

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-11
May 9, 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
Development Services Director, Suramy Cabrera

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz
Ed Santamaria

Agenda Item G-11
Discussion regarding the Board of Architects appointments.
(Sponsored by Commissioner Fernandez)

Mayor Lago: But we're moving onto G-11.

Commissioner Fernandez: So, on G-11, the current process for appointing members to the Board of Architects is that the Manager recommends, and the Commission ratifies. One of the concerns that I did hear from residents over the course of the campaign was, the Board of Architects is really the one board where we, as the city, kind of give the direction for the design of our projects in the City of Coral Gables. So, one of the requests that was made was that the Commission, who are our elected representatives should be the ones appointing members of the Board of Architects, not the Manager. So that was a recommendation that was made. They've also made several concessions to have folks who don't live in the city sit on the Board of Architects for X, Y, or Z reason. I think

City Commission Meeting
May 9, 2023

we should really try to stick to residents sitting on the Board of Architects as well. So, I wanted to open that up for discussion.

Mayor Lago: Well, in regard to that, I'll be very brief. The opening up for non-residents, they still have to have an office here in the Gables, correct.

City Manager Iglesias: That's correct.

Mayor Lago: So, they had to have an office here in the Gables. They had some sort of affiliation with the Gables. I'm a little cautious about this, because this is the only board where you're required to have a license. There are no other boards that its required to have a license, number one. Number two, there's 2,000 registered architects in Miami-Dade County. Very difficult to get people to come in and serve on this board. And this is the board that should be A-political, not be politicized, not have individuals appointed to this board that are not strong in regards to Coral Gables and understanding what our criteria is, and I think that when you start appointing people to boards based on Commissioner appointments, I think on this one, especially if the Manager should be able to appoint a person. What I would like to see is the board bifurcated, residential board, commercial board. Resolving the opportunity to address and be a little bit more flexible and a little bit more nimble in regards to how we deal with issues, and have certain architects who have a lot more experience on the residential side, homes, maybe small multi-family projects, be focused on that area, I think would streamline the process, and when you talk about larger commercial projects, I think that they should be strictly involved in commercial projects of a significant scale. I think when we start going in the direction of naming people on boards from Commissioners, I think we need to be very, very careful on this, especially on this board, because this has got to stay A-political. This is not something, in my opinion, should be politicized and have people on the board who don't have the qualifications to serve.

Commissioner Fernandez: I don't think it's political. I think they would still have the same requirements; they would still have to meet the requirements that the board has, but I think right now, we basically have at the end of the day, the Manager's vision on this board, not the vision from residents. I think that's the concern that we have. Some of the members of the board are always advocating for projects that you would find on Brickell. They are not advocating for the projects that the residents are asking for here in the city. So, I think that's where the concern comes in.

Commissioner Menendez: I have a thought and idea when I saw the item, and I asked, I guess I was briefed, perhaps that, not a compromise, but a common ground. I was told that the City Architect provides candidates.

City Manager Iglesias: The way it is, must be a registered architect, ten years' experience, live in the Gables or have an office in the Gables. The resumes and so forth go to the City Architect. The

*City Commission Meeting
May 9, 2023*

City Architect then recommends to me, which he feels are the top architects. It's a tough job because they are here 5-6 hours a week, pro bono, it's very hard to get people, but I work through the City Architect, and I know because I've had a rough time sometimes in my own projects with the Board of Architects, which is fine, that's what they are there to do. But it's not that I make a selection based on who I want. I make a selection to bring to the Commission for approval based on the recommendations of our City Architect.

Commissioner Menendez: So my suggestion just to take a baby step or a step would be, and I think I asked the City Attorney that it would be allowed, to add one more architect that it would be selected by the Commission as-a-whole, recommended by the City Architect, a group of architects and we as a body, we select at least that's a first step in that direction, we select an architect to sit on the board, selected by us collectively. I don't know if that's...

City Attorney Suarez: Yes, that can be done. It would require a text amendment to the zoning code, because the requirements and the appointments of the membership of the Board of Architects are in the zoning code, and the Board of Architects membership is composed of at least seven members. So, if what you're saying is have at least one of those seven be an appointment by the Commission as-a-whole, that's something that can be done.

City Manager Iglesias: And also, I've never recommended somebody to the Board of Architects that wasn't approved by the City Architect, that wasn't recommended, excuse me, not approved, but recommended by the City Architect, because I believe he's a good judge of that, and even though I am in the field, I would refer back to the City Architect. So that's how it's been working.

Commissioner Menendez: And that would keep it as recommended by the City Architect, but he could recommend three candidates, another three or four, we discuss, and we select one. So, we know where it's coming from – meets all the credentials and then we select amongst ourselves who we think is the one that we as a body feel is the best candidate. At least we start moving, balancing things out a little bit.

City Manager Iglesias: Fortunately, Commissioner, we don't have like four architects – very, very difficult to get architects on the board because it requires so much time, 5 to 6 hours.

Commissioner Fernandez: I heard from at least three residents who have been interested in serving on the board, have sent in an application and have never even heard back.

City Manager Iglesias: If the City Architect recommends them, they would have been...

Commissioner Fernandez: Right but is there a process where we at least reply to them and acknowledge and let them know, hey, you weren't chosen for X, Y, or Z reason, because one of them actually served on the board for a few years and he retired now, was interested in serving and he just never heard back.

*City Commission Meeting
May 9, 2023*

City Manager Iglesias: I'm not aware of anybody who was prior on the board and wants to serve, if there's somebody like that, then I'll be happy to look at that.

Mayor Lago: Who was it?

Commissioner Fernandez: I have to get you the name. I didn't bring the name today.

City Manager Iglesias: I'm not aware of that.

Commissioner Fernandez: He lives up in the north Gables.

City Manager Iglesias: But because you are a registered architect, doesn't mean that you can be on the Board of Architects.

Commissioner Fernandez: Agreed. I know that there are parameters, specific parameters in the code as to who can sit on there, but again, I think the concern that residents have, I just want us to get around the central problem is a lack of trust in our government, and we need to give residents some sort of, a sense of comfort that they have a voice, or maybe a couple of voices on the Board of Architects who they know. They can come to the Commission and say, "we want this person out," the Commission can remove them.

Commissioner Menendez: If you all are comfortable with that concept, have the City Attorney, perhaps work on how that would work, you know the details, and at least take that step in that direction, there may not even be a vote, but let's explore that.

Mayor Lago: Madam City Attorney, can you work on something for the Commission.

City Attorney Suarez: Yes, we can certainly do that. We can bring you legislation to that effect.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Commissioner Anderson: Right. I'm in agreement with that. We need some more bodies on the Board of Architects anyway. The biggest challenge too, that I've seen is that as far as the larger projects are concerned is, not all the architects do vertical, and when you don't do vertical and you are not schooled in classical architecture, you're not going to be able to provide the residents the type of product that they really want to see for the Mediterranean code, and we get what's called essentially, a wallpapering of Mediterranean where you don't have deep enough base, enough fenestration on a building. You have to earn that. So having two sections of the board, I think would both help the residential for the smaller projects, and help the vertical projects, because we get a better quality of architects. So, I'd also like to look at, if you go to tomorrow night's presentation, understand the value of having at least some requirement for the architects to view a presentation on classical architecture, to understand where the weaknesses are in our current

*City Commission Meeting
May 9, 2023*

buildings and what are good examples for the future so we can aspire to do it better. So, I agree with the Mayor's concept that we need two boards.

Commissioner Fernandez: Are you going to bring that up again or should we...

City Manager Iglesias: We've been working on that. Its been difficult to get architects to come, especially those that are dealing with bigger projects, because of the time requirements are so large, but we also have to be careful that we get the right architects, because you are a registered architect and because you have ten years of experience, doesn't mean that you necessarily qualify, because you may not be doing the work that our City Architect deems as efficient to be on the board, because you are reviewing other people's work. It's a very important job and it's a very difficult job, because you are reviewing other registered architects. So, we want to make sure that we do get those people that are qualified, not just by having an architectural degree or ten years' experience but are qualified to review work of other professionals.

Commissioner Anderson: I understand, but I think we do need to explore because of those reasons.

Commissioner Menendez: So, the bifurcation would be more of an administrative, I guess, move and then...

Mayor Lago: Why don't we have the Manager and his team work on this, giving him input in regard to what we would like to see addressed on the board and potentially bifurcating the residential and the commercial. Seeing how we can structure something, and they can bring it back to us to see if it satisfies the Commission. Okay.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, before you move on, we have members of the public requesting to speak on the item.

Mayor Lago: Go ahead.

City Clerk Urquia: And also, on Commissioner Menendez' suggestion, the only thing I would mention is that would bring the number to ten, so you would have, you could have the possibility of a tie vote.

Commissioner Menendez: Then an odd number.

Mayor Lago: Can we hear.

City Clerk Urquia: The first speaker is Ms. Maria Cruz.

Ms. Cruz: Good afternoon. My concern with the Board of Architects, since I've sat through many sessions of the Board of Architects is, the issue of having architects that are presently working in projects in the city that will be going to the Board of Architects, and yes, they have to recuse

*City Commission Meeting
May 9, 2023*

themselves, is very hard to work with six people week-in, week-out, and then you recuse yourself and they are going to be 100 percent objective. I think we need to take away that issue. I believe from talking to several architects that there are plenty of retired Coral Gables residents that are architects that would be very happy if they were selected to serve on the Board of Architects. They are experienced, but they are not doing projects at the moment, at the time, and they can be very objective and not have the peer pressure to not be objective. So, I would consider – I’m not sure that dividing the board is a good idea. Like I said, I’m not an architect, and a teacher, but you know, I sit there and I hear their comments and I think most of the people that are on that board, including the Chairperson who is outstanding, can handle both residential and commercial and there are plenty of people that would love to be involved, and I think the time has come to not have active, working architects serving on a board that their projects are going to come to.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Thank you very much.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Hold on, hold on, Mr. Clerk. You didn’t turn the time on, number one, and number two, I’m asking for the sponsor, because Maria Cruz has said that there are many people, many architects that want to serve. I would ask for the sponsor of this item to please bring me a list of five architects that meet the criteria, that are interested in serving, that are willing to serve on this board, because I haven’t been able to find people who want to serve and this is an item that we’ve talked about for a long time, for a long time.

Commissioner Fernandez: I will get you that.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Cabrera.

Development Services Director Cabrera: So, we have struggled to find people that want to serve on a weekly basis on this board and that are qualified, and our City Architect feels are appropriate to serve on that board. I think, since I’ve been here, we’ve gotten one or two resumes the most. What we did do, we tossed around a lot of ideas and the last one was to really get a feel of how many architects that live in the city or have their business in the city. I sent out invitations asking them to please submit their portfolios and resumes. Martha was working on those invitations, so they should be going out soon to the restaurant licensing website to get addresses to see if we could get people that are interested in serving on the board.

Mayor Lago: And I’m also a firm believer that we need to be very careful about punishing people’s success. If somebody is successful and they have done multiple projects in the city, we shouldn’t eliminate them from contention in regard to being able to serve the community. There is a reason why they are successful, and they are being used on multiple different projects. That’s a person we could use as a resource, not alienate them, because they’ve been successful. That to me is envy.

*City Commission Meeting
May 9, 2023*

I'm not a fan of that. I'm not a fan of envying people and counting another person's money. I'm a big believer in – if someone is successful, let's lean on that person. Maybe we don't agree with the design, but let's lean on that person and let's not push them away, especially if they are residents and they have their offices here in the city.

Development Services Director Cabrera: So, we only send out to residents or to architects that have their office here in the city, and we asked them several questions. One of them is how often would you be able to serve on the board if they were weekly or biweekly, things of that nature, to get an idea of how we could get really highly qualified architects that want to serve on the board.

Mayor Lago: That's why I said, I would love to see a list of anyone who is willing to serve.

City Manager Iglesias: So, we are doing this outreach and hopefully we'll get enough to have two boards, and that's what we've been trying to do. So, this is the outreach that we're doing and hopefully we'll get some feedback and work to establish those two boards.

Commissioner Fernandez: Since we would be splitting it, the workload would actually be reduced on one end, right.

City Manager Iglesias: Well, there's also the issue of, I'm not good enough to look at big projects, so there's a lot of issues there.

Commissioner Fernandez: I'm just saying because maybe we can split it from ten people to five and five.

City Manager Iglesias: Yes, but there's also the professional issue of maybe not wanting to be residential.

Commissioner Fernandez: Got it.

City Manager Iglesias: There's a number of...

Development Services Director Cabrera: We don't want to upset anybody that's on the board that somehow they feel that we don't feel they're good enough to review the bigger projects, only review small projects, and to just have them serve half and half is that you'll have one board seeing a project that maybe rejected and when it comes back it will be a different board seeing the same project.

Commissioner Fernandez: I'm actually saying the opposite. Split it – five of them take over the residential, as the Mayor had said, and five on the commercial. I'm sure that probably half of them have expertise in the commercial and the other half probably more in the commercial – residential.

City Manager Iglesias: I think there's an issue, Commissioner of, I'm not good enough to do something.

Development Services Director Cabrera: Right. We don't want to upset them, you know, because we do value every single one of their opinions and that they are here every Thursday for as long as it takes to get the job done.

City Manager Iglesias: The fact that they work for probably 6- or 7-hours pro bono every week.

Commissioner Menendez: I'm sorry Mayor. The issue I see with five and five is quorum. I'm sure there is a quorum requirement, right, on the board.

Development Services Director Cabrera: If we have five and one can't make it, like they may have a meeting and they can't even meet. So, I'm worried about a small number, because anything can happen, and they can't meet or make decisions.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk, do we have any other comments?

City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir, we do. Ed Santamaria.

Mayor Lago: By the way, we are deferring G-18 and also, I-1 will be deferred also.

Mr. Santamaria: Good afternoon once again all.

Mayor Lago: G-18, excuse me, G-18 and I-1. Sorry sir. Go ahead, Mr. Santamaria.

Mr. Santamaria: That's quite alright. Good afternoon once again. As with other boards, the Commission can recommend architects to the Manager and so, the process is that the Manager recommends or appoints and the Commission ratifies, and so, they can ratify or not. I think that the board and the City Architect are doing an excellent job in setting the design of the city. In fact, they are often seen by many as being heavy-handed. I keep hearing this thing about Coral Gables becoming Brickell. Coral Gables will never be Brickell. Brickell has a number of buildings that are approximately 1,000 feet in height. The maximum height allowed by the Coral Gables Zoning Code is about 190 feet, and this is only in limited areas. Coral Gables will never be Brickell. Let me sight an example which surprised me when I found out, but this is a fact. Merrick's original plan was for buildings up to around 160 feet on Miracle Mile. We are now talking about buildings that are not as tall as Merrick's original plan, which in my mind confirms again that Coral Gables will never be Brickell, for at least our lifetimes. Maybe when South Florida is a giant metropolis and we have buildings that are a 1,000 feet tall all over the place, if that ever happens that might be the case, but I think really that we need to be realistic and understanding that there is a maximum height here in Coral Gables and that the Planning and Zoning Board is very vigilant of that, and they recommend according to the code. So, I thank you for your time on this issue.

*City Commission Meeting
May 9, 2023*

Mayor Lago: Thank you sir. I appreciate your guidance. Mr. Clerk.

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

Mayor Lago: Alright. We'll close that out. Does staff have marching orders, Mr. Sponsor?

Commissioner Fernandez: I believe so. Madam City Attorney.

City Attorney Suarez: My office will prepare legislation to change it to one of the minimum seven will be nominated and appointed by the Commission as-a-whole.

Commissioner Menendez: Can you go through the process of being vetted by the city.

City Manager Iglesias: As recommended by the City Architect.

City Attorney Suarez: Correct.