

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item C
February 24, 2026
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 Richard D. Lara

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz

Javier San Juan

Jackson Rip Holmes

Paul Savage

Agenda Item C [Start: 10:10 a.m.]

Public Comment

Mayor Lago: Now we move to the Public Comment. I'd like to read a brief statement into the record. Welcome. I'm going to ask everyone who comes to state their name and address for the record. Please state your name and your address for the record. You will have three minutes to share your thoughts with the Commission. As a reminder, these comments are limited to the items on the agenda or within the scope of the City Commission's jurisdiction. If you wish to speak on an item that is on the agenda right now, please remember that you will not be given an additional opportunity to speak again once the item is called. All comments should be directed to the Commission as-a-whole. When the three minutes is up, the timer will beep and ask you to please wrap up your sentence and leave the podium when you're done speaking. If someone keeps talking after three minutes, I will ask you very respectfully to please finish your sentence and hopefully you will. Thank you very much. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. First speaker this morning is Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road; 305-323-2154. This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. As we all know, February is the month recognized for love and friendship. A few weeks ago, in this Chamber, I was identified as my dear friend in the back. So, I thought that it would be a good time today to remember and honor the friendship that I had with some people on the dais. People ask me all the time whether we were really friends, and I would like to put that to rest. Yes, we were friends and it's extremely sad that we're not anymore. Billy, can you please.

City Clerk Urquia: Cable TV could please put up the photo. I'm sharing on Zoom.

Mrs. Cruz: And that's from an Instagram picture that I found that showed that we were really friends.

City Clerk Urquia: Thank you. Next speaker, Javier San Juan.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir. Thank you for being here with us.

Mr. San Juan: Good to be here. Good morning honorable Mayor Lago, Vice Mayor Anderson, Commissioners and officers of the City of Coral Gables. I am Javier San Juan, homeowner of 305 Santander Avenue in Coral Gables. And I've been living in this beautiful city or should I say City Beautiful in my home casa Santander since 2008. I chose to move to this city 18 years ago, because of the Coral Gables unique architecture, character and its residential scale and balance, as well as its longstanding commitment to protecting its residential neighborhoods. Better said, in 2008 when I moved here, I was a believer in George Merrick's wonderful version. Mr. Merrick was definitely ahead of his time, as was the city he founded. As a matter of background, my home and duplex were planned, built and sold to me by the honorable Fernando Navarro, a respected member of the Coral Gables community, who you may already know and my two neighbors, excuse me, my two neighboring duplexes were built by the well-known MG Developers. I'm here today to express serious concerns regarding the direct and recent acquisition by a developer of three homes directly behind mine and my neighbor's homes. These recently acquired homes are addressed at 300, 310, and 318 Malaga Avenue. Most of my neighbors and I, residents of 301, 305, 309, 311, 315, and 317 Santander Avenue are deeply concerned that this recent acquisition could result in the construction of a high-rise building right off of our backyards, one similar to the large Alexian Crafts high-rise recently built by Trammell Crow Developers between Malaga and Catalonia Avenues. Each of our six homes is relatively new, two-story residential duplex, with between 2,200 and 2,500 square feet of living space, built again between 2008 and 2017. These houses were constructed and purchased in good faith with the reasonable and justified expectation that the scale, character and privacy of our unique residential neighborhood would be preferred. By way of context, my next-door neighbor at 309 Santander Avenue purchased their two-story home just last year for approximately \$2 million dollars and the 317 Santander Avenue next-door is currently on the market for \$2.650 million dollars. Should a high-rise development be permitted on the

recently acquired Malaga Avenue lots, 6 Santander Avenue families would face the chilling and unfair realism of a seven-story building just a few feet and I emphasize just a few feet, as in between me and where you are, of a seven-story building just directly behind our backyards, not even a street to divide a single home from a high-rise. And if such a high-rise development were to be established, what's left of the rest of the entire block may easily follow with high-rise structures and not rows of townhomes and duplexes, which was the direction that the block was taking prior to this recent development. This would literally mean dozens of windows and possibly an open rooftop area with direct unobstructed sight lines into the six private homes with private living areas, including living rooms, dining rooms, bedrooms, backyards and pools of the six houses. A high-rise condominium within a few feet directly behind our properties would dramatically and negatively affect our privacy, our quality of life and not to mention the value of each of our homes, all without any action or fault on our part. I want to emphasize that these six Santander Avenue homes are referred to were built many years prior to the controversial 2021 rezoning of a portion of the Coral Gables Crafts Section. I think you all know that a former Commissioner was very involved in some of these rezoning things, Eric Menendez, and he also has a house a few blocks down from me, not a few blocks, a few houses.

Mayor Lago: Excuse me, you meant to say Kirk Menendez, correct.

Mr. San Juan: Kirk Menendez, who was very much involved in this controversial 2021 rezoning, which I call 2021 Covid, because we were all gone, we were travelling, we were not going out of our houses, and we didn't really know what was going on until after the fact. The investors, builders and owners of these homes most certainly did not buy into a transition zone or a high-density corridor. The homes were built in a stable, low-density residential neighborhood with fair-minded and reasonable expectations of zoning related protection by the City of Coral Gables. We were even told that the neighborhood was next to Coral Gables site with historic significance, which had neighborhood height restriction considerations in place. Clarity from this honorable Commission is essential for our peace of mind and our ability to protect our homes and families. Today, on behalf of my neighbors and myself, I humbly and respectfully ask the honorable Coral Gables Mayor, Vice Mayor and the Commissioners to please provide clear and timely guidance regarding the applicable zoning, height limitations and development restrictions for the three properties directly behind our homes. My cardiologist asked me to put that there. I would like to make clear that I am not here to oppose reasonable development. On the contrary. I am simply here to ask for fairness, consideration and transparency for the hardworking Santander Avenue residents who have invested their lives and their considerable savings into this fine Coral Gables community. Finally, we want to make it clear that we are more than willing to sit down and meet with the developers and the City of Coral Gables in a constructive and respectful manner to discuss their plans and share our very real and valid concerns. I thank you for your time, your service, and for allowing me the opportunity to address the honorable Mayor, the Vice Mayor, the Commissioners and the officers of Coral Gables regarding these matters of great importance to our community. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. I'd like to clarify on the record, Mr. Manager, just a few things that I think are important. This gentleman has come to see me before on zoning matters and other matters that deal with the neighborhood. I was here when the lot for Trama Pro which is currently built and has a CO and is inhabited now was built. That zoning was seven stories, correct.

City Manager Iglesias: Its MX1, seven stories with Mediterranean Bonus.

Mayor Lago: So, 77 feet, correct.

City Manager Iglesias: 77 feet with Med Bonus.

Mayor Lago: Then Vice Mayor Mike Mena took the property where you live, the entire block, and during much negotiations stated that, we should have a transition to the historic building, which is on the corner of LeJeune and University, which you can see, Mr. Clerk can you put up that photo again please.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Its very clear. I want to put this on the record, and I want to make sure that we satisfy the resident. In between that Trammell Crow project, which is completed and was allowed to be 77 feet, it has a park on the corner, you can see the empty lot, where the red dot is, is the block in question. That block was zoned by the Vice Mayor then Mike Mena, to 45 feet maximum. So, after much discussion with the neighborhood, the three homeowners that sold their properties just recently got tired of waiting, as they were trying to assemble the entire block, they sold the properties. Those homes cannot be taller than 45 feet. So, what you'll probably see there is a townhouse, three-story product, similar to what MG produces in certain areas of the city. That is the maximum that's allowed by the code. They can always come back. But I will tell you where I stand and my colleagues would like to interject and add their position, I'm perfectly welcome to that. I will not accept the rezoning above 45 feet there. Why? – because you're at 77 feet for the Trammell Crow project, which is just north. You can see the empty lot. It's no longer empty, now it's a building. Then you have your entire block, which is a perfect transition to the historic building that you see there, which is kind of like a triangle on the corner of LeJeune and University. That was the original, and correct me if I'm wrong, University of Miami Building, correct.

City Manager Iglesias: That is correct Mayor.

Mayor Lago: So that is a historic building and that's why we went from 77 feet at the Trammell Crow site, to your entire block, which is 45 feet, to this building, which I think may be 40 feet or 35 feet, the historic building. So, you have a very smooth transition that again minimizes the impact of what you see there. I will not under any circumstances support an increase in height on those three lots or in your block. It is 45 feet, and my vote will remain 45 feet.

Commissioner Lara: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Yes sir.

Commissioner Lara: I want to echo your sentiments. I wasn't on the Commission at the time that the Trammell Crow project was elevated to 77 feet, seven story, I wouldn't have voted for that, if I was on the Commission at that time, but I'm also echoing the Mayor in stating that I am vehemently opposed and would not vote for any change to the 300 Block of Malaga, to be above the 45 feet, which is the maximum allowed now. So, you have my commitment should that ever come up in the future.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, I'm going to add in the zoning in that area also are limits to 45 feet, anything within 100 feet of LeJeune Road, and this would bring a consistent all the way across and its always been my position that you have to have these transition zones down to the residential area and it would not be appropriate within a few feet of a home, a single-family residential home without a street separation to have anything more than the 45 feet, that's already been zoned there.

Mayor Lago: And I want to add something since I want to take advantage and putting it on the record. I think it's important because I've heard from residents on the other side of University, the south side of University. So, you have your lot, your block, then you have the University of Miami block, it's no longer the University of Miami, now it's an apartment building and you have University and then you have single-family homes on the other side, right. From there all the way to Bird Road, I will not change the zoning. The dividing line is University. It's very clear. There will not be any zoning changes. I will not entertain a zoning change, neither on Ponce or on LeJeune, even if your property is on LeJeune, because I've had people come up to me, can we turn a 2 into a 4? – can we open an office? – can we do something with some frontage to LeJeune? Under no circumstances. The dividing line for me in regard to development is University and you can see a perfectly well choreographed step-down in buildings that respect the historic nature of the building on the corner of LeJeune and University but also ensures that the integrity of the residential neighborhood across the street is protected. Nobody knows – we've talked about it why those three blocks ended up being residential when everything else was commercial, but that's the way it worked out. Mr. Manager.

City Manager Iglesias: Through the Mayor. Thank you, Mayor. I would also like to add that that particular block is not MX, it's not mixed-use, it's multi-family.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

City Manager Iglesias: So, we have the first block north of University is multi-family, and then the other two blocks are mixed-use, and then multi-family, height was limited as you mentioned, to 45 feet.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner Fernandez.

Commissioner Fernandez: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. Mr. San Juan, I had the privilege of visiting your home, I had the privilege of visiting with both of you, and I think the biggest selling point to anybody who is on the fence in this argument is stepping into your backyard, and just visualizing what even a 45-foot building would be behind your home, and the invasion of privacy that it would be. I would definitely be against any change in that zoning and in fact, I would urge the developer who purchased to take into consideration the homes that are currently there and when they are proposing a project, try to come up with something that minimizes the impact that it would have on the privacy and the quality of life of you, the residents who live there, because that is important. I agree with the Mayor. There should be no changes to the zoning south of University either. I think we need to preserve our residential neighborhoods there. We have an incredible wealth of community there, a community that's very united and they appreciate the fact that they have the smaller single-family homes that they can enjoy, and we need to make sure that we preserve that. I think the damage has been done here with the upzoning already in this neighborhood, but we need to encourage developers, as they have in other projects where they haven't maximized on what they can build to try to work with you and I appreciate hearing from you that you are willing to sit down. That's always been your motto, the times that we have spoken, both of you have said, we are willing to sit down and have a conversation and find a solution that works for both sides, because you understand that their ownership right and their ability to build something that they do have, but I think there also needs to be that other side where they can appreciate the fact, whatever they build there is going to be right behind your house. And these aren't very large properties where you have these huge trees that can protect you. There is no tree canopy there that can protect your home from the visibility that you have from a three or four-story building behind you. So again, if there is anything that I can do to help mediate between you and the developer, happy to sit down with both sides.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Commissioner Castro: First, I want to thank you very much for having the courage to go ahead and say your public comment here and what you're going through. I want to reassure you, as the strongest voice on this Commission, that you have my complete attention when it comes to this. I will have a very strong stance when it comes to changing or upzoning the zoning code and you have nothing to worry about from my part. Thank you for speaking up.

[Mr. San Juan gestured to speak to the Mayor]

Mayor Lago: Of course.

Mr. San Juan: One thing that I'm extremely worried was that there was another developer that wanted to do the entire block, and what we heard was that they wanted to do a high-rise. They

spoke to everybody in that neighborhood except for the four duplexes, eight families. They didn't even want to talk to us. So, stuff like that got us worried and then this is the next step. I was waiting for the other shoe to fall, the saying, the other shoe to fall after this acquisition. I don't know if there will be another shoe falling, but I thank you very much for your comments and for your support. It's an honor to be here, by the way. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: So, as I visited you at your house a few months ago, when we were walking door-to-door, and as you come to visit me, I told you, if you're not sure in regard to the Commission's position, I will tell you my position on the record. So, it was a pleasure to invite you and I'm happy you came and it's very clear, they can only build 45 feet, at the end of the day. I know that there was an effort to try that was led by Commissioner Menendez in an effort to upzone that property so that it would be a more of an advantageous position in the sale that fell through when the three properties sold, breaking up the entire parcel. So, at the end of the day, it worked out in your favor, in the community's favor, and if they do bring it forward to the Commission for consideration, I will obviously keep my word and say that I'm not in support of changing the zoning not one inch. Thank you, sir.

Mr. San Juan: Thank you.

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

City Clerk Urquia: Jackson Holmes.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir.

Mr. Homes: Greetings. Thank you very much. My name is Jackson Rip Holmes. I live at 35 Sedona Avenue in Coral Gables. I'm here to speak about the upcoming referendum vote by mail, and I urge people who are watching this proceeding on television or whatnot to vote to keep our elections in April. This really is a developer plot to take control forever of Coral Gables. How so? If we move the election to November, it will be such a crowded ballot where people are not really focused on Coral Gables. They'll be voting for President, for Governor, and then the voting in Coral Gables will almost be an afterthought, and they won't even necessarily know which candidate is which. And here's where the developers take over our city forever. They buy name recognition in advertising. The regular guy can't afford that kind of purchase of name recognition, and so the developers will have, if we move it to November, bought City Hall, and they will change this city to make it unrecognizable. The best outcome might be Brickell Avenue, and the worst might be the City of Miami. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Paul Savage.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Savage, good morning. Good to see you.

Mr. Savage: Hi, good morning. It's my pleasure to see the Honorable Mayor, the Honorable Vice Mayor, and the Honorable Members of the Commission. Sometimes I'm here on controversial items, and this morning I have a nice, easy one, and I just wanted to come down and personally and formally thank the Commission for its support of Coral Gables High School. In case I didn't say, for the record, I live at 522 Villabella Avenue in Coral Gables, which is the street immediately behind Coral Gables High. I am the proud father of a graduate of Coral Gables High who's now at Emory University, and I also have a junior. My son is a junior at Coral Gables High. I'm here today as a volunteer board member of the Friends of Coral Gables High, and I'm to thank the Commission and the Mayor and the Vice Mayor for their support of Coral Gables High. Sometimes I'm here asking for contributions, or I'm asking for interlocal cooperation for events and things like that, but today I'm just here to thank you, and in expression of our support through the Mayor as the Chair, I'd like to hand out an invitation to our next event, and I invite you and your staff to please RSVP to the email that I'll provide, and we would really love to host you at a very nice garden party that we have coming up next month. So today, again, is a happy one. I really enjoyed the fun part of your job this morning, honoring our medalists and our firefighters and the like, and in that ilk, with your permission, I'd like to hand out this invitation, and again, we thank you for the support at Coral Gables High, which I know is now an A school and has been for some years now. Thank you so much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Mr. Savage, for always engaging in the community and bringing us, no matter how controversial it's important. Thank you.

Commissioner Castro: Thank you for the invitation.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk?

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

Mayor Lago: All right, we'll close the public comment. Thank you.