

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item E-10
June 11, 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

Budget Director, Paula Rodriguez

Community Recreation Director, Fred Couceyro

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item E-10 [10:26 a.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission authorizing an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2023-2024 Annual Budget to recognize as revenue \$2,675,240 from the sale of historic facility Transfer of Development Rights (TDRs) and to appropriate \$500,000 towards the Coral Gables Museum, \$75,000 towards the Merrick House, \$1,064,740 towards the Venetian Pool, and \$1,035,500 towards the Alhambra Water Tower. (Sponsored by Commissioner Menendez, Co-sponsored by Vice Mayor Anderson, and Co-sponsored by Commissioner Fernandez)

Mayor Lago: Let's do E-10, we'll skip E-8 and E-9 after time certain around 10:30 so we can get one more item in.

City Attorney Suarez: E-10 is a Resolution of the City Commission authorizing an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2023-2024 Annual Budget to recognize as revenue \$2,675,240 from the sale of historic facility Transfer of Development Rights (TDRs) and to appropriate \$500,000 towards the Coral Gables Museum, \$75,000 towards the Merrick House, \$1,064,740 towards the Venetian Pool, and \$1,035,500 towards the Alhambra Water Tower.

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Commissioner Menendez: I just want to comment that I think we've had over the last couple of years opportunities to sell TDRs and move those funds to historic preservation and what is a fund and I think for the community to see actual dollars go to specific historic landmarks, I think it's a great part of the process and educating the community as to why this is a valuable and important. So, I think I'm very happy to have this legislation.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Just a couple of comments. Some folks when you start on the Planning and Zoning Board and so forth, you don't even know what TDRs are. It's one-time money that we get to utilize air rights from development to now preserve the historic assets and am very pleased to have been a part of this. I know there's a long history to when this started, Mayor and Commissioners before us, started this process and fortunately now we are going to be able to reap its benefits for many of our other buildings in our city. So, I'm glad to move it.

Commissioner Menendez: And I'll second.

Mayor Lago: So, before we take a roll call. Are there any comments.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes Mr. Mayor. Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. I told you it's a good day in the City of Coral Gables. Strongly support this one.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes
Commissioner Castro: Yes
Commissioner Fernandez: Yes
Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Mayor Lago: Before I vote...

Commissioner Fernandez: I have a few comments that I never was able to make.

Mayor Lago: I was just trying to say, just very quickly. I'll be brief. Is this coming back for a second.

City Attorney Suarez: No. This is a resolution. This is it.

Mayor Lago: So, number one, like I mentioned, I want to repeat again so the history is very clear. This was achieved in 2022 with the prior Commission and I think it's important to give Vice Mayor Mena and Commissioner Fors, along with my colleagues on the Commission the credit for finding a very creative way in addressing historic preservation. That again does not affect the budget in any form or any way. This had not been done before in the city that I'm aware of and we were able to craft legislation that addresses these concerns, so I think it's very important to put that on the record. Number two, this is the fruit. What you're seeing here is the fruit of legislation that was written in 2022. My second point that I have a concern about is the issue of the Merrick House. I
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think the Merrick House – I’ve been to the Merrick House; I was there this past week. I saw some of my colleagues were there also. There are several issues that I think need to be addressed there that fall short of the \$75,000. Since this is not coming out of the General Fund, I think that we need to take that and just as a budgetary item, potentially have it to \$150,000. I think there are issues in regard to interior drywall, you have issues of paint, you have issues where the exterior needs to be cleaned, probably bring in a professional cleaning company that can address issues with the fragile wood, the exterior wood, excuse me, the exterior Cokina stone. Certain things that I think that has to be done in a professional manner, which obviously cost a lot more money when you are talking about historic preservation. So, I think that, just bringing this up, while \$75,000 is a great number, I was never consulted on that \$75,000. I think that it falls short, especially when you see the amount of work that has to be done there. There are certain areas that have to be refinished. Certain entrance features that the wood is exposed that need to be painted. Certain windowsills that need to be addressed, because of the water intrusion. So, I think that the 75 is going to fall short and we have the money in the TDRs. I would request that my colleagues consider moving that to, having a line item for \$150,000, at a minimum \$125,000 to address those issues since it is coming from TDRs not from the budget.

Commissioner Menendez: I know Commissioner Fernandez has something to say. Other question regarding the TDRs whoever can answer. Can I amend the legislation to increase the dollars for the Merrick House and bump it up to 150? Are those dollars available?

Budget Director Rodriguez: So, you can certainly amend this item. There is some information that you’ll get tomorrow, and we’ve discussed a little bit in our preparation of tomorrow’s Capital Budget discussion. So currently, the Merrick House does have some funding for some repairs that they need interior. In our proposals for the Capital items, we are proposing \$30,000 towards the Merrick House to be used as an assessment of the facility, and so, the \$75,000 was discussed to put aside to address any damage, any needs that come out of that assessment.

Mayor Lago: What I would recommend, if I may, and I appreciate.

Budget Director Rodriguez: Certainly.

Mayor Lago: First off, \$30,000 for assessment is a pretty significant amount of money. I don’t think we need to spend \$30,000 on an assessment.

Budget Director Rodriguez: And we may not need it all.

Mayor Lago: No, no, go ahead.

Budget Director Rodriguez: I’m sorry. We may not need it all. That was just a number.

Mayor Lago: I think that you can do it for a lot less. You can bring in a certified – we have two incredible architects who are specialists when it comes to historic preservation. Their offices are here in the City of Coral Gables. I’ve worked with them in the past. They are renowned architects in this community. I think they could probably come in and do it for a significantly less fee. A

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simple report telling us these are the areas of concern. I know there's been a lot of renovations in the Merrick House over the last few years that were long overdue. We had a lot of deferred maintenance, a lot of that was done about two years ago, three years ago, but I think what we need to focus in on, for example, when you walk in there, there are glaring issues that are just right in front of your face. When you look at the chimney, the chimney has a hole that I've been mentioning to the previous City Manager and the current City Manager for about probably a year now, eight months now. It has to be taken care of. But you just can't go in there and repair that stucco. You have to bring in a person who is versed in that style of stucco repair, drywall repair. It's like a Venetian plaster finish, Venetian plaster but it's a plaster finish that has to be done, so it matches properly and you're not just going to do that little hole. You've probably got to repair pretty significant portions, so it matches. You have issues with the windowsills that I've seen. You have wood framing around entrance features that have to be finished in a proper way. I think the exterior of the building needs to be cleaned, especially the overhangs when you are walking around the facility. This can't be done just with a simple pressure washer. It has to be done in a way that is thoughtful in regard to not destroying the facility. There are wood beams. Things have to be done very, very carefully. I'm not a historic preservation expert, but I've seen when I've done projects that the cost is pretty significant in regard to regular construction. So, to me, I think \$75,000 is short and I would like to see a budget item of \$150,000. Try to reduce that 30 to \$10,000 if we can, if not less, so that we can swing that money over. And if we're able to take away, even include that \$10,000, for example in the review and put it into this 150, to me, it would save money out of the budget, and we could just use the TDRs because I know that we need every single dollar in the budget. That's my opinion and I hope that the Commission will consider that, because I think it's much needed.

Budget Director Rodriguez: So, this is a resolution, and you certainly can make an adjustment to the amounts that are proposed for the facilities.

Commissioner Menendez: I'm open to –

Commissioner Fernandez: The question is do we have the additional \$75,000 in TDRs to...

Budget Director Rodriguez: What would need to happen in this particular resolution is whatever we add to the Merrick House, I would recommend either reducing what we put towards the Venetian Pool. So, currently as its written, the TDRs are going to the Alhambra Water Tower, this \$1,035,500 covers the new need request for Fiscal Year 25. This would allow us to provide that funding this year, as opposed to next fiscal year, and it allows us not to use General Funds to fund that project in what we'll review tomorrow. The same is true for Venetian Pool, the \$1,064,740, funds the majority of the ask of the new need request for the Venetian Pool. It's short by about \$216,000, which we believe we can find in this year's funding. There is some contingency that we have available from a project that closed out, and we will be able to fund the full ask of the Venetian Pool. So, increasing the 75 to the Merrick House would just require us to pull it from one place or the other. I would recommend pulling it from the Venetian Pool since that one doesn't get the full funding and then we'll work out, maybe we reduce the \$30,000 that we're recommending tomorrow from the Merrick House and take the difference and put it towards the Venetian Pool or something like that.

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Commissioner Fernandez: I guess to the Mayor's point, if we move it to Merrick House now, we can start working on Merrick House and possibly complete it as soon as possible versus if we do it in the budget, we're talking about October before we can even start considering it.

Mayor Lago: My point is that these are simple items that I don't think even need a permit, except for maybe the exterior paint, which can be addressed in 24 hours because staff expedites that very quickly for residents. You have some simple – I think the interior is wire...possibly, I haven't really looked. I didn't want to fall off a chair looking to see the hole that's sitting in the ceiling, but there are some pretty simple things. I remember I helped draft legislation that removed interior permitting requirements for paint for simple things like baseboards and things like that. But I mean you may need for the wire laff, correct me, you may have to pull a permit for that, that might take a week. So, these are things that we can address now that have been long overdue and I think will really spruce up the Merrick House and give it that added touch in preparation for the holiday season. One of the things that I don't remember, I don't remember was the last time we painted the exterior of the Merrick House, I'm not sure.

Budget Director Rodriguez: I don't know anything about the facility...

Mayor Lago: Maybe the Vice Mayor can give me a little guidance.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I did do a complete inside-out tour, including the air conditioning – I looked at the laff in there as well and I'll add...

Mayor Lago: So, it's laff.

Vice Mayor Anderson: There is laff in there.

Mayor Lago: I'm saying the hole by the fireplace its laff.

Vice Mayor Anderson: The ceiling area – what I'm going to add too is we're ultimately going to save money because the sooner we fix this, the less damage that's going to be done. Even around the air conditioning ducts, it's not apparent where the leak is, but because they need some additional insulation you are going to have to tear into that Venetian plaster to do it correctly, because it's leaking inside of the wall. I looked at the duct work inside of the closet and it's not dripping there, so I think this is a good choice because it's going to save us money in the long run and prevent irreparable damage to this building and possible mold intrusion. It spirals. It's a labor of love these buildings, but they're worth it. Just like this one when we chose to put money into the windows here as a priority to push this forward as soon as possible to prevent additional damage to this building, so that we don't have more damage to the plaster and more damage to the interior. So, I'm happy, if you're moving, I'm happy to second.

Commissioner Menendez: Fred, if you don't mind.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I know Fred's having a heart attack because we're taking money from the pool.

Commissioner Menendez: Can the pool survive if we move collectively 75, can you still accomplish with 75?

Community Recreation Director: We have a lot of long-term stuff with the pool, that small amount, there are still some projects that's going to take a long amount of time, so whatever needs to be done for that.

Commissioner Menendez: I didn't say Venetian Pool, they said it.

Community Recreation Director: Its fine. Venetian Pool, as you know, there's extensive projects and that's going to take more than – its not a right now thing. We have to plan it out so it's okay to look at how the funding goes in sections.

Commissioner Menendez: Okay.

Mayor Lago: If you don't mind, maybe what we can do is, during the assessment they may come back and say, listen, you may need \$100,000. Let's put a reverter that whatever funds are not used, we can always find ways to use funds. There are always ways to use funds. There's one additional project, there's one more thing that we can do, but if the assessment says that whatever is not needed and this is what we need to take care of, to provide a little touch up that will get us through the next five years, I think that we can put a reverter in the legislation that says, whatever monies are not used are directed back to the Venetian Pool. And another thing I would like to see is something like what I did with the White Way Lights, the legislation that I wrote. We have to make it a point that staff goes by these sensitive buildings and just says look, when you look at the underhang of this building, it's a beautiful property. We have to get it cleaned. We can't allow the cobwebs and the dust, you can see it, it's white. So, anything that's on it, it starts building up and building up and building up. So I think that we need to have like some sort of checks and balances where we say look, once a year like what Zeida does with our private tenants who rent buildings from us, say something to the effect that we will just do a quick cursory review of the building and say, look, everything looks clean, everything looks up to snuff because I think what ends up happening is that the caretakers of the Merrick House can't be expected to do certain things, there's limitations, only staff can do that or an outside company that has the equipment that can property do that, especially when you're talking about a historical building of this magnitude.

Commissioner Menendez: So, I'll go ahead and amend the legislation to move the 75, additional 75 to Merrick House and as the Mayor said, any funds that aren't used to go back to Venetian Pool, I think that way we cover all the angles. So, I make that amendment.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I second the motion.

City Attorney Suarez: So just to be clear then. The funding towards the Merrick House will be \$150,000 and the funding for Venetian Pool, I'll rely on Paula to do the math, but it would be that amount less t \$75,000.

Budget Director Rodriguez: Yes.

Mayor Lago: With...

Commissioner Menendez: With the language that any funds not used by the Merrick House go back to Venetian Pool.

Mayor Lago: And I would like for me, personally I would like to see through the Manager's office, through Zeida, through whoever is responsible, our Historic Department, just once a year, what is pending so we can start building actual knowledge and budgets based on not, hey by the way, the following building is having catastrophic issues. No. We need to be aware of what's happening. A little bit of preventative maintenance goes a long way. You see it everywhere. So, I think that we need to make sure that we're at least doing that once a year, especially when you are talking about a building of this magnitude. The same thing with the museum. We're about to spend massive funds on the museum. We need to make sure that we don't look back after five years and say, hey, what happened. That's why I wrote that legislation for the White Way Lights, because I can show you White Way Lights and I meant to take pictures, but I drove by them and I didn't have time to stop, where some of the White Way Lights now are orange, as a result of the sprinklers that are corroding them. Those are simple fixes. We had asked the residents in those areas to not point the sprinklers in that direction and correct it or move the sprinklers, because if not, every time you fix them, we spend millions of dollars correcting bringing them up to the standard that we appreciate. Thank you. We have a motion and a second.

City Clerk Urquia: All in favor.

All: Aye.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.