

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item E-5
September 10, 2024
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, Amos Rojas, Jr.
City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz
John O’Brian
Charles Brannock
Edward Kelly
Nick Stocco
Niel de Jesus

Agenda Item E-5 [p.m.]

An Ordinance of the City Commission designating Patriot Day as an official City Day of Remembrance and amending Chapter 1, "General Provisions", Section 1-2, "Definitions and Rules of Construction" of the City Code to designate Patriot Day as an official City Holiday; providing for a severability clause, repealer provision, codification, and providing for an effective date. (Sponsored by Commissioner Menendez)

Mayor Lago: E-5.

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City Attorney Suarez: E-5 is an Ordinance of the City Commission designating Patriot Day as an official City Day of Remembrance and amending Chapter 1, "General Provisions", Section 1-2, "Definitions and Rules of Construction" of the City Code to designate Patriot Day as an official City Holiday; providing for a severability clause, repealer provision, codification, and providing for an effective date.

Commissioner Menendez: Thank you, Mayor. Some background. I think its no secret to anybody that on September 11, 2001, it was one of the darkest days in our nation's history and in that darkness a beautiful and powerful light broke through. The light emanated from the men and women who sacrificed their lives to save others. The light also emanated when our country came together as one to confront the evil unleashed and hellbent in destroying, not only our country, but our collective spirit. That is why I believe we should take this time to officially remember the day, remember our nation's pain, remember the sacrifice and honor those heroes, many of them, first responders that not only saved lives, but also helped save the day and helped save our nation. And that is why I present to my colleagues on the City Commission, to our residents, our community at large, legislation naming September 11th Patriot Day, a day of remembrance, but also an official day along with Veterans Day, Memorial Day, and Independence Day, an official holiday of the City of Coral Gables.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk, do we have any public comment, or you want to address the Commission first.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I did have some comments because I did go back and look at the history of efforts that were made by George W. Bush, back in 2002, to make 9/11 a national holiday. History indicates sadly because of the cost to taxpayers of \$818 million dollars at the time, in federal tax dollars it was deemed too much. More recently, the New York City Commission on more than one occasion and just this past September passed a resolution urging Congress, United States Congress, to declare September 11th a national holiday. There are several events and memorials planned to commemorate September 11th, throughout our country and I do think that we should pass a resolution to urge again the United States Congress to make this a national holiday. The events that have unfolded on September 11th unfolded in New York City, unfolded in Washington D.C., unfolded in Pennsylvania, but reverberated throughout our country. I remember exactly where I was standing, as I'm sure every single person in here that day remembered where you were standing. This is much bigger than the City of Coral Gables. I also looked up some of the things that the national government is doing, and I asked our esteemed Clerk to bring up for you and I have paper copies for you, some of the things that the government, federal government does recommend that we do on September 11th in addition to honoring the fallen, those who sacrificed their lives. They suggest that September 11th as a day of remembrance and service, service from ourselves, service from each one of us, to donate our time, our talent, and our treasure to help out those who should be remembered. Whether it be in the spirit of what was presented earlier here today, LEAF for law enforcement and first responders, or as shown here this Nation Park Service commemorations and celebrations where even locally here you can do things to give back to the community in honor of and in respect for those who gave the ultimate sacrifice and was exposed to the various contaminants that existed at the sites where the twin towers went down. Those who gave their lives in Pennsylvania with the plane crashing there, as well as into

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the Pentagon itself. I think it's imperative that the federal government take this step. If we make it a holiday in Coral Gables, we're a small piece of the puzzle, we need to take a bigger piece, just like we have urged the United States Congress to take steps in the past to do things for this country that they should be doing. Let's be bold, let's stand forth and urge the United States Congress once and for all recognize September 11th as a day of remembrance and service, as well as being a holiday throughout this entire country, because every United States citizen, every resident that lives here, anyone who knew somebody or has humanity in them cares about what happened on that day and it should never again occur. We need to remember; we need to never forget, and we need to give back to our community in remembrance on this day. So, I would like to make a motion that we urge the United States Congress to recognize September 11th as a holiday throughout this entire country.

Mayor Lago: I second the motion.

Commissioner Fernandez: I was already working for a member of Congress on 9/11, and like you, Madam Vice Mayor, I remember where I was standing at that moment, and I was not in Washington, I was at our District Office. The uncertainty that the moment had for our country was palpable. Nobody knew where the next attack was going to come or if there was a next attack coming. Capital Hill Police gave a directive for all of our offices to be shut down immediately. We had to do an assessment of all vehicles parked around our perimeter to ensure that there were no bombs, because there were threats at local offices would be bombed. Members of Congress, we couldn't get a hold of our boss for about two hours. It was a scary time for our country. I remember I was sitting in my office; my dad called me, my dad never called me during the day, but the concern that he had that day, somebody who I'd never seen scared before, was something that really touched me and it still touches me today. 2,977 lost their lives because other people disagreed with their way of thinking. Think about that. 1,469 others, that's the number we have confirmed have lost their lives since due to related illnesses, over 10,000 are currently dealing with ailments because of what they suffered that day. I have no problem kicking the ball to Congress for Congress to act, but we have an opportunity to lead today and set a standard across the country and say, you know what, in Coral Gables we're honoring the people who lost their lives that day. We're going to have our day of remembrance. We're going to have Patriot's Day in the City of Coral Gables and we're going to encourage the residents of Coral Gables to give back to the community on this day. I have no problem voting to ask Congress to act, but I think that should come with an attached resolution that Coral Gables has dedicated September 11th as a holiday in the City of Coral Gables in remembrance for what happened that day. One of the most touching ceremonies that we are able to participate in every year is the 9/11 ceremony at the Fire Headquarters and I will never forget the speech given by my predecessor Vice Mayor Mike Mena and his connection to 9/11. It touched all of us. It touched each and every one of us and, you know, we can attach a price tag, we can blame anything for not calling it a holiday here in our city, but this is something that is right and I think it's something that we should do.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk open the public comment.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir. First speaker is Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. What can I say. This is long overdue. This should have been done years ago, and I'm glad that you brought it up and I think the least we can do is push it through, make it happen, and then be able to say, we did it, instead of we waited for others to do it before we tagged along. It is the right thing to do. Let's do it. I don't even think anybody should have second thoughts about it. I think it's time, it's long overdue. Make it happen.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: John O'Brian.

Mr. O'Brian: John O'Brian, President, South Florida Council of Firefighters, mailing address 8000 N.W. 21st Street. I do not stand here because of one individual and his words, its not his name that matters. The names that will always matter are the 343 firefighters that gave their lives that day, the 343. You know what traits are expected of firefighters, bravery, calmness in the chaos, and yes, a little crazy to run into danger. You know what traits are expected of an elected official representing tens of thousands, professionalism, tactful, and most importantly respectful. Anyone who knows a firefighter knows that there is one word that makes us uncomfortable when it's directed our way and that's heroes. We see ourselves as ordinary people placed in extraordinary circumstances and oftentimes that means giving someone a fighting chance to live, but those 343, they are heroes and not I nor the other firefighters in this room will allow anyone to pretend otherwise. In a town full of secrets, the Mayor has kept it no secret as to how he feels about firefighters, but this isn't about a group you dislike, this isn't even about your confusion with historical significance in our country. This is about honoring and respecting the 343 we lost. See, they didn't do it for the monuments or thank you's, they didn't do it for the media coverage, the votes, or the self-promotion, like many other jobs require. Those 343, they sacrificed in the name of service and the least that can be given by you is either respect or silence.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Charles Brannock.

Mr. Brannick: Good afternoon, Commissioners and Mr. Mayor. I would like to first thank you all for having me speak today or allowing me to speak today. My name is Charles Brannock, I am retired Coral Gables Firefighter of over 30 years. I'm also one of two Coral Gables Firefighters that was sent to New York part of FEMA Urban Search and Rescue Team. Chief Dan Thornhill was also with me, another Coral Gables Firefighter. So, I want you to know that we did represent, Coral Gables did represent in New York for this. Let me get to the point. I would like to throw out some numbers, some that have already been mentioned here; 2,977; 72; 343; the first number is that's how many people died on 9/11, 2,977 due to terrorist act on this country; 72 is the number of police officers who died that day; 343, the number of my fellow firefighters who gave their lives to try to save lives because that's what we do. Now Mr. Mayor, I saw the video where you made some comments about 9/11, you said this is not an exact quote, but close enough I think, 9/11 is not a national holiday, its not a state holiday, and you can check with the Clerk to make sure. I want to make this point, perception, tone, maybe arrogance, that's how it came across and that's where I, as someone who lives with the memories of what I did and what I saw and health issues

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that come with the members of the Florida Task Force Number 2. I take offence to your comments. Now, I'm sure you didn't mean it the way I and fellow firefighters took it, but now, you and your fellow Commissioners are able to fix this. You now have the unique opportunity to make 9/11 a recognized day in the City of Coral Gables. Don't wait for other parts of the government to do this, be the first and watch it spread. We remember the days like December 7, 1941, and 9/11, because it's the right thing to do. Thank you for your time.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is going to be on Zoom, Mr. Mayor, its going to be Edward Kelly.

Mr. Kelly: Good afternoon, Commissioners, thank you for having me and allowing me a few words to say at this Commission meeting. My name is Edward Kelly. I'm the General President of the International Association of Firefighters representing 350,000 paid professional firefighters and EMS workers throughout North America and beyond. I'd especially like to thank Commissioner Menendez for spearheading this ordinance. It's a very worthwhile endeavor. I'd also like to thank President Perez and the members of Coral Gables Local 1210 for making sure that their voices are heard. You know, 23 years ago today, close to 3,000 innocent Americans went to bed expecting a normal day of work the next day and were met with absolute vicious hatred and death. Those attacks cleared out New York City, Pennsylvania and at the Pentagon, but make no mistake about it, the intended target was Coral Gables and every other city and town in the United States. On that day, many of our fellow Americans who were killed that day left behind families to mourn, children that lost their parents, parents that lost their children, thousands that lost their significant other, but everyone in this world knew that the world changed that day. Every American knew that that which was, was now different. As my brothers who came before me mentioned, 343 members of the Fire Department of the City of New York sacrificed their lives heroically and what was the single greatest rescue effort in the history of the world. Also, one Fire Patrol member, Keith Roma, another IFF member lost his life heroically that day. And since that time, 360 FDNY members and counting have succumbed to World Trade Center related illnesses. I will tell you that the hatred and the misguided devotion that drove those murders that day still exist today. And the answer to that hatred is to never forget the love that was put on full display by those who sacrificed their lives saving others that day. So, I ask the good Commission of Coral Gables to lead the way, lead the way in this country and ensure that 9/11 is forever remembered in Coral Gables. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is Nick Stocco.

Mr. Stocco: Good afternoon, Commissioners. My name is Nick Stocco and I'm the President of the Tampa Firefighters Union, probably representing over 750 uniformed firefighters and paramedics in Tampa, Florida. I'm speaking today to offer our full support for the proposed ordinance recognizing September 11th Patriots Day, as an official City Holiday. This day holds significance for firefighters and first responders across the nation. It's a day that honors the selfless sacrifice of those who gave their lives, and it serves as a reminder of the bravery and dedication we bring to our jobs every day. To hear of the importance of 9/11 was recently diminished in Coral
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Gables by Mayor Vince Lago was deeply disappointing, especially given the connection firefighters have to that day. We commend Commissioner Menendez for proposing this ordinance and standing with first responders, recognizing Patriots Day as a paid holiday reflects the respect and honor the day deserves. It also sends a clear message to the nation and its firefighters, both in Coral Gables and across the state that their contributions and sacrifices are never forgotten. I encourage the Commission to adopt this ordinance, and we stand with the men and women of Coral Gables who support this important issue. I yield my time. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is Niel de Jesus.

Mr. de Jesus: Good morning, Mayor and Commissioners, thank you for your time, thank you for allowing me to speak this morning. My name is Niel de Jesus, and I am a proud past member of the Coral Gables Fire Department. I'm a former Fire Chief, City Commissioner, and City Manager. Thank you, Commissioner Menendez, for sponsoring this ordinance and thank you Commissioners Castro and Fernandez for your continued support. Mayor Lago and Vice Mayor Anderson, I encourage you to put your political differences aside and support this ordinance unanimously. I sat in those Commission Chambers on Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, when I received a page from our Communications Supervisor that a plane had just struck one of the Towers. By the time I stepped out to gather additional information and confer with members of Command Staff, the second plane had struck the South Tower as well. I walked back into the Chambers, approached the side of the dais and advised the City Manager of this tragic event. The Manager interrupted the meeting and advised the Commission of the news. There was an immediate somberness throughout that room and even some tears, but let me assure you, there was clearly no smiling as there was no reason to smile, not on that day 23 years ago and not today. Mayor, after watching the August 27, 2024, Commission meeting, specifically item F-13, I felt compelled to go back and watch the entire meeting to ensure I understood the full context for which you brought and made such an insensitive statement. Your comments came across as ignorant and arrogant. While September 11th is in fact not a national holiday, there was a joint resolution approved December 18, 2001, that Congress designated September 11th as a year as Patriot Day and by public law 111-113, approved on April 21st that Congress has requested the observation of September 11th as an annually recognized National Day of Service and remembrance. Regardless of that fact, nearly 3,000 people murdered that day, including 2,574 civilians, 343 firefighters, 23 NYPD and 37 Port Authority Officers who rushed in to save those innocent souls. The remains of 1,117 souls were never found leaving loved ones without closure. Those numbers are astonishing. And in the war that followed we lost nearly 2,400 U.S. Troops. Since 9/11, 2001, the number of post 9/11 related deaths for first responders has surpassed the deaths on that tragic day. Ironically, in spite of your obvious disdain for the City of Coral Gables Police Officers and Firefighters, those brave men and women who serve the City Beautiful would still do the same for you and your family. With that said, Mayor, the families of those that were murdered will not be smiling on 9/11. Anyone who loves this great country and what we stand for will not be smiling on 9/11. The brave military and first responders who protect and serve will not be smiling on 9/11, and you sir, should not be smiling on 9/11. However, you should attend a 9/11 ceremony and stand in solemn remembrance of those who were murdered and those who made the ultimate sacrifice. I will be in attendance. I would love to meet you, but I

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would not be smiling. In closing, Mayor Lago, I encourage you to issue an apology for those hurtful words to the families, survivors, and the men and women who serve in this brave occupation. Thank you all for your time.

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

Mayor Lago: Anyone else from the Commission.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'm just going to follow up. There seems there's a misunderstanding here. I want to make a resolution to push Congress to make this a holiday because we need to go beyond our borders. This should have been done a couple of decades ago, roughly speaking, and still to this day its not. Just having it a holiday in the City of Coral Gables is not sending the message that we need to send that we should never ever forget the suffering that's happened and still continues to happen because of that day. It's a solemn period. Its not a period for celebration. It should be a day of service, which is why I shared the materials that I did today for people to participate. I'd like to take a vote on the resolution first and then we can make a motion on the ordinance.

Commissioner Castro: With all due respect, Mayor, I sincerely demand an apology to not only Coral Gables, but to the rest of the country.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk, do we have anybody else on.

City Clerk Urquia: Not at this time, Mr. Mayor.

Commissioner Menendez: Since, Mayor, with all due respect, I ask that we pass, we vote on my item and we do as Commissioner Fernandez said, if it's the will of the Commission and I'm in total support sending a resolution to Congress, but we attach our legislation to it.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I have no objection attaching our legislation to it, but because a resolution is one vote.

Commissioner Menendez: There is no attachment unless we vote on this one first. So, I would prefer, if you don't mind, its my item, I'm going to make a motion to approve the ordinance, if there's a second let me know.

Mayor Lago: Second.

City Attorney Suarez: Are you withdrawing your motion Vice Mayor?

Commissioner Menendez: We are going to vote on the ordinance first.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I will defer it now to the ordinance be voted on first out of respect for Commissioner Menendez' request.

Commissioner Menendez: Thank you, Vice Mayor.

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City Clerk Urquia: I'm sorry, who seconded it.

Mayor Lago: I did.

City Clerk Urquia: Okay. Thank you.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 5-0)

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'll move again to bring a resolution to the United States Congress urging them to make 9/11 a national holiday for all of the United States.

Commissioner Fernandez: I'll second.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Any further comments for the good of the order. I'm going to make some comments. In my opinion, its profoundly important that we remember and honor the significance of September 11th. I've been to every September 11th event that this city has had here. I've also visited the September 11th Memorial in New York. I did this past weekend when I was there for work. Recently, a statement I made was taken out of context and I want to make sure that you understand, taken out of context. All of you have sent me text messages, Billy McCallister, David Perez, all of you have sent me comments on social media. Please understand this is all politics, all politics in an effort to smear my name. I made was taken out of context, implying that I did not view September 11th as a national holiday. If you play the entire clip, you will see Commissioner Fernandez is telling me that we shouldn't have a clock dedication, which is a simple clock in downtown because September 11th is a national holiday. I stood up, I went to the Clerk, and I said, I didn't know, is it a national holiday? If it's a national holiday, I agree, we shouldn't have anything on a national holiday. He told me it was not a national holiday. I brought it before the Commission, I said, September 11th is not a national holiday. We are doing it at 6 o'clock at night, the remembrance is at 8:45 (a.m.) like we've done year after year. I'm a believer that those terrorists who came to this country and killed over 3,000 people want us to shelter at home, want us to not go out, want us to make sure that we don't continue to live our lives, and I won't do that. To clarify, my point that September 11th should not be celebrated as a holiday, but solemnly observed. The city remains operational on this day, reflecting that its not a time for celebration, but for collective

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remembrance. My intention has always been to move forward with the ceremony that appropriately honors our city and all those who have served, like we do every September 11th, like I go to every September 11th, to pay respect to the men and women who paid the ultimate sacrifice, and who went into that building with many of them knowing that they will not come out. I'm pleased that we found a new date for the clock. The individuals who graciously helped me with this clock that we worked on for two years said, Vince, let's just move it. Half of the team can't be there, its not a big deal. We'll move it to another day. I said, perfect, we'll move it to another day. It's the following day. Ensuring that our annual celebration remains intact. This event is dedicated to honoring not only those who endured the horrific attacks, but also the brave souls who sacrificed their lives, their families who continue mourning those individuals who are lost. Upholding our legacy is a responsibility we take seriously, and I remain committed to ensuring their courage and the impact of that day are never forgotten. Unfortunately, like I mentioned before, this is yet another attempt to attack me as Mayor, by focusing on semantics, rather than the true intent behind my words. Instead of being distracted by such tactics, I urge all of you, every single person, let's come together tomorrow to honor the memories of those who were killed, those families that were affected forever as a result of the terrorist attacks on 9/11, as they deserve our full respect and dedication. If any of you were here before and you questioned my loyalty to police and fire when I don't agree with union contracts or when I do agree with union contracts, my record is clear, over a hundred million dollars in infrastructure, new infrastructure, all new fire stations, record-breaking union contracts and in today's Commission meeting I worked on a project for one year with other local residents, you can look it up, called the LEAF Program, Law Enforcement and Firefighting Day in the city. We will have an event in January where we will raise money for firefighters and police officers in our community who were affected in one form or another, either they passed away in service, they were hurt in service, and we are here to help their families make sure that they can make it by. So, at the end of the day, I have the utmost respect for the hard work, your efforts, and 9/11. I have no issues with it being a national holiday. My response was clear. It was in response to Commissioner Fernandez in regard to whether we should have a ceremony that day or not. Remember, we have days in history in this country where many Americans tragically died, from Pearl Harbor to Oklahoma City, where hundreds if not thousands of people died. You take those days off or do you remember them forever. We honor their lives, we honor their sacrifices, but its very easy to try to smear me and try to destroy me over a comment that's taken out of context, but please don't come here and tell me that I don't respect you. Please don't because I have the utmost respect for you. We may have disagreements, at the end of the day, but I do respect you, your efforts and everyone that was lost on 9/11. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. We'll move onto item F-2.

Commissioner Castro: Was this your apology?

Mayor Lago: I don't feel like I have to apologize. Let's move on. We have a vote already. Do we need to take an additional vote?

City Clerk Urquia: No sir.
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Mayor Lago: Alright. Then we're moving onto item F-2.