

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-1
October 24, 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

Solanch Lopez

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item F-1 [2:30 p.m.]

Discussion regarding businesses on Giralda Avenue
(Sponsored by Commissioner Castro)

Mayor Lago: Moving onto item F-1.

Commissioner Castro: F-1 is a discussion regarding businesses on Giralda. We had one of the owners of Bar 77 here in Public Comments saying what was going on in Giralda. I have 14 businesses advocating for more – here’s the video. Thank you. Thank you for the video. This video is Saturday afternoon, probably a month ago, and this is how Giralda is looking. Not a lot of business is flowing through there and a lot of the businesses of Giralda are suffering as a consequence of this. So, I wanted to bring this up to the Commission, so we could brainstorm. I know Belkys is doing a very good job as well and she’s having meetings with these business owners. These are some recommendations business owners have told me. Maybe it’s too late, but maybe we could consider this for next October. They were saying maybe we could expand the trick or treating event a little more into Giralda to do like a loop on Miracle Mile, that would be

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beneficial. Another thing they suggested was softening the special event permit fees. I don't know what you guys think about that. They think that maybe they brought in their own vendors and got a special event permit, maybe they'll be a little more traffic. They are just very frustrated and maybe we could brainstorm. Oh, they want the umbrellas back, that's something that all of them have advocated for. We brainstorm together, maybe we can figure out how to help them and for the residents that are watching, come on down to Giralda.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Commissioner – because I know the heat has been a considerable issue and I remember when the umbrellas were there, the trees were very tiny at the time, and they did provide some additional shade and relief. My granddaughter was down, who had just been born in the summertime, and so it was kind of nice to have the break from the heat and we can go from umbrellas to flower designs, to ribbons, other things to change it up, but when was that video taken.

Commissioner Castro: About a month ago.

Vice Mayor Anderson: About a month ago, so we were still pretty much in the heat. It's a challenge. It is a big challenge to get people out there. Did the shop owners share with you what kind of special events we're talking about that people would be willing to go to in 90-plus heat.

Commissioner Castro: Yes. I've heard like yoga and other little things depending on the business owner. But the umbrellas would be a great idea.

Vice Mayor Anderson: The heat has been horrendous this past year, more so than any other year that I've experienced in the downtown Coral Gables area, and Giralda was not alone. Lack of traffic during certain hours, so maybe some more evening activities we could do.

Commissioner Castro: So, let's do something about the heat. Let's bring in the umbrellas or if it's not the umbrellas something that provides shade.

Commissioner Fernandez: I know that Belkys has definitely done quite a bit of trying to attract folks to Giralda. I know we had that concert series that was held during the summer, which was a daytime event on weekdays to try to attract the local people who were having lunch. We had that brunch on Giralda which Solanch was there. It was so hot that day, it was impossible to even be out there from how hot it was. But it was also good to see that the business owners were also wanted to be part of the city events. Giralda is one of those places that's a little different from other areas because it really relies on that pedestrian traffic that's coming there. It's not like Miracle Mile that somebody can see, oh that restaurant looks like its hopping, tonight I'm going to stop and go to dinner there. To go to Giralda you have to be planning on going to Giralda. I think the Christmas Tree is going to be or the Holiday Tree, whatever we call it now, is going to be a big draw. Was it 30 feet you said, Solanch. I know that the archway went in this weekend and it will be in there for a few weeks, but I definitely think that we should start looking at ways that our

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Economic Development Department can start working with the businesses in that area because if this is going to be a focal point of Coral Gables, which I think it has been in the times of the year. I remember it was during Covid, you and I went to lunch there at the burger place, Clutch Burger, and there wasn't a place to sit, it was packed. I think we need to start attracting people back there. Umbrella Sky was definitely, the shade did help. The exhibit that came after that wasn't as popular, but it was still really a cool thing to go see, because you had those words that were reflected on the ground, but I guess, the question is, we have to find funding for whatever it is we're going to do there, and I think we need to get serious about something we have discussed. You brought up a few months back, which was finding ways to tackle the heat in some of these areas, because that will help.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I think it's an overall problem of the entire CBD, the lack of trees on certain streets and there's going to have to be a give and take. So, I will try to press forward on solving some of the parking issues by getting the building built and then we can start maybe a contract growing some trees to bring them in at a larger size.

Commissioner Menendez: I just want to give an observation. I'm wondering if restaurants near Giralda are suffering because Friday night my wife and I went, wanted to go have some coffee at Graziano's Marketplace, we couldn't find a table. It was overrun with – it overflowed into the sidewalk. So, I just wonder, is it an issue also of new places popping up in the area drawing people away from Giralda. I'm just curious to see how other areas nearby are being affected, other restaurants. That's another thing that popped into my mind.

City Manager Iglesias: We have a number of initiatives on Giralda that we can mention now. The umbrellas were about \$200,000, so it's not a cheap event.

Mayor Lago: And I don't think, this is me personally, maybe I'm wrong, hope I'm wrong. I don't think by bringing the umbrellas back you're going to catch that fever again. It's been there done that. I don't think it's going to happen, but I'm more than willing to do it again. I think the issue that we have here is that when you look at Giralda. I was here when we started that project, a well-intentioned project and I love that project to this day. I think it was great to close that street, allow there to be seating, but it's not a venue space. I think what you need and what we've been missing that whole time is what I've talked about a few times before and that is converting the 15 parking spaces that are there in the parking lot into a park, and then what you do is, you abandon the street across the street and you connect it to the park, and now you have an actual open space that you could put pavers on, you could have a band, you can have a lot of different activities connected to a park. It's the same problem that we're going to have with Ponce Circle Park, after we spend the millions of dollars that we're going to spend, but we're going to do it. I'm in favor of it. I'm just telling you that if you really want to address things here, I'm not being facetious, the Japanese invented it, in the Middle East they're doing it. You have to build giant domes because there is no

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other way to get people here out to have dinner. I will not sit outside eight months out of the year, potentially nine. It is unbearable to sit outside. We live in South Florida. This used to be a swamp. The humidity here is unbearable. So, we have to be honest with ourselves. Are we putting a glass dome over Giralda? – no. That will never happen. What can we do? If you have fans, how many fans are you going to – how is that going to affect the atmosphere, the sound, the noise, the experience. We have to come up with a way to get more people there through shade, through activation and that park, I know it’s an alley, but maybe we can do something with that alley. Maybe we can cut some of those parking spaces, hug the alleyway to the street, and then make an immediate left, make it an immediate left and then you close that street there and you push it all the way into the park. I’ve envisioned that. I’ve mentioned that for years. It takes real political will, because you’re going to get the neighbors in the area who use that parking space. I may have Kevin Kinney come out here and kill me, you know. He’ll probably tell me how much profit he makes on that parking lot, but these are monumental types of projects that if you start working on them now, you may see them deliver in four or five or six or seven years. Case in point, the Underline; case in point, the White Way Lights; case in point, the pieces of property that I’m bringing, hopefully in the December meeting. The Manager is finalizing negotiations. This is the type of project that if we’re willing to attack it, and do a real study, I don’t think the answer sits on Giralda. I don’t think the answer sits on a piece of art. You’re talking to the guy who loves art more than anybody else. You tell me you want to spend money on art, I’m all for it. I just don’t see how someone’s going to come to Giralda for nine months out of the year. Let me give you an example. I ate at Brochure this Sunday, took my whole family to eat there. When the guy at Brochure pointed me outside, I said, nope, I’ll wait inside. No, we’ll put in a fan. I want to be inside. I don’t care. I’ll wait an hour. I don’t care what it takes. People don’t want to wait. People don’t want to sit outside, and I hate to say this, but when you have kids, they become more restless, people are nicely dressed up, you become soaked because of the sweat, the humidity. So, it’s tough. The best times, November, December, October are exceptional to be out there or if you’re watching sports and you’ve had ten beers, it doesn’t really matter. But my point is, I don’t see and I’m willing to hire a consultant, I’m willing to attack it anyway you want it. I just don’t know how we’re going to handle the heat and how we’re going to handle making it a permanent venue that draws people twelve months out of the year, which is what I aspire to. That’s my dream.

Commissioner Castro: I actually really like your idea.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Say that again.

Commissioner Castro: I actually really, really like your idea. I really like your idea and I think that maybe we could make the little park a little more kid oriented, maybe more families would go just because of the park and end up either shopping or eating. As far as the umbrellas, I know that the most expensive thing about the umbrellas are the trusses, right.

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Ms. Lopez: That's over \$100,000.

Commissioner Castro: So how about if we just have them permanent instead of taking them on and off...

Ms. Lopez: Hurricane season makes that difficult.

City Manager Iglesias: The problem is they are not hurricane resistant, so if there's a hurricane you have to take everything down. And the problem with the park is there's an alley and we can't get into the alley so that's the problem that we have with that park, Mayor.

Mayor Lago: What you do with the alley is, you take the alley and then you hug the alley against the wall for the neighboring business and that opens up all those parking spaces and it gives you an L-shaped kind of feel.

City Manager Iglesias: Remember Mayor, it needs truck traffic too. That's the problem.

Mayor Lago: But there also comes a point where we have to figure something out.

Commissioner Fernandez: To the Mayor's point, I think there's an appetite on the Commission to do this. Let's make a resolution instructing staff to start exploring this option and start working on this.

City Manager Iglesias: We actually have a design as part of Giralda for that park. It was designed.

Commissioner Fernandez: Can you bring it to the next meeting.

City Manager Iglesias: It was done because of the cost and the fact that – it has to be designed for that truck traffic to get out. So, there is a design for that, that was part of the Giralda project. I believe it's roughly a million dollars.

Commissioner Fernandez: Can you bring it up at the next meeting and we can discuss it then.

City Manager Iglesias: We can bring it up. Maybe a situation where trucks have to go during certain hours or something like that.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Manager, I think what we can do there and I mentioned it to you before, budget constraints, obviously have made it difficult, because I think that the idea of abandoning that street. It's not like what we were talking about in regard to Ponce Circle Park, which I remember our then director of zoning almost had a nervous breakdown when we mentioned that. He was a nice gentleman, but it's a historic street and he was kind of not willing to even entertain it. I think that if we abandon that street to a certain point, we cut it off, and we're able to redirect that traffic, and maybe reshape, get rid of the hedges, leave the trees, maybe we push out a little bit – maybe we push out that park a little bit since there's no restaurants there. We push out that park a little bit

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into the pavers that we did, so we can actually have a street that comes out, out into those parking spaces and then comes left, and then you have the connection into that park and then you can take the sidewalk and make the sidewalk go around the park, just connecting to the park. Yes, it's going to cost money, but we looked at a plan before, maybe we could have staff on your team...

City Manager Iglesias: If we can bring it back in December. Let us take a little bit of a look because the devil is always in the details. Let us take a look at that and we can bring back that in December. Having to take a look at the right-of-way issues and we can also bring back the little drawings that were done for that area. We did part of it when we did the coral, that was part of that job, but it extended in and because of the cost, because of the high cost it wasn't done at that time. Also, the fact of the impact of the alley, but we can take a look, a good look at that and come back to the meeting in December.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Commissioner Menendez: I have a quick question, maybe when it comes back. I'd like to know what, if it's possible to measure, the demographics of the people that go to Giralda for dinner or dining, whatever experience versus Miracle Mile. Commissioner Castro mentioned about bringing families. I think when it first opened up, I think it was more family-based clientele and I think in time it shifted, it shifted, it shifted. The times I've gone there, it's really like young adults, 20-something year olds, but before you'll see large families with kids and stuff like that. I'm just curious to see what the demographics are Giralda versus Miracle Mile. I think we might be surprised there are totally different demographics.

Ms. Lopez: I know we can get pedestrian counts. We would have to look at how to perhaps from credit card data. That would be a little tough.

Commissioner Menendez: I'm in no rush, but I think it's something to look into.

Mayor Lago: Anything else Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'm just – the more shade we can bring, living as close as I do to Biltmore Way, I can feel the difference even at night. You walk from the shaded streets to out here you can feel the heat radiating from the asphalt. So, whatever we can do to change the way this whole area how it looks, it will benefit us at night, foot traffic, as well as day foot traffic. I have seen a similar change in the age range of folks showing up, but it still is business either way. I used to get people asking me when I was on the Mile walking, where's Giralda and these were travelers from Japan. So, it is a destination spot. I do think that the Umbrella Sky put it on the map and people want to see it. So, let's be creative in the designs that we do. If we are able to put in some permanent poles or something to mount things on, then we won't go through that cost again and again.

Commissioner Fernandez: The other thing I would add is, maybe we could consider changing the palm trees to shade trees and that might be something we can do. Maybe not something that is too large that will affect, since it is narrow, but something that can at least provide a little more shade.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Like the Lang Lang tree that Deena's put out and its fragrant. I've learned so much from Deena.

Commissioner Fernandez: The other thing that did affect Umbrella Sky was, we had a lot of those tour buses that would stop on Giralda, that stopped after Umbrella Sky. So, it might be something that Economic Development can consider, trying to see if we can reach out to some of those companies and see if they are making stops in Coral Gables and encourage them to start bringing some of that traffic back.

Commissioner Castro: And how does the Commission feel about maybe lowering the special event permit fees for them.

City Manager Iglesias: I'm not sure the idea is really – because we have to charge for police and so forth and that would come right off our budget. So, we can look at that, but we want to at least to recover the cost.

Commissioner Castro: Okay.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Just give us some information, give the Commission some information.

City Manager Iglesias: We'll do that in December also.