

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting**  
**Agenda Item D – Public Comment**  
**March 28, 2023**  
**City Commission Chambers**  
**405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL**

**City Commission**

**Mayor Vince Lago**  
**Vice Mayor Michael Mena**  
**Commissioner Rhonda Anderson**  
**Commissioner James Cason**  
**Commissioner Kirk Menendez**

**City Staff**

**City Attorney, Cristina Suárez**  
**City Manager, Peter Iglesias**  
**City Clerk, Billy Urquia**  
**Police Chief, Ed Hudak**

**Public Speaker(s)**

**Maria Cruz**  
**Christopher Challenger**  
**Jackson Rip Holmes**  
**Jessica Keller**  
**Karelia Carbonell**

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Agenda Item D [12:35 p.m.]  
Public Comment

Mayor Lago: I'm going to move it to Public Comment, so I can get that done with today.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, we have four speakers today, three in person, one on Zoom. First speaker is Ms. Maria Cruz.

Ms. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road, Coral Gables, Florida. I have serious concern about how we look at the compensation report. I think its really bad that we have people that are paid so little and people that are paid so much, and I understand the compensation report, I think, that some people that make a lot of money still should be making more money, but I do not know how to go around it. Perhaps instead of percentages, because when you deal with people that make little

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money, even if you give them ten percent, its nothing. But when you deal with people that are making lots more money, when you give them ten percent, it's a lot of money. So maybe there should be some, I don't know, some compromise so the low paying, low salaried employees in this city make enough to have a decent life, and that's what I'm mentioning because when you have people that barely can make, barely can buy the minimum necessities we're not doing a good job.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is Mr. Christopher Challenger.

Vice Mayor Mena: Really briefly just because that reminded me. I had stepped out, unfortunately, during I-6, I just wanted to register my vote in favor.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir.

Vice Mayor Mena: Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Christopher Challenger.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Challenger, good afternoon.

Mr. Challenger: Hi, how are you?

Mayor Lago: Good. How are you, sir.

Mr. Challenger: Good luck, Mr. Mena, in the future. Christopher Challenger, 265 Sevilla. I'm the President of the Coral Gables Fraternal Order of Police, Lodge 7. I've been a Coral Gables officer for over 21 years. I would like to address you today on an issue that affects the heart and soul of our police department, that's our morale. It is the subject of paramount importance as the effectiveness of our work is directly linked to the spirit and motivation of our officers. First, I would like to address the recent cancellation of our longstanding workout policy. Without any clear explanation, other than the union utilizing a grievance process and possible workers comp coverage, it was removed. Physical fitness is not only an essential to our performance on the job, but it also plays a significant role in our mental and wellbeing. By abruptly cancelling these workouts, we have inadvertently sent a message to our officers that their health and welfare are not priority. This decision, as trivial as it may seem, has had a negative impact on our department's morale and overall sense of camaraderie. Another issue causing distress among our officers is the department's policy on calling out sick. Just starting recently, when an officer is unwell, and I'll say in a non-uniform manner, a supervisor is sent to the residence to ensure they are home. This practice suggests an underlying mistrust in our officers and creates an atmosphere of suspicion instead of supporting our officers during a time of illness. We are adding unnecessary stress to

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their lives, further eroding the morale within our ranks. I would also like to bring to your attention another issue that has come to light, further eroding the morale in our department. A significant number of our officers have applied to Miami-Dade County Police Department, and they've had their applications process halted. The reason behind this is deeply concerning. The department has called the Miami-Dade Police Department asking them not to hire ten percent of our department. This action not only undermines the career aspirations of our officers, but breeds resentment and mistrust within our ranks. Lastly, the practice of bringing outside personnel to fill upper rank positions has had a stifling effect on the opportunities for growth and advancement within our department. Our officers who work tirelessly to protect and serve our community deserve a fair chance to rise through the ranks and develop their careers. By denying this opportunity, we are hampering their motivation and creating a sense of stagnation within our department. May I continue?

Mayor Lago: Of course.

Mr. Challenger: Never mind that the upper rank positions that we're filling with retired personnel come from the very department we are preventing officers to go to, and say that, that is not a knock on any people we've brought here. Chief Hanlon, he's doing an excellent job and it's not a knock on him or anybody else, it's just a morale issue. To rebuild morale, we must first acknowledge and validate the concerns of our officers. We must create an environment that fosters trust, respect, and open communication. It is crucial that we address the issue of interfering with officers' career prospects in other departments. Such action send a clear message that our department does not support the growth and development of its members, further deteriorating morale and unity. In conclusion, it is evident that our department is facing a critical challenge and maintaining the morale and motivation of our officers. We must confront these issues headon, starting with recognizing the problems and working together to create a supportive and empowering atmosphere. By doing so, we can restore the pride and motivation that our officers need to excel in their careers and continue to serve the community with dedication and professionalism, and I'd also like to thank the residents of Coral Gables for always backing us up. I appreciate it.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Mr. Chief, would you be so kind to join us. Thank you. How are you sir?

Chief Hudak: Good.

Mayor Lago: You obviously heard the gentleman's statements, would you like to add anything further, a little bit more color to his comments?

Chief Hudak: Sure. We had a grievance procedure about an individual who hasn't worked here, I think it was a total of 24 days, and during those 24 days was serving our county on military leave. He was in town, took military leave, and notified the SWAT Commander that he was not available, he was not in town. The recommendation to me was to remove him from the SWAT Team. I chose

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not to remove him from the SWAT Team, put him on an inactive status, which means he can continue to collect his money, as legally he is entitled to. Part of the workout program that that officer was entitled to was, SWAT officers are allowed to workout an hour a day and take their lunch. In 2008, when I was a Major, and then Chief Hammerschmidt, we started a workout program for patrol officers. If they did not take their lunch break, and their two 15-minute breaks, they are allowed to come in, workout, and then go back, with the supervisor's approval. Every officer in this department has that ability to this day, of this decision. We also then extended it to our civilian employees. You've heard me say many times about the stresses of being a Communications Operator, we extended it to them. During the conversation and the grievance procedure that came through, because the union grieved the fact that this individual officer was not allowed to workout under that SWAT auspice, and I stated to him that, and its recorded because I sent it out to the troops yesterday that I don't know if you want to go down this road, because I'm sure I will be asked, as I was, to do more in depth analysis of workers comp claims, calls for service. This body here just gave us 15 more bodies, I've got to justify why we need those bodies. Part of that workout time was factored into that. So the decision was made and I talked with the Manager and the HR Director that until those questions are answered, and as I said, in a video to the troops, the workout policy is on hold until we answer those questions. The other problem we have is that we're paying that. Now, we are the only police department in Miami-Dade County that allows their employees to workout on duty, can't find one. One tried. To the point some other agencies don't even allow their employees to use their gymnasium without signing a waiver. We have the waivers. This city, this body, this department and this Chief have never done that because we have always backed up our people, and that has been completely from the beginning. That's how the program started. It has been suspended. It has been suspended before. It is absolutely written into the policy that its solely the Chief's discretion to have this policy. As far as the morale issues; yes, there are conversations, there was an active movement within the FOP to convince young officers to leave and go to other jurisdictions for certain reasons. One of them being retirement issues, which they gladly posted last week when I was in Tallahassee supporting it as a member of the Florida Police Chiefs, saying that they need to change their FRS back to what we have. Now, as far as the officers leaving, several have talked to me. It's a very simple fix. The Miami-Dade Police Department talked with other Chiefs, myself included, and we had conversations. You cannot decimate all of your other jurisdictions by hiring enmass, very simple. They just chose not to hire so many people at the same time. There's other departments that have 13. Now, there's a fix to this and I have given this personally to one of the officers who came to see me. If you want to go to Miami-Dade and have a job, and they're not hiring anybody currently working in Coral Gables, quit. Once you quit, they are going to hire you, because you don't work here anymore. Now, the other policy that everybody needs to understand is that it has been my policy that if somebody leaves just because the grass is greener, I will not bring them back. If somebody applies and they are on Marine Patrol, or they are a detective, has nothing to do with their work, it is an operational necessity and easier, I should say, for me to fill the position on an

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officer than it is a detective. So two or three of these detectives have applied. I have nothing to say bad about any of them. They were great detectives. They decided to move on. They went back to patrol, some of them got hired. I don't know what goes on in the minds of the hiring people at Miami-Dade, and they've asked me, okay, what's this person done? – here's the book. It is a very transparent action. But the issue that I have is, if it is the position of the current FOP administration to talk officers into going someplace else to better position themselves for benefits here, I think that's a great disservice to the men and women who I lead. Quite frankly, I don't know really what to say. I have had and I still have a great relationship with the union. To this day, even though they don't represent me, I pay dues to the FOP, always have, never stopped. Some people stop, some people start again. I believe that a morale is a two-sided sword. I will do whatever I can to improve the morale, but if bringing morale is so that officers can wear beards, I'm just maybe too old school. I don't think look works. We have tried, we looked at it, I will continue to look at it, but if somebody wants to wear a beard in uniform, they don't need to work in Coral Gables, that's Ed Hudak's opinion.

Mayor Lago: I just want to touch this briefly and we have to move on. First off, thank you for the explanation. Besides undermining the city, our public safety, which there is no room for that, is it your opinion, it is my opinion so I'll put this out there, that a lot of the maneuvers that you're seeing by the FOP are maneuvers in an effort to somehow, somehow intimidate this Commission, the City Manager, our Finance team, and our negotiations team in an effort to somehow, somehow get what they want in regards to negotiations for union issues.

Chief Hudak: I don't know if its undermining. There is a YouTube video out, in true transparency, and I know that word gets thrown around a lot. I sat down, like a fireside chat with about, I don't know, 30 or 40 members. We had anonymous letters, because to Chris' statements, I'm very intimidating in my department. We had a box that was locked that had questions. I read the questions for the first time and answered, this is recorded, its on YouTube, you can see it. We asked question after question after question. The first question out of the box was, and written on a piece of paper is, when the union votes or if there is a vote of no confidence, will you step aside? – and I said no. So that was the first question, and we went on. And honestly, this is not – you have me here to make decisions on what I think is best for the department, and if some people don't like the fact that they weren't ready for those promotions, that's fine. Discipline, I award it. It goes through him, him being the Manager, excuse me, and if its overturned its overturned, they go to arbitration. If we go to an arbitration, but I will tell you, the union's position on arbitration is, they are going to get someone else outside to look at it. Under my administration, all of my cases, city has not lost an arbitration, and I still believe that the union is here to make sure that I do my job right, that's the job of any union. It is not to get bad guys out of jail, to get bad cops. That's my job is to identify them. Their job is to make sure I do it right. But is equally, as equally it is my job to make sure that the residents of this place is safe, that I find the right officers and put them in the right place, the morale is for me and from the union as well. If you're pushing people

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to leave the department, my job is to make sure we run this right, and Commissioner, Mayor, excuse me, Mayor you know. I've run this place with 17 bodies down. I'm good with it.

Mayor Lago: First of all, I appreciate that. If the Commission will indulge me, I'd like to pass the gavel over to the Vice Mayor. I'd like to make a motion in support of our Chief, a vote of confidence for his efforts and for his leadership in regards to the police department here in the City of Coral Gables.

Commissioner Cason: Motion.

Commissioner Menendez: I'll second.

Commissioner Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Cason: Yes

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

Vice Mayor Mena: Yes

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Let's be clear, on both fronts, today we had a settlement, came to an agreement, thank you to Raquel, the Manager, with our general employees, we need to move forward with the police and fire, we need to get down to business, we need to cut a deal. You will not intimidate this Commission. You will not get me, no matter how many YouTube videos, or how many Billy Corbins, or how many political blogs you hire, I will not change my opinion. I have full faith and confidence in the Manager, full faith and confidence in our City Attorney, our City Clerk, our Fire Chief, our Police Chief, I stand with the employees, but you will not, anonymous YouTube videos, blogs, one hit wonders on Instagram, calling elected officials corrupt, its not going to happen, under no circumstances. I'm not going to make a decision that will hinder the future of this city, based on intimidation, anonymous intimidation. My office is always open, we're available starting 2 o'clock on Fridays, some of my colleagues are there. I've met with the unions, we've sat down, we had conversations, we are willing to negotiate, but we've got to negotiate together. We didn't call for an impasse, that wasn't the city's position, that was the union's position and we moved forward, and I look forward, I look forward to putting this to rest, just like we did with the general employees. Chief, the city stands behind you. We're blessed to have you here in the city, along with every single one of our police officers and our firefighters. Let's get down to the business at hand and that is protecting our city.

Chief Hudak: Thank you sir.

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Mayor Lago: Thank you Chief. Moving onto the next item.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is Mr. Jackson Rip Holmes.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Holmes.

Mr. Holmes: So, this is obviously a tough subject. However, I think it needs to be an open subject and the people who are watching you should chime in with your opinions, because in my experience in my 25 years since returning to Coral Gables where I was born, and trying to involve myself with city government to bring a department store to the Miracle Mile area, there is no higher priority, the top priority, the single top budget priority of our voters and our residents is this one, that is to say that they want a strong police force, and I salute the new union President, Chris Challenger for raising this issue. There is obvious controversy and its not certain as to how it all shakes out, but it's the number one issue of all of our spending, nothing is more important than this, and it needs to be publicized and all the people who care about our city should chime in. If we have to ire one side or the other, I say we pay the police too much rather than too little. We can't afford to lose good police officers. I'm not saying that we all have a full grasp of the issues, but this needs to be public and it needs to be revisited and if I were sitting where you are, maybe I'll never get there, I would tell the police, we're going to raise your pay, we don't know how much, don't leave us.

Mayor Lago: Thank you sir. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is Ms. Jessica Keller, she is on Zoom.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Keller, good afternoon.

Ms. Keller: Good afternoon, my name is Jessica Keller and I'm a resident of Coral Gables. I wasn't planning on thanking Mike Mena today, but I want to thank you for your service...[Inaudible]...when I was employed by the city. Your thoughtful and even keeled and its much appreciated but now I hope you go onto get to enjoy your life. That said, I tuned in today to follow up on the public request I made after the last Commission meeting, two weeks ago. I learned that bicycle infrastructure was being excluded from Biltmore Way and requested the preferred alternative and the data to support the decision. I followed up and I have not received a response. I just want to make sure that its being worked on.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk would you do me a favor.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir.

Mayor Lago: Would you make sure that we provide Ms. Keller her request.

City Clerk Urquia: We will sir.

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Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker, Mr. Mayor is Ms. Karelia Carbonell, also on Zoom.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Carbonell, the floor is yours.

Ms. Carbonell: Good morning. Good afternoon, everyone. I really do also want to send best wishes to Commissioner Mena and with the beautiful ceremony this morning, so I just wish him and his family all the best. I do want to read something that's very prevalent today, obviously it's something very important today, as part of the proclamation recognizing Women's History Month. Almost 70 years ago, the city elected its first female Commissioner and please give me a few minutes so that I can read just a brief history on the Honorable Lucille Neyhare, in recognition of that proclamation this morning. In 1951, Lucille Neyhare won a seat on the Coral Gables Commission as the first female elected official on the dais. Lucille, a native of Ohio, added Madam Commissioner to her other titles of wife, mother, and business owner. She served for six years in the Gables City Commission, a two-year term and then was reelected to a four-year term. According to media reports, she declined to seek reelection in 1957, to make way for somebody else. Lucille Pretts was born on a farm in Plain City, Ohio in 1902. After graduating from Ohio University, she moved to Florida to sell real estate. That career was cut short by the real estate bust of 1925, and she pursued an opportunity in government. During that time, she met her future husband and they moved to Coral Gables, where Lucille lived for 42 years until her death in 1967. As Coral Gables Commissioner, she is credited with bringing a woman's touch to City Hall renovations, including the addition of a mural at the top of the building where you are all now, at the top of the building stairway is a wall mural, painted by renowned American painter and illustrator John St. John. The whole mural is titled, Landmarks of the 20's and depicts buildings and scenes from the years of Coral Gables. Commissioner Neyhare commissioned this piece in 1957. She was also – her other accomplishments and I'm almost done, her other accomplishments as Commissioner included the beautiful...of the main entrance and plazas and the planting of thousands of trees and shrubs along the pathways. She also sponsored adding and/or repairing sidewalks in many neighborhoods, school areas and commercial districts. Among her many awards and accolades, Lucille Neyhare was named Women of Achievement, a Woman of Achievement by business and professional women's clubs of South Florida during her first tenure as Coral Gables City Commissioner. So with that said, I thank the Commission for recognizing Women's History Month with a proclamation and I do hope that now we can all honor Ms. Neyhare somehow as our first female City Commissioner. So thank you for the opportunity.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Mr. Clerk.

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

Mayor Lago: Alright. Let's close the public comment.

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