constantly, we talk about them. We can talk about what's our portfolio is going to look like. How we are looking at what are our options for the future? – where are we looking at properties, and we could do something like that.

Director Couceyro: Sure.

Commissioner Menendez: Can I make a second request in addition. I think that's a great idea, Mayor. With regards to Catalonia, just because its an ongoing issue, and by the way, I want to recognize that the majority of the folks with dogs abide by the rules; they are on a leash, they are well behaved. Its just on occasion things get out of control. Can you come back, maybe the next meeting or the April meeting with how you can adapt, make changes, because folks in that area are just already used to it being for dogs. So even if we open up somewhere else, its just become a habit, you know, its part of their way of life. So, in addition to the great idea the Mayor had, can you come back with how we can retrofit Catalonia, to sort of alleviate that situation because it's not going away.

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Commissioner Anderson: Its not going away and I'll just, I hate to belabor this, but I spent a lot of time there talking to people, and when I talk to the people who are there with children, and I ask the children, what would you like to see here? They'd like to see some climbing toys; they'd like to see some other things. I understand that some of the legacy people like the turtles in there; they are hot, they are not practical as a play toy. Using that lot as a play place for children is not practical either. We have some beautiful decorative rocks that are literally dangerous for children to play in there. So, I know that there is some vision that residents may have of things that they may want, but if its not practical to be able to utilize it for children to play in, then we need to give them guidance.

Mayor Lago: Let's schedule a Sunshine meeting for April and we can have a conversation on that, okay.

Commissioner Anderson: Okay.

Mayor Lago: But please circle some dates with the Commission and we'll have a conversation in regard to dog parks.