

City of Coral Gables
Special City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item B-8
May 6, 2025
City Hall Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Melissa Castro (Absent)

Commissioner Ariel Fernandez

Commissioner Richard D. Lara

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Alberto Parjus

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Deputy City Attorney, Stephanie Throckmorton

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz

Jackson Rip Holmes

Agenda Item B-8 [10:49 a.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission amending Resolution No. 2021-225 which amended the policy adopted pursuant to Resolution No. 2019-55 for City Commissioner Expense Accounts/Office Budgets and directing City staff to reduce the amount from \$10,000 to \$5,000 in the proposed Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Budget.
(Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: Moving onto our final item before discussion, B-8.

City Attorney Suarez: B-8 is a Resolution of the City Commission amending Resolution No. 2021-225 which amended the policy adopted pursuant to Resolution No. 2019-55 for City Commissioner Expense Accounts/Office Budgets and directing City staff to reduce the amount from \$10,000 to \$5,000 in the proposed Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Budget.

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Deputy City Attorney Throckmorton: Hello again. As you all know, each Commissioner is allotted an office budget pursuant to Section 2-32 of the City Code, and the amount is set in each year's budget. The current amount is \$10,000. We've had various resolutions; Resolution 2019-55, 2019-34, and 21-225, which is the latest version of that policy. It sets forth the policy providing that the expense account and office budget of each Commissioner may be used for certain purposes. Those purposes are outlined in that resolution. This resolution would amend the amount of that money back to \$5,000 starting in the October 1, 2026, Budget, and then also provide for some strikethroughs to the existing policy. It removes the fees for mass mailing, it removes the design, production and printing costs for flyers, palm cards, or other advertisements for Town Hall or community meetings and community enhancement events, hosted by an elected official. It removes the purchase of tickets to events held in the city where the elected official is attending in his or her official capacity, where tickets have not otherwise been procured, and it removes the ability to use the funds for donations for public benefit to a public school in the city or a charitable organization based in Coral Gables. So then, this reduces the amount in the next budget cycle to \$5,000 and strikes those current approved uses.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: First speaker, Mr. Mayor, is Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. Once again, this is just another, we're talking about grandstanding, another grandstanding move, because whatever the Commissioners do not have in their expense account and they want to do for the city, all they would have to do is ask the City Manager for their support, like has been done before and hopefully the Commissioners will not talk among themselves and try to put their money together to be able to do things that shouldn't be done. So, this is just another attempt to look good, to let people think that, boy oh boy, now we have a king in our midst. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Jackson Holmes.

Mr. Holmes: So, because I have lucked out, I speak regularly with our Commissioner Melissa Castro, and she voiced her distress over this item. Since she's unable to be here today, because she's in surgery, I pass that along to you. What she said specifically is that she gets out welcome packages to new residents, which seems to me to be a good function, right, and now this is going to cut her ability significantly to do that. I think that other officials may, one in particular, may have made end-runs around using city funds for promoting causes. She prefers to do it the right way, but now that option is being taken away. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. Mr. Clerk.

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

Mayor Lago: Do we have a motion.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'll move it.

Mayor Lago: Do we have a second.

Commissioner Lara: Second.

Mayor Lago: Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Mayor, thank you for bringing this item. I think this is, as we are stewards of taxpayers' dollars, that we have to spend the dollars wisely on what the residents want. Welcome packages for new residents in a paper format is something that may have been relevant 10, 20 years ago, but with the amount of information we have available and easy access on our city website and electronic newsletters and so forth, we can save a lot of trees and we can avoid creating a lot of paper waste in our community when what we need to do is redirect new owners who all go to a closing at attorney that can provide them the information that's available on the city website in a more efficient manner. And again, it goes back to our stewardship, knocking thousands of doors, the loss of welcome packages or the existence of welcome packages is not something that the taxpayers were concerned about, but they are concerned about our management of the budget and this is one key thing where we can put the dollars back into the budget to do the things that the residents are asking for the most.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Commissioner Lara.

Commissioner Lara: Yes, a couple of things. Again, I echo the Vice Mayor's sentiments and her basis for supporting this item agenda and we should take stock at what we're doing here today, right, as stewards of the taxpayer's money. One of the things that I campaigned on as well is on the thousands of homes that I knocked on and the residents that I spoke with, right. So whether its undoing the pay increases, car allowances, travel spend, that occurred two years ago, bringing some order to the manner and means by which we utilize the taxpayer's money is exactly why we are sitting here, among other reasons because we are the representatives of the residents, and I believe that it is incorrect to say that this is some sort of attempt at censorship on any of the Commissioners ability to get information out, because on any worthwhile and supported bases you could ask for funds to be allocated in the budget or going directly to the City Manager, but there is one more thing that I think bears mentioning, right. I heard too many times today, and most recently on the public commentary for this particular item that there's a king sitting here on the dais. There is no king sitting here on the dais. There is no queen sitting here on the dais. There is no dictator sitting here on the dais. We are a collegial body. We are a respected body. We serve at

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the pleasure of the residents. We are entrusted with their sacred trust. I ran and have been in fact implored by the residents to do this, if elected, that is why I received support, that is why my colleagues were overwhelmingly elected, reelected to position in a record-setting election because people don't come out in droves like this, because they want more of the same, they wanted real change for the positive. I held my tongue, I've got to say. I reject those comments. They are false and they would lead us back into a course that we are deciding today to correct.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner Fernandez.

Commissioner Fernandez: I understand the concerns brought up by the members of the public, but personally I have not exhausted the funds that these accounts I have returned it to the city and to the taxpayers every year. So, I'm supportive of this measure, if that is the direction we would like to take. I think accountability is important when it comes to these things, and I think it's a path forward.

Mayor Lago: How did we get here. And I'm happy to see that Commissioner Fernandez is coming on board. This item was placed by three members of the Commission in the budget, just like the salary increases, just like the car allowances. It was neither myself nor the Vice Mayor. We do not need a welcome package to residents. We already provide a welcome package. It's been done before. What this is, it's a campaign ad at taxpayer expense. We can do better. The raising of it from \$5,000 to \$10,000, we're going back to the original amount and I'm adding what I have always done and require my colleagues to do the same. Every year at the end of the year, I produce a memo and detail every expense and whatever is left over I send it back to the budget, but that memo get produced and gets uploaded to the internet, to our website so that people can see what did the Mayor spend his \$5,000, or \$3,500, or \$4,000, or \$2,000, and where did the rest of the money go. I've been doing that for probably 6, 7, 8 years, can't remember how long, and that will be now, as per this legislation requirement. That is transparency. That is to be a fiduciary on behalf of residents. The idea that you're sending a welcome package. Why do you need a welcome package? The Vice Mayor said it very clearly, I mean seriously, how much mail do we get that we just toss out, how many catalogues, how many magazines, how much advertisement that we don't even want anymore. Send it in an email. It's an environmentally friendly vehicle and it saves the residents money on postage. This is the will of the voters. This is what they've told me. I had multiple people show me this package at their front door that they received, new residents. Why am I receiving this? That is why I put this forward. It's simple. It's transparent and it continues our effort. So please, do not be fooled, just like the raises, this was also put in the budget that the Vice Mayor and myself voted against. There'll be a campaign in the next few months to try to confuse, to garner what other people were in support of these measures. The Vice Mayor and myself and now Commissioner Lara have fought for these measures. This is the will of the people. This is

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what the residents want, and this is what people deserve. The residents spoke, they were very clear, and that's why we're moving forward. I call the question, Mr. Clerk.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Commissioner Lara: Yes

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 4-0)