

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item 2-1
Commission Chambers
December 8, 2020
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Raul Valdes-Fauli
Vice Mayor Vince Lago
Commissioner Jorge Fors, Jr.
Commissioner Pat Keon
Commissioner Michael Mena

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias
City Attorney, Miriam Ramos
City Clerk, Billy Urquia
Planning and Zoning Director, Ramon Trias

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item 2-1 [11:52 a.m.]

A Resolution of the Coral Gables Transportation Advisory Board requesting that the City Commission direct City staff to investigate the continued feasibility of the Gables Redevelopment and Infill District (GRID) and requesting appropriate action be taken following such investigation.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Now we have time certain 10:30 and I understand that Sue Kawalerski is on the line and wishes to speak and she is muted. Hello?

Sue Kawalerski: Hello? Can you hear me?

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Yes, we can.

Sue Kawalerski: Okay. It says the host has stopped my video and would not unmute me, so I apologize, but I've been trying to get on.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: You're on, you're on, so go ahead.

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Agenda Item 2-1 – Resolution of Coral Gables Transportation Advisory Board requesting That the City Commission direct City Staff to investigate the continued feasibility of the GRID

[Date]

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Sue Kawalerski: Alright. Thank you very much. I'm Sue Kawalerski and I'm representing the Transportation Advisory Board for the city, as the Vice Chair, and we are bringing this item to the Commission for reconsideration. Just to fill you in, the Gables Redevelopment Infill District GRID is incorporated in the City's Comprehensive Plan and has been in place for over ten years. The original intention of incorporating this GRID was to encourage developers to fill in the quarters with their projects without having to conduct traffic impact studies. The quarters in the GRID include U.S.-1, the University of Miami section, the Red/Sunset intersection and adjacent areas, and everything west of LeJeune within the City of Coral Gables. The Transportation Advisory Board recognizes that these quarters and areas have been sufficiently filled in by new development and we are asking the Commission to now eliminate the GRID from the Comprehensive Plan and begin to demand traffic impact studies for all new development within this GRID before a developer's application is approved. The number one issue residents tell us is degrading the quality of life in the City Beautiful is over development and resulting traffic which spills into their neighborhoods, which creates safety issues for pedestrians and other vulnerable road users; and it also creates congestion to the point that it's difficult to leave their neighborhoods and commute to work, school and other destinations. Therefore, we are asking this Commission to consider the elimination of this GRID, so that we can once again resume traffic studies on all developments within that GRID.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you Sue.

City Manager Iglesias: If I may comment Mayor.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Yes, please.

City Manager Iglesias: Concerning their GRID. This was done quite some time ago, by the state. It deals with concurrency. Concurrency means that if you do a building you have to have sanitary sewers, you have to have water, you have to have power and they also included traffic. And they quickly realized it was a mistake because it would have stopped construction. You can certainly provide increase sanitary sewers, water, power and so forth within the right-of-way but you have issues increasing the right-of-way with in size or double-decking, let's say U.S.-1. So, the GRID was established to allow areas to be developed that you could provide all those utilities except for the traffic issue. I don't believe there is anything wrong with our GRID policy right now. I think what that would do is simply stop construction in a lot of these areas, because you simply do not have the traffic and certainly this good policy was in the City of Miami, Dade County and many other cities or you were essentially stop construction, and I think that's what this is. So, I believe that the GRID is fine. I think that we address it. We ask for traffic studies in an effort to enhance the area, but knowing full-well that a lot of these streets are at capacity and development cannot occur, as the state realizes and quickly remove that traffic requirement by allowing the municipalities to create this GRID requirement, so that traffic would not be part of that. Do we double-deck U.S.-1? Does Miami double-deck Brickell? Do we double-deck LeJeune Road? So this is really something that I think has worked well and we are working with the developers and within the city to really maximize our traffic, but within what we have, which is existing rights-of-way and existing infrastructure from a traffic perspective.

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Vice Mayor Lago: Mr. Manager, have you studied or reviewed any other cities that are entertaining similar studies?

City Manager Iglesias: No, I'm not aware of anyone. Certainly, Miami would not even consider this, or you would have zero development in downtown.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: This is an effort by the same people to paralyze construction 100 percent in order to do anything in Coral Gables, I'm talking about LeJeune, the Craft Section, whether we do something or not, all of downtown, Ponce, Alhambra Circle, downtown as I said, and U.S.-1, we would have to double-deck these streets which is something that I would suggest the Transportation Advisory Board to tell us how to do that. This is another backhanded attempt to paralyze the city and I am 100 percent against it, because it is very disingenuous to say the least.

Commissioner Fors: I wouldn't be opposed to, obviously, we are not going to vote today to eliminate the GRID with very little discussion at all...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Of course, we are not.

Commissioner Fors:...at any time in reality. However, I would not be opposed to scheduling for the future and I think it should be right after, not right after, but after the zoning votes are completed but just have one of our folks come and explain that point that you are trying to illustrate, Mr. City Manager and the Mayor as well, how it's not feasible, just so we can have that explanation in public. And I think I understand, by the way. I've thought about it myself. I researched the GRID and the history of the GRID, concurrency, the entire concept of it, but instead of just...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: I agree. I have nothing against an explanation in public, but the purpose of the GRID is that in municipal areas, like ours, we are in the middle of a big area, but we having nothing at all to do with Brickell, etc. U.S.-1 passes through us and if anything that is done on U.S.-1 requires a traffic study or require double or triple-decking U.S.-1, and same with Ponce, same with LeJeune, same with Alhambra Circle, same with Douglas. It will paralyze the city 100 percent. And as I said, this is a backhand attempt by the Riviera Neighborhood Association or I'm sorry, the Coral Gables Neighborhood Association now, to paralyze construction in the city 100 percent; and Commissioner Fors, I would support your call for an explanation by the City Manager and our city staff on the GRID and what this accomplishes.

Sue Kawalerski: May I speak please?

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Yes, you can, of course, you can always speak.

Sue Kawalerski: I know you love the Riviera Neighborhood Association, but I am speaking on behalf of your Traffic Advisory Board, the City Traffic Advisory Board, and let's make that very clear, please. You are now saying that the traffic through Coral Gables is just fine and we need

more development, and it won't cause anymore traffic, and therefore we don't need traffic impact studies, is that right?

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: I haven't said that Sue, I haven't said that at all. You are misreading or you are misinterpreting my comments, like you do many times. I haven't said that. What I have said is that we live in an urban area and we have to look at traffic impact, like we do, for very specific projects and we have required, at their expense, traffic studies, but what we are not going to do is for everything to eliminate the GRID and then paralyze development in the city. We are not going to do that.

Sue Kawalerski: How eliminating this GRID paralyze development in the city?

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Sue, you should know that being on the Transportation Advisory Board. I'm not going to answer that for you. Look it up. The City Manager has just stated it. The City Manager has just stated it and Peter, will you say it again for Sue's benefit, she wasn't listening probably.

Sue Kawalerski: I was listening very carefully, but...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Peter, would you say it again?

City Manager Iglesias: Let me just say, Commissioner Fors, that the state when concurrency was adopted, they quickly realized what the issues of looking at traffic impact were, and that was really stopping development and they quickly allowed the counties and municipalities to implement the GRID type of study. Now we do have traffic studies and what we try to do is look at those intersections, look at those streets, and try to tweak them as much as we can to help traffic. So we do have those traffic studies right now and they are done by one of our consultants and so, we do try to do as much as we can, but we cannot increase the right-of-way, we cannot double-deck streets. The traffic impact is one thing, our traffic studies are dealing with tweaking the traffic as much as we can within the existing right-of-way and within the existing infrastructure to deal with impact, that is what the state realized was the problem, because you deal with impact you can't have a building without sanitary sewer, you can't have a building without water, or power, so those are truly impacts. However, when you deal with traffic as an impact, then what you are doing is basically in the inner cities and in the downtown areas is affecting development completely.

Commissioner Keon: Do you have a GRID...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: [Inaudible]

Commissioner Keon: I'm sorry. Can I ask a question?

Mayor Valdes-Fauli; Yes please, of course.

Commissioner Keon: I couldn't figure out who was talking, sorry. Peter, do we have – I thought that the GRID and the exemption from the GRID was set by the county, not by the city, I thought it was the county.

City Manager Iglesias: Yes, we do have the ability to create our own GRID and its part of our Comprehensive Plan.

Commissioner Keon: We have our own GRID.

City Manager Iglesias: Yes, its part of the Comprehensive Plan.

Commissioner Keon: But are we subject to the county, to the GRID from the county?

City Manager Iglesias: What the county is doing, what the county looks at the traffic studies is how to improve those intersections and maximize the use of those intersections.

Commissioner Keon: Right, but I think...

City Manager Iglesias: Its different from an impact. If you look at the impact that's a whole different ballgame.

Commissioner Keon: Right. I understand that. But what I thought that...she can verify what she is talking about, I thought what they were talking about was the concurrency with the grade of roads of roadways as to what level they are at due to traffic.

City Manager Iglesias: Yes Commissioner. The original concurrency looked at impact and level of service for the roadway. What the state did is they quickly went away from that, because they realize they were stopping construction completely.

Commissioner Keon: Right.

City Manager Iglesias: Especially in the downtown areas.

Commissioner Keon: It was my understanding that the county, although all of these roads may have a level of service that's reflected in a particular letter grade, that everything they designated the infill district, and I think its pretty much everything east of the Palmetto Expressway, is the infill district, and there is no concurrency for that infill district with the traffic concurrency on roadways.

City Manager Iglesias: Level of service impact perspective, so we are looking...

Commissioner Keon: So, the level of service is of no issue, I mean, some of them are all at the maximum capacity, but you are no longer subject to that concurrency.

City Manager Iglesias: Right...

Commissioner Keon: No matter what we did it's not going to make any difference.

City Manager Iglesias: Yes. The concurrency level of service issue. Now we still ask for the traffic studies because we try to maximize our efficiency and maximize intersection design and things like this.

Commissioner Keon: I know, but I think what they are asking is that we deal with the concurrency, the grading of those roads as to capacity and if they are at capacity that you don't allow any more traffic. Could you explain exactly what it is you are asking for, when you are asking about the GRID?

Sue Kawalerski: Well, first of all, for the general public that doesn't know what concurrency is, I'm going to read the definition. Concurrency is...expression for a set of land use regulations that local governments are required by the Florida Legislature to adapt to ensure that new development does not outstrip local government's ability to handle it. For development to be concurrent or meet concurrency, the local government must have enough infrastructure capacity to serve each proposed development. What we are asking for right now with this GRID, we don't have to do any traffic studies. We don't have to know what the impact is going to be if a new development is built. And concurrency, we want to bring everybody into concurrency, that means that local government, Coral Gables, must have enough infrastructure capacity to serve those new proposed developments, not like after the fact, let's build, build, build, infill, infill, infill, and all of a sudden we go, Oh my God, our roads can't handle it. Well, that's after the fact. We are trying to prevent that from happening. We foresee right now – first of all, this GRID is in the code as of at least 2010. I think you'd have to agree that since 2010, these past ten years, most of the GRID has already been filled in by development, to the point where we are now experiencing what we are allowed to talk about, 650,000 cars every day passing through Coral Gables by non-residents. I mean, we have a massive traffic problem here.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Can I comment?

Sue Kawalerski: Make sure before we build any more that we actually are required to have traffic impact studies.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Sue, you are being disingenuous here. I was part of a committee that suggested the concurrency requirements and when we did that, we did not focus on traffic. We focused on schools, especially west of us, schools, sewers, hospitals, parks, so you could not build a 1,000 home, or 2,000 home development without a school or without a park, or without adequate sewers. That was the motivation for concurrency, the motivation for concurrency and not traffic, except as it impacted these little residential streets which would require doubling the street or whatever, and that was done. You just mentioned that 650,000 cars pass through Coral Gables, but for non-residents. What do you want us to do? – triple or quadruple the height of U.S.-1 in order to allow for these cars or maybe we could have a bridge over Coral Gables. Wait, wait let me

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finish. We can't have a bridge over Coral Gables. The purpose of the GRID is downtown and in other places, to allow for rational measured development in accordance with our zoning code, in accordance with our height limitations and everything else that we are discussing now and you are a part of those discussions. I think this, as I said, is a disingenuous usage of that concurrency provision in order to achieve something that you've been afterwards, which is to stop development 100 percent.

City Manager Iglesias: Mayor, you brought up a very good point. If you have very, very large developments then you have the concurrency requirements of schools, parks, roadways, sanitary sewers, water treatment plants and all those issues. We don't have that this is a mature city, and within mature cities you have established right-of-ways and that's what the state realized. So, concurrency for mature cities like ours, which we have established right-of-ways for 95 years, and so the state quickly realized that that was not a practical solution certainly for traffic in mature cities. The Mayor made a very good point. If you are doing 1,000-acre subdivision, you have certain concurrency requirements. When Arvida built theirs in Broward County, they had schools, water treatment plants, parks, etc., all those amenities and all those as part of the concurrency process, so you don't overload the current systems, but they quickly realized for mature cities that doesn't work as far as traffic. And so, quickly the state established the allowance of the GRID in the Comprehensive Plan. And so, this went back a long time ago and it goes back to basic – the issue is that as a mature city we can't deal with that in the same way as a new development can.

Commissioner Keon: I know that, but what I'm asking you if you can confirm please with the county, it is my understanding that the infill area, the urban infill area is exempt from traffic concurrency.

City Manager Iglesias: From traffic impact – impact concurrency.

Commissioner Keon: Impact concurrency.

City Manager Iglesias: Impact concurrency. Let me have Ramon Trias...

Commissioner Keon: Could you check with the county to see, there is language, I think in the county, I don't know.

City Manager Iglesias: And we've dealt with it, Commissioner. I'll have Ramon Trias address it now, if you wish.

Commissioner Keon: Maybe they can speak when Commissioner Fors, we have an item, you have a meeting, or you have that explanation...

City Manager Iglesias: Explain whatever it is, but that is, what I've explained is the issue that we have.

Commissioner Keon:...and the exemption from concurrency.

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Planning and Zoning Director Trias: Mayor, Mayor, if I could help a little bit. The Mayor is correct. The GRID was originally adopted back in 1995 and then it was amended in 2010 to include the University of Miami and that's what the...was referring to. These kinds of discussions come from the 1980's discussions about comprehensive plans and growth management, etc., and there were classic issues of the unintended consequences of some of the very good rules that the State of Florida implemented in the 80's as a pioneer, in terms of growth management. Very soon it became clear that some of those rules were encouraging sprawl, were encouraging the kinds of development that was not sustainable and so on, so that's why the GRID was adopted. And each municipality and the county as zoned local government, have the authority to adopt it under the State rules, under the 163 Chapter. So that's what the city did and has been in place ever since and that's part of the review process. Now that doesn't mean that we don't have traffic studies, that doesn't mean that we don't look at traffic and the operations and so on, we do, its just that we don't do it from the point of view of concurrency. It's a very technical discussion. It has to do with state law, and I think it has served the city well, and if you want a more detailed explanation, we can certainly provide it.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Alright. Any other discussion?

Commissioner Fors: Mayor, not even something you have to vote on, I'll just put it on the agenda for public explanation of it. I think I understand some of these conflicts already myself, but just for the public to hear the more calm, informed explanation that I've received from folks like Trias about why its truly not feasible to consider removing the GRID at this time and to allow the proponents of eliminating it to speak on the specific points that we site that day. So, I'll site it, there is nothing to vote on.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Alright. If there is no intent to pass a resolution or propose a resolution, then we will go onto the next item, which is 2.2 and thank you very much Sue for your participation.