

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-14
July 1, 2025
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Melissa Castro

Commissioner Ariel Fernandez (Absent)

Commissioner Richard D. Lara

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

City Architect, Juan Riesco

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item F-14 [5:38 p.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission prioritizing residential reviews by establishing an Order of Business for Board of Architects Meetings. (Sponsored by Vice Mayor Anderson)

Mayor Lago: F-14.

City Attorney Suarez: F-14 is a Resolution of the City Commission prioritizing residential reviews by establishing an Order of Business for Board of Architects Meetings.

Mayor Lago: Oh, this is a long time coming. Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I noticed the smile on our City Architect's face.

Mayor Lago: This is years in the making.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Sometimes people don't like change, but we really need to become more efficient. So, in an effort to be able to have residents first and being taken care of first and not

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waiting around for large projects to be reviewed, while it might be interesting and educational, we are going to indeed put residents first here. So, we are going to restructure the order of business before the Board of Architects. Time certain presentations will be based on project types. The goal is to prioritize residents for the intent of expediting the process for all. You have the presentation up there. I should just let you do the presentation, but you know the idea. Go ahead. You take the floor. I've talked enough today.

City Architect Riesco: You guys can do it that way or I can walk you through it. So, good afternoon, Mayor, I think we are going to get three for three.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I think so.

City Architect Riesco: Regarding your unanimous votes, I'm hoping so.

Mayor Lago: We hope.

City Architect Riesco: Good afternoon, gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen, Juan Riesco, City Architect. As the City Architect, I am also the Secretary for the Board of Architects and the liaison to our residents. As you know, the board is responsible for the reviewing of all projects in the City of Coral Gables and upholding the high standards of design that this city expects. Our BOA meetings are unique, in that we have weekly meetings instead of monthly meetings, and it's different from all the other boards in the city. Our meetings are held every Thursday at 8:30 in the morning, and typically run till 1:30 p.m., due to the high volume of submittals that we review. Our meetings are very intense and rigorous, where many projects are reviewed in a limited timeframe. They range from a simple fence project to a very complex and large project. We typically review 25 to 30 submittals on a weekly basis. We currently have nine registered architects on board, with an average of 20 to 30 years of experience behind their belt. Each of them has vast knowledge of the ranges of small-scale projects to large complex developments. And based on the input of the residents and the concerns of the Commission, we are here to adjust our order of business at the Board of Architects meetings. Two quick slides. The first slide is, again, as the Vice Mayor stated, we're restructuring the order of business. The goal is to prioritize the residents with the intent of expediting the process for everybody. We are now initiating time certain presentations, based on project types and complexity, and we are also soliciting additional architects to the board, to help expedite further reviews. If you can, put up the second slide. I hope it's readable. I wasn't sure. This is my first presentation. I wasn't sure about the text size. So, what we've done to address the concerns is separate the meeting into three tiers. The first tier is what we call Panels, which are going to be initiated. Our meeting starts at 8:30 roughly, it's an hour-long session for panels, because these are the simple projects, in our mind, these are the simple projects; they are the fences, the windows, the decks, the docks, roofs, tiles, signage. All of the miscellaneous, ancillary components of a structure, whether it be commercial or residential, and so, they go relatively

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quickly. What we do is, we sub-divide into four teams, two to three people per team, and then we concurrently review projects and try to keep a handle on what's getting approved, what's getting deferred, what's getting rejected. The second tier of the meeting is what we call the Board, and that's where we review additions, renovations, alterations, new construction, and solar panels. And what we do at that point of the meeting, which usually starts about 9:30 and it will end probably by 11, we are hoping for an hour and a half session. And these are the core reviews that we do where we have the most volume of work. These are the new houses that sometimes become cumbersome, so we split up into two teams of four architects, anywhere from three to five, depending on the attendance of the meetings, because now we're into the summer session and a lot of the teams is travelling, whether it be business or personal, they are not available, so it can range from three to five people per team. And then the final tier of the board meeting is going to be the full board, where we do the large-scale and complicated residential projects. We have some residential projects; we just reviewed one last week, it was 30,000 square feet. One of the biggest residential projects in South Gables right off of Old Cutler Road, in Gables by the Sea or Gables Estates, I'm not sure where it was. So, in the full board sessions, this is also the portion of the meeting where we review projects that are requesting Med Bonus. This is where projects are requesting conceptual reviews. So, this is delegated to the complex projects that are the most time-consuming and require the most attention in terms of detail. We also review historic properties. We also allocate time for product presentations. So, in this city we try to vet products that are new, that are coming online. We try to stay on top of the materials that come into the market, because a lot of developers, a lot of owners, a lot of builders want cutting edge, new technology, new materials. There is a strong push for composites versus natural materials, because of course degradation due to water infiltration, termites, whatever. So, we've got to watch what people use in the projects so we ask them to come in and do product presentations a week; the board can vet the materials, look at the guarantees, the materiality, the connections, how it's attached, how it's connected, so that's something that we do on a full board level. And then the last thing we do at the full board level is, based on the mandate from the Commission, we review the metal roofs, and that's a full board requirement. And so, that's kind of, in a nutshell, what we're doing. Our full boards can run up to a couple of hours, sometimes we go past one o'clock, which I don't think is productive, because the board is tired after four or five hours of reviewing projects, and everybody is hungry by one o'clock, so we try, I try really hard to get the agenda complete before one o'clock, but again, we're at the mercy of the project and the complexity and the exchange between the applicant and the board. And again, the full board session is anywhere from five board members to nine board members. I need five to create a quorum for a full board session. So, in a nutshell that's what we're doing. We think this is going to solve a lot of the concerns and a lot of the requests of the residents and also the Commission. I think it's a great situation for us at the board level. I was on the board for eleven years, and this ability to break up the board into two components is going to help us tremendously with the time, because now I can have two concurrent

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boards running at one time. So, hopefully people will get in quicker and get out quicker and hopefully its less complaining about sitting and waiting for five hours, which I understand, but up to now that's been the MO for the board meetings, and so, I'm glad the Vice Mayor brought it to our attention and I'm also glad that some of the residents have talked about it, at the meetings, why should I wait for four hours and my answer has always been based on the agenda, its based on when you submit the project, you get put on the agenda and we've got to deal with it. My promise to everybody is that we'll get you done in this board meeting, that it's not going to get shelved to another subsequent meeting. So, that's it in a nutshell, guys.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I had talked to board members about two years ago about doing this. There was some pushback at the time, but I think the appetite is there now, so now is a good time to do this. It gives you the opportunity to bring in some additional people, so it's not as much of a strain on the existing board members that we have, and you can still get projects processed here. This is a resolution, it's a minor tweak to our code. I'll move it.

Commissioner Castro: I'll second.

Mayor Lago: Can I just state for the record a few things.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Absolutely.

Mayor Lago: First of all, I want to commend you for working on this. This is something that we've been talking about for a long time. I've heard from a lot of architects. Something we have talked with the Manager on multiple occasions, and I think it's the right thing to do. I think it really offers different, not only opinions, but I think skillsets and it really opens it up so that people can get a better understanding and really delve into residential versus high-rise construction, commercial construction, and I think its been a long, long time coming, a long time coming, and are there any other ways that you think that we could potentially do a better job that maybe you think there's constraints financially, staff. What can we do, because the only thing that I see, Mr. City Architect, which is, I don't know how to answer these individuals when they come to me. I bring them to you; dozens of times I've brought them to you.

City Architect Riesco: Every week.

Mayor Lago: Every week. Hey, my project was denied for a fourth time at the Board of Architects, usually they are residents. Some of those, again, I'm not an architect. I look at them and I say, that's a beautiful design, and they say, oh, I don't want to make the windows smaller. I want to leave the windows the way they are and there's that back and forth. I'll give you one example. What do you think that we can do? – is it just that people sometimes use architects that are not local or architects that don't have the experience with the standards here in the city, and I think sometimes its very frustrating for staff, because staff wants to tell them, listen, your architect is

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just not a person who understand our standards here, or doesn't understand that you're in a historically designated neighborhood and you can't build an ice-cube in the middle of a neighborhood. No, but this is what I want. So, what can we do to make your life easier and the staff's life easier, because it's really hard when you have to deal with somebody and they say, "I want this, but you're like, no, you can't have that.

City Architect Riesco: Well, let me answer the first part.

Mayor Lago: I know it's a loaded question and I apologize.

City Architect Riesco: I'm ready to answer that. The first component is the staffing. We are short, one staff member now in my department and we lost somebody in January, and so, it would be great to pick up another employee that will help us with the internal reviews at staff level, not at BOA level. This is purely what we do in-house where we review what we call the miscellaneous projects, the small projects. That would be helpful on that level. The second issue or the second response to the broader question about people getting deferred or rejected at the board level. I hate to say it, but the majority of the architects that I deal with on a weekly basis that get rejected are, I think exactly what you mentioned that they are not well versed in perhaps Mediterranean design, they are not well versed in traditional Coral Gables architecture, they are modernists. I am a hard-core modernist. I graduated from college loving Richard Myer, which is a light box guy, but I understand now that I'm an employee of the City of Coral Gables and I have to adhere to the standards of the city, and so, I put that away and I focus on what I need to be doing here, and so, I try to meet with the applicants, Mayor, to respond to your query about people getting upset. I do it on a weekly basis. I probably meet with three or people every week regarding rejections from the board. That's a big part of my job here as a liaison, as an ambassador of the city, is to try to get these guys in line so they understand what we expect, and you're absolutely correct about what you said that some of these modern houses cannot be built in our traditional neighborhoods, its just not something that we can accept, because again, our marching orders are very clear, we have to protect the integrity of the neighborhood and the context. If there's a position or a part of the town that's a little bit more open-ended, maybe an annexed area that we took over from Miami-Dade County that has a little bit of variation, then we open up the doors a little more and we allow the more modern vocabulary in those areas, but unfortunately, many of the architects that come to the board, some are first-timers and they have no clue what they're getting into; some don't come prepared; some don't understand the requirements of whenever they are doing renovation work, existing versus new, and how we read the plans, and how we try to understand them. You've got to keep in mind, we are looking at a project for sometimes 15 minutes and we have to be able to determine what the scope of work is, understand what they are trying to do and make sure that it's all complete, so we can give them an approval so they can move unto the next tier. And so, a lot of guys just – and I'm working on that also. We are trying to create some design standards; we are

trying to generate typical permit comments that we look for on the projects that we're doing. So, there's a lot of things we are trying to put stuff online, we are trying to publish the product standards. We are trying to do a lot of things that weren't available in the hard-copy days. Now that we're in the digital world, we have a lot more flexibility, we have a lot more ammunition that I can use to do that, and so, we're working on all these things and we're trying to give the community and the architectural community in particular, what they need to be successful in this city, and unfortunately, some guys just don't have it, I hate to say that, and some guys we can work with, and some guys are stellar, and they do great work and we appreciate that and we love that. You know, I've got guys complaining to me, hey, I've been there four times, and I got deferred, rejected and then I got a guy, I saw a guy get approved on the first shot. That guy, unfortunately probably did his homework, did his research, did his context study, looked at the requirements that the board expects, put together a package that's complete, and put notes on the plans. I mean, I can't tell you how many times we stop presentations because the product isn't complete, not enough information for the board to make an assessment.

Mayor Lago: Can I ask you a question, also a question directed at your staff. Don't you think a lot of it has to do with also, not only experience in regards to the city and our objectives, but it also has to do with the fact that the times that we are living in right now where everybody wants to maximize every last square inch of the property to get the highest dollar amount, so its like they are going setback to setback, they are trying to build, for example, if you look at my house, for example on a 12,000 square foot lot, they built 3,000 square feet. They could probably build another thousand-something on that lot, but 50 years ago when they built that ranch-style home, it wasn't a necessity. Now they would take that lot, knock the house down, build to the last square inch. Let's say it's 4,500 square feet so that they can sell it for X times 45 and make the most bang for your buck, and again, you see these massively packed lots where Coral Gables was never like that. You never had that many two-story houses. You always had spauling one-story houses that maybe they have a lot more green space. Now it's setback to setback. You think that it has a lot to do with it also?

City Architect Riesco: I think it has everything to do with it. I think that's a viable discussion point and again, that's an argument we have on a weekly basis at the board level, where an applicant says, hey, you guys are not allowing me to do a second floor, and the answer is always no. We are allowing you to do the second floor, we are trying to address the concept of mass and how you distribute the mass on the second floor so that its not imposing on the street, so that its not imposing on the neighbors, and again, I can't tell you how many meetings I have with owners and applicants on a weekly basis having that same discussion. Why won't you let me do my second floor? – sir, that's not the point here. We want you to do a second floor, we welcome the second floor, but it's got to be done properly, its got to be integrated and sometimes it's an existing renovation where they are adding a second floor to a single story in a neighborhood that's full of single-story homes.

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So, this is the first impact that that neighborhood receives. So, we want to treat it really sensitively and make sure that the addition is going to be compatible with the house and that that particular house is compatible with the neighborhood, and it's a big contentious point that we deal with weekly. I understand. You're paying a lot of money for the dirt, and you want to maximize your dollar, and you want to maximize your square footage, and exactly what you said. We get into discussions with people about lot coverage. Their chart says that they are off the lot coverage requirement by one square foot. I said, "Are you kidding me, you are not giving yourself a little room for error. Don't do that because eventually you are going to have a problem somewhere. You miscalculated, the drawing wasn't to scale, and all of a sudden, your back is up against the wall and what happens now is, you've got to remove a portion of the structure, which is absurd, but that's kind of the mindset. The mindset is to maximize and we're the opposite. We're like, hey – another discussion that comes up a lot is the two-story volumes on a lot of these modernist homes where they want double-door entrance and a foyer that's 30 feet tall and a living room that's 30 feet tall. That increases mass. That volume, that second-story volume that's part of the ground floor increases the mass of the project, so if you take that out and you put that mass somewhere else, you can bring it down. And so, again, it's an argument we deal with this daily. It's the individual property rights versus the city requirements, that's kind of the fine line that we walk every day, and it's a tough pill to swallow, most people don't like to hear that. Hey, you're rejected. I've been an architect almost 40 years, and I can't imagine somebody telling me that I'm rejected, because I work hard at what I do, and some of these guys just come into the meetings and they are not prepared, they don't understand, and it's a rude awakening, but I'm there moderating the meetings, trying to be fair to both the applicant and the board members. Some people get hostile, some people get upset, and I'm there to make sure that it doesn't get out of hand and I try really hard to appease applicants and I meet with them after. It's not a requirement, it's not part of my job description, but I do it because I think it's a good thing for the city and its customer service. So, I try to meet with them. I try to steer them in a direction where I feel the board might have an opening where they can approve the project and I give them the input that I have gained and the knowledge that I hear every week in and week out and try to move them forward and sometimes I'm successful and sometimes I'm not. It's always the typical scenario – you get to a fork in the road, and you make a left or a right, one of those two is the right way, the other one's the wrong way, and sometimes we have collateral damage. You make design changes thinking, hey, this is what I'm going to do to address the board, and the project actually gets worse, gets further away from what the board is expecting. And so, it's a tough business, but I think we work really hard at it on a weekly basis. I think the board tries really hard to get the projects approved, that's what everybody wants is the least path of resistance. It's the easiest way out of this, but unfortunately, it's not an easy path to get to, and I think that's kind of – I think that's what the city is about is a high standard. We don't want the regular everyday stuff that you see everywhere else around our cities. I think there is a level of expectation, there's a standard of quality that we want to adhere

to, and I think that's our job and that's our charge. So, I don't know if I answered your questions. If you have any other questions, I'll be happy to answer them.

Mayor Lago: No.

Vice Mayor Anderson: We have a motion, and we have a second. We're ready.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Castro: This is very good. Yes

Commissioner Lara: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 4-0)

(Commissioner Fernandez: Absent)

City Architect Riesco: Thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.