

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-1
August 26, 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

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz
Maite Halley

Agenda Item F-1 [5:25 p.m.]

Update regarding Youth Center Property
(Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: What is the update as quickly as possible on the Youth Center property?

City Attorney Suarez: Yes, Mayor. So, I sent you all this morning the response. So as directed by the Commission, I sent a request to the association for the documents that the Commission asked to be provided by the association. I received a response this morning for counsel for the association, basically asserting that, you know, as a private nonprofit entity, they are not required to provide these documents. But in the spirit of transparency, they were providing certain publicly available records. And those include the association's annual reports filed with the Florida Division of Corporations, the association's IRS forms, 990 IRS filings for the past five years, the deed to the Youth Center Association property, the summary final judgment that was entered on October 30,

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1968, and the Third District Court of Appeals affirmance of that summary final judgment. That is all they've provided. I've sent that to all of you.

Mayor Lago: Okay. First and foremost, they missed the deadline. We provided for them, and they have not provided other documents we requested. This is an entity that is entangled with the City of Coral Gables. At one point, they had lost their 501(c)3 status. In the 90s, for five years, they were defunct. This is something that, again, I have no issues with a reverter clause at all. I have no issues with a reverter clause. That can still be put on the property, but this idea that this project is going to be developed and this entity is going to be the savior, why wouldn't we develop Phillips Park, for example? It's a large swath of land. Why are we now going to be taking in another massive piece of property, which is six acres that I've been working on for 10 years, and we're on the final stages of negotiating that? We're looking to bring that in, so it's not developed. So, at the end of the day, what I think we should do, and just to go really quickly. I think that we should have our City Attorney hire outside counsel to hold, to do a real thorough, in-depth review of all the tax documents. I want to see bank account records. They are responsible. They are responsible and should be held to the same standard, just like the case that I forwarded you, Madam City Attorney, which says that they're responsible for the sun. They should be held to the same standards in the sunshine. I want to see votes. I want to see how you selected boards, all those things that have occurred over the last two decades. Who is responsible? How are elections? Where's the money? How do you spend your money? If you're a 501(c)3, you have to provide the last three years at a minimum. You should be able to provide it in two seconds of all your financial information. So, I'm asking for the City Attorney to bring outside counsel on this issue to provide a comprehensive breakdown of what's happening exactly. Again, I have no issues with a reverter clause, but I do have an issue with there being an entity out there that can't keep their papers in order. And in that case, potentially putting the city, a city treasure like the Youth Center in jeopardy. Would anybody join me in that?

Commissioner Castro: No, but through the Mayor?

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Commissioner Castro: I want to just give a little clarity to this. The War Memorial Youth Center is a private entity. The reverter clause was challenged in the 1960s in the District Court and the Third District Court of Appeals. Both ruled that the reverter clause was valid. The War Memorial Association, the land was purchased, then they built the structure, and they conveyed it to the city for free with the reverter clause to protect the property. Okay, we're getting this for free. Reverter clause states basically that it always has to serve primarily for the youth of the community and it has to be called the Coral Gables War Memorial Youth Center. Also, the city must maintain and operate the Youth Center exclusively. This was a gift to us. All we have to do is maintain it.

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Mayor Lago: Okay.

Commissioner Castro: Mayor, you've been in office for more than 12 years. Why are you bringing this up now? This would be a problem. The only reason this would be a problem on the title is if you're planning to sell it or is that what you're trying to do?

Mayor Lago: Uh-oh, is that Political Cortadito? The next big story. Mayor's selling the Youth Center.

Commissioner Castro: It's a direct question because the reverter clause there is to protect the Youth Center. But then you want to go into a legal battle again with waste taxpayer money, okay, on a private entity that didn't even have to give you that information and they were very generous to do so.

Mayor Lago: Now, nobody knows where that money is. Nobody knows the process of putting together that board. Nobody knows what is, why did the 501(c)3 lapse? Why were they for five years defunct? There's a lot of questions that need to be answered. So again, this is a simple matter. You asked me, I've been in office for 12 years. Yes, I have been in office for 12 years. It's never been an issue because I didn't know it was an issue. When I see something like this, it needs clarity and address. At the end of the day, my job is to make sure that no property that the city owns has any cloud on title. And at the end of the day, this has to be corrected. Just like we corrected today on the elections, which will happen in April, and that will be addressed. So, Madam City Attorney, the Commissioner says a lot of things that I was not aware of in her explanation now. So, I'd like to know, I'd like to know, were you aware of everything she just said?

City Attorney Suarez: Mayor, generally, as you know, Mayor, we have discussed that the youth center was originally operated at the site where currently the Publix is located.

Mayor Lago: That's not what I'm asking. I'm asking, were you aware of the litigation that took place before?

City Attorney Suarez: Yes, yes.

Mayor Lago: And your opinion is?

City Attorney Suarez: So that was, the city brought that action to get a declaratory judgment. And the trial court found that the reverter was valid and binding.

Mayor Lago: Okay, perfect.

City Attorney Suarez: That was affirmed by the Third DCA in what's called the Procurement Affirmance, without an opinion.

Mayor Lago: But with that being said, they should have no issues in having their documents reviewed. At the end of the day, if they're associated with the city, you should be transparent and provide all these documents. I don't know why you're so, what is there to hide? Why do you have to be so anti-transparency, so anti-a process that people can view the documents of an organization that is entangled with our jewel, the Youth Center? The problem is, I think there's a conflict of interest.

Commissioner Castro: With who?

Mayor Lago: Kirk Menendez was a Commissioner and tried to pass \$150 million bond while he was the Chair of this board. That to me is a direct conflict of interest. And thank God that I stopped that \$150 million bond because it would be more debt on the city. Kind of like your COLA, which is a \$20 million debt on the city. So, \$2 million a year for the next 10 years. So, my point is, my point is that if there are no issues, if all the paperwork is in order, why wouldn't you just submit the paperwork? If you're such a steward of the city's, one of the city's most important assets, just give me the documents. Give them to the City Attorney. We gave you a deadline and you gave us a few documents but give us all the documents. I want to see 10 years of bank records. I want to understand how did you, let me ask you a question. You think it's appropriate that a person who's a chairman, yeah, that you think it's appropriate that a person who's a chairman of a board, of a board that is in charge of a reverter clause for the Youth Center, puts his wife, his son, and his daughter on that board. I think that's nepotism. And in my opinion is a huge conflict. And that person at that time is also a Commissioner in the City of Coral Gables. I'm sorry, that doesn't pass muster with me. And you don't need to be an attorney to realize that.

Commissioner Castro: Yeah, through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: So, I'm not done yet.

Commissioner Castro: Why are you asking a question?

Mayor Lago: No, no, no, but I know the answer. You find an excuse for anything. Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, I'm going to go, you know, I agree that we need the records. I also agree that we need to preserve the history. There's a rich history there of individuals that started the, not only Youth Center, but really post-war era, World War II, one and two, commemorate and preserve the memory of those who served in the wars. And that's why it was called the War Memorial Youth Center. And that organization was formed. The individuals that formed that, you know, formed it long before Commissioner Menendez were around and their history needs to be

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preserved and told. I happen to be in a via Zoom at a Rotary Club meeting this past week and got to hear a rather eloquent presentation. It was put on and I do think that those records need to be preserved that this city needs to be able to tell this story. Okay, one of the comments that was made by Commissioner Menendez, who did the presentation at that time is, you know, the City of Coral Gables never tells this story. Well, help us. Provide us the records. Let's preserve the history so that for the next hundred years, the story of those individuals, those individuals that bought the original property where the Publix now sits next to the A&P gets to be told for future generations. And we get to honor their legacy and what they did back then in the 1940s and 50s and 60s, you know, before a lot of us were born. So, I would like to add to that request for the full record on what was done.

Mayor Lago: One second. So, you asked me, you asked me why do we have to hire an attorney? You asked nicely once, and they don't respond. You give them a 30-day deadline, and they don't respond. It's kind of like my lawsuit with Atualidad Radio. They slander you. They say a lie about you. And what you do, you have to hire an attorney to get an apology letter. Not only do you get an apology letter, you also get a huge payday and also get Mr. Tejeda fired from the radio station. So, I hate to do it, but there's no other choice, but you have to, you have no other choice but to hire an attorney to get compliance. Because at the end of the day, they'll stall and stall and stall. If you don't have anything to hide, then just give me the documents that I'm requesting. It's in the best interest of the city to make sure that we memorialize those documents and that we have, we have a proper, proper transition. Or is Kirk planning on being there post-humiliations? You know, at the end of the day, is he going to be like a mummy and he's going to be there just forever, you know, a part of that board? So, we can do better.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Yes, commissioner.

Commissioner Castro: Yes. At the end of the day, this Commission can ask or request anything they want to. But the reality here is that nobody is above the law, right? And that is a private entity. And they are in the right to decline or to give it to you. And it seems to me right now, like we're going to try to waste more taxpayer funds just because of a personal issue you have with Kirk Menendez. I think we need to focus on city business and conduct ourselves accordingly.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner, to answer you, I am conducting city business, like the mobility hub, like moving elections, like getting an Inspector General, which you vote against all of that. I am conducting city business, voters' business, what they elected me for. But at the end of the day, Kirk Menendez should comply. So, Commissioner, do you have anything you'd like to add?

Commissioner Lara: Yes. The only thing I want to add, because I find this all more unnecessarily distracting than it should be, because I agree with Jane Muir that, yeah, the War Memorial Youth

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Association is a private Florida not-profit organization. A corporation. But there have been concerns raised both on this Commission and from residents concerning the management, the stewardship, and ultimately the transparency of the way that it's been run. So, I find it distressing that Ms. Muir says that in the spirit of transparency, I'm quoting from her letter that she sent to the City Attorney, that in the spirit of transparency and cooperation, she'll provide what's already available via public filing. That to me is confounding, because if you're going to quote being transparent and cooperative, you just turn over the documents that are requested, which are neither intrusive nor burdensome. They are documents that would be readily available, archived, accessible, and they should be curated, because if the place is being run properly, managed correctly, and handled by professionals, that would take you all of less than an hour to compile, assemble, and send it back to the City Attorney. So, I find it all kind of unnecessary really, I hope. But it's certainly not transparent or cooperative, the way that we got a response in the very last minute from when the documents have been requested. It raises, I think, more questions than it answers. It invites negative light where maybe, hopefully, there shouldn't be no negative light, but they're sort of calling the question. I mean, does anybody on the, well, Commissioner Castro, do you think it's burdensome or somehow improper to request clarity and transparency on these issues as framed and sent out by the City Attorney?

Commissioner Castro: Through the mayor?

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Commissioner Castro: Yes. I think that at this point, that doesn't matter. They're a private entity, and they're all decision to decide if they want to give us something or not. At the end of the day, my opinion really doesn't count. We have to go based on the law.

Commissioner Lara: Okay, so you, through the Mayor?

Mayor If I may, again, you just answered my point. You made my point for me. It's a 501(c)3 entity. It's enjoying that status. So, at the end of the day, if that's dissolved and you're associated with the city, look, I'll put it to you this simple. Do you, let me ask you a question. Do you think, hypothetically, would you remove or modify the reverter and give that reverter if the city violates? If the city violates a reverter, would you be opposed to that property going to a judicial receivership? I'm asking you a question. Would you be opposed to that? Because I think the best thing, the best thing in my opinion is get rid of the reverter and apply it in a way that if the city does break its promise, which I find it hard to believe that the city would break its promise, the mere fact that you state that I want to sell, you know, I want to sell the Youth Center or develop the Youth Center. It's just the typical, you know, gotcha kind of politics that has taken over here over the last two years. And thank God there was a change. You know very well, you know very well that's not going to happen. Very, very well.

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Commissioner Castro: How? How?

Mayor Lago: How? We haven't done any other property.

Commissioner Castro: Listen to what you did today with the other garage, which I was like, I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if you want to build something here too. At the end of the day, the reverter clause was here to protect the Youth Center. That is it.

Mayor Lago: From what?

Commissioner Castro: From us not using it as it's supposed to be used, period. That's the only reason. Okay.

Mayor Lago: So, you, so you truthfully think that someone is going to go out there and sell the Youth Center?

Commissioner Castro: Absolutely. Or use part of the parking or do something else that is not for the youth. There's a lot of things that you can do, especially coming from a person that's very into development. I'm sorry, but let's not bicker. It's not good for anyone. City Attorney, do you recommend us legally engaging this? Or what is your recommendation?

City Attorney Suarez: It's really up to; it's the will of the Commission. Whatever the Commission decides is what it wants to do. We will take that direction.

Commissioner Castro: Do you think we're going to be wasting money challenging this or do you think it will be successful?

City Attorney Suarez: I don't know, Commissioner. I don't know if they're going to, if they comply right away, that could just be a very easy ask.

Commissioner Castro: But what he was asking is for us to go and remove this reverter clause, correct?

Mayor Lago: That's not what I said.

Commissioner Castro: Okay, so correct me. What did you say?

Mayor Lago: So first and foremost, what I'm asking is to hire an attorney to get all the documents that this 501(c)3, which was again, dissolved because it was, fell out of its 501(c)3 and now jumped back in to provide all that documentation to the city. They do not want to provide it. It's simple. It's not that difficult. I want -- they should be transparent. They should send us all their documents, their bank statements, everything that has to do with the entity, their meeting minutes. I want to see everything. They are not outside of the Sunshine. For the Winter Haven case, they have to comply with the Sunshine law. So, it's simple. Wait, hold on. I'm not done yet. Mr. Clerk.

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City Clerk Urquia: Yes, sir.

Mayor Lago: I'd like to make a motion. My motion is, and I pass the gavel to the Vice Mayor, and that is that we have our City Attorney hire outside counsel to meet with Kirk Menendez' lawyers to receive all the pertinent information in regard to this entity. From bank statements to their 501(c)3 status, to their recordings, to all pertinent information that has to deal with that entity.

Commissioner Castro: Are you done?

Mayor Lago: I'm waiting for a second.

Commissioner Lara: For discussion.

Mayor Lago: Yes, of course.

Commissioner Lara: Second. May I make a comment?

Mayor Lago: 100%. So, make an amendment. You give me a comment.

Commissioner Lara: I'm also looking at this letter, and I'm also would like the City Attorney to focus on what I'm just cursory looking at here. So, I have the utmost respect for Jane Muir, very, very competent attorney. I've known her for decades. And I think she chooses her words very carefully. So, in her response, she says that the documents that she does provide reflect the association's continued compliance with its obligations as a non-profit entity under state and federal law. That's because it may be a 501c now, and she refers to it as her, it's continued compliance with his obligations, probably as of the date of this letter. But it doesn't tell you a thing about why it did or did not lapse and go into for-profit status. That is one of my concerns about how this entity with such control over this land has managed itself during this time and what the consequences could be if not handled correctly. Also, while they provide the IRS forms and annual reports, they provide us with no statement of accounts to show what the comings and the goings and the deposits and the withdrawals have been over the years. I say this not out of morbid curiosity, but while Commissioner Menendez was a Commissioner, he attended a Town Hall and held up a document in front of the residents that appeared at that Town Hall to say, the monies there. There's nothing to see. Move along. So, the door was not only creaked open, it was like kicked open, inviting the scrutiny, because that leaves you with even more questions, right, than not. And when you ask plainly, I'd like to have the bank records, a respectful decline is still, I'm not going to give it to you. So, I think there's actually much more there, and it's something that should be pursued at perhaps the next level since a simple ask has been thrown back.

Mayor Lago: The goal is to protect the entity. Madam Vice Mayor. I made the motion, by the way. You're running the...

Vice Mayor Anderson: I know. I know. And we're in discussion right now. So, I also have questions because there was a point where the entity lapsed and it was renewed, and it slightly changed names and did the reverter become null and void at that point? Are we talking about something that's not? You know, so there's a lot of questions out there.

Mayor Lago: By the way, Madam Vice Mayor, it lapsed for five years.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yeah, that's exactly my point.

Mayor Lago: But not five days, not five weeks, five years.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, corporations, once they die...

Mayor Lago: They die.

Vice Mayor Anderson: That's a dead person. So once the person dies and has the reverter, it's not like you can resuscitate them and they come back to life again.

Commissioner Lara: Through the Mayor. And on that point, hypothetical, we're just talking, right? So, if the entity should be in position as the proper receiver of the reverter, if triggered, no longer exists, then the entity that remains as any corporation, if it dissolves or involuntarily, or it dissolves or winds down improperly, at some point, it may revert even to an individual. We don't know who that individual may be. So, who the officers are, who the ultimate...

Mayor Lago: How they're elected.

Commissioner Lara: Right, but I'm saying like, ultimately, who may control the fate of that land is unknown today.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yeah, but the liability then, you know, the liability to people like the City of Coral Gables. I mean, the wind down process requires notice to everybody that has an interest in something. And the City made significant investment in the land. None of that notice procedure happened. So, when you're in violation, I mean, what's the answer to this legal question? I don't have the answer here as we sit today.

Commissioner Lara: So, with all the questions that remain unanswered, I would just say, it seems rhetorical to me that there should be on this dais, no opposition to asking the questions and pursuing it reasonably. Because if there is a reasonable opposition to pursuing the information, a reasonable opposition, I'd hear it from anybody on the Commission.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Chair. City Attorney, are they in their legal right to decline this information?

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City Attorney Suarez: So I think that there's something more that we can look at here because to the extent that there has been at some points during the relationship, some agreement with this organization between the City and them, there might be situations in which we could seek to see if they might've been subject to public records, different aspects of the records requests.

Commissioner Castro: How are they subject to public records as a private entity is my question.

City Attorney Suarez: So to the extent that they were at some point in the relationship, perhaps not currently, but at some point in the relationship with the City, in privity with the City per an agreement or providing certain services to the City, we have to look at all of that and see if there's some aspects under which they might be subject to public records.

Commissioner Castro: Is that something you can look into yourself, your office could?

City Attorney Suarez: We can certainly do that.

Commissioner Castro: Okay. I don't think that we need to get outside council right now until at least the City Attorney's Office figures out if that's the case.

Mayor Lago: So, through the Chair, a few things. Number one, in the 1993 resolution, which I hope that you read, Commissioner, the entity and the Youth Center set the policy together moving forward for the Youth Center. So, they're intertwined. The key here is we need to know if the reverter was extinguished or if it still survives to this day. This entity was dissolved for five years. And I understand that you want to help out Commissioner Menendez. But at the end of the day, we're going to move with outside council because our City Attorney has extensive work on their hands, and I need to get this answered immediately. Because let me tell you why. This is a \$200 million piece of property that I need to protect, and you should do the same. Because at the end of the day, I put it on the record here before you feed it to Political Cortadito tonight. I do not want to develop that property. I do not want to sell that property. I want to protect that property. And like Commissioner Lara said, it is incumbent on us to ensure that we protect this property at all costs. Especially when you're spending tens of millions of dollars of hard-earned taxpayer dollars and you don't know where you stand with this entity.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Or who can make a claim on it. Now, there was also an association, Neighborhood Association, that was part of that agreement that no longer exists. So how does that impact it as well? That was a critical piece of it.

Commissioner Lara: Through the Chair?

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes.

Commissioner Lara: So, I would just caution you because I don't know whether or not any further questions from the dais directed to the City Attorney since we're now even contemplating hiring

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outside council puts you in an uncomfortable position to reveal attorney-client privilege or mental or legal theories. The questions that Commissioner Castro has been asking would be kind of the same questions I'd be asking if I was Jane Muir or any council, they want to subjectly hire. So, I just caution everybody that these conversations, perhaps if they delve into that area, should be held not at the public dais.

Mayor Lago: If I may through the Chair, that was good. That was good.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Well stated.

Mayor Lago: Well stated.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So anyway, all right.

Mayor Lago: So, we have a... Madam Chair?

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yeah.

Mayor Lago: We have a motion and a second.

Vice Mayor Anderson: We have a motion and a second.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Let's call it.

City Clerk Urquia: Ma'am, I have members of the public requesting to speak on this item.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Is this an item we have public comment on?

City Attorney Suarez: If you're going to take action, yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Okay.

City Clerk Urquia: Our speaker is Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. This whole conversation has been fascinating. Now I hear that a 501c3 is covered by the Sunshine Law. Everybody who has 501c3, all the service clubs, everybody is... Somebody needs to check records here. Okay, I have several issues. I don't think the issue is whether the property will be sold because if I remember correctly, the reason why the neighborhood next to the charter school brought the issue to the city was because the city was asked to allow private school, a charter school, to use the youth center field. And according to the rules, whatever the agreement was, they could not do that. And that's why I believe the issue came up, if I remember correctly what I heard. Okay, number one. What fascinates me is that Kirk Menendez was a wonderful person. When he agreed with the Mayor, Kirk Menendez could walk

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on water. There were no issues with him. And all of a sudden, guess what? He's a criminal. And we're going to have to check everything he's done. You know what? There's a whole bunch of people sitting here that we would like to know where their money comes from. And that should be public record where the \$600,000 mortgage came from. We all wonder, but we're not clear on that. We're not transparent on that. Funny. I wanted to speak before, and I was kept from doing it, even though you added some new stuff, because we're talking about money, finances. You know what? The way we violate the finances issue is we reclassify employees so we can give them a higher salary and be good, because we're only paying a salary. And that's not just one employee. Several employees, they get reclassified as needed. We change the requirements for them to have that position, because, you know, we want to do it. It's not my money. It's the city's money. We can do it. We have done so many things, and we only concentrated on what's convenient to concentrate. I heard very clearly when the salaries were increased that the Mayor and the Vice Mayor were going to donate the money. People have been asking, show me what you donated. Oh, no, we don't have to show you that. Transparency.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker, Mr. Mayor, is going to be Maite Halley on Zoom. Ms. Halley, if you could please unmute.

Ms. Halley: Thank you for listening to my comments. Maite Halley, 1245 Milan Avenue. I've been awaiting this discussion because the Youth Center is important to me, to my family, to those of us that have raised families who have gone to the Youth Center. And I've been listening to this discussion and sort of had to smile to myself here because what I hear from the dais is people turning themselves around into pretzels, coming up with legal theories and possibilities of how the issues that the Commission has with the foundation are related to the Reverter Clause. The Reverter Clause is nothing more than a deed restriction. It's not a cloud on the title. And that deed restriction puts the fate of the Youth Center completely clearly and unrelated to anybody else on the Commission's hands. And I trust this Commission. I know you all personally. I trust this commission not to sell it to developers. Absolutely. But you are the protectors of the future of this. And you have no control over what a possible future Commission can do. The Reverter Clause simply states that if it's not used for the youth of Coral Gables, it goes back to this foundation. Now, I don't know the ins and outs and the legalities of all this foundation, but to me, it seems pretty simple. It's a private entity in the city. It'd be like asking me for all my income tax returns because you don't like how I'm handling my finances. You have no right to do that. There's no legal standing for it. And I think our esteemed City Attorney knows where this is going to end up. So, you guys want to waste our taxpayer money, that's fine. But remember, at the end of the day, if you do your job as Commissioners and you protect this fabulous asset for the future of our city, then the fate of it is in your hands and it's all done. And it's very simple. Thank you for taking my comments.

Commissioner Castro: Thank you.

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City Clerk Urquia: That's it, ma'am.

Mayor Lago: All right.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, City Clerk, I think we're ready for a vote.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Castro: No

Commissioner Lara: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

(Commissioner Fernandez: Absent)

(Vote: 3-1)

Mayor Lago: Thank you. For the record, the end goal is to protect the asset, which is a Youth Center. We should all be on the same page for that. Moving forward, F2.