

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-13
May 20, 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
Commissioner Richard D. Lara

City Staff

Acting City Manager, Joe L. Gomez
City Attorney, Cristina Suárez
City Clerk, Billy Urquia
Public Works Director, Hermes Diaz
Assistant Public Works Director, Melissa DeZayas

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item F-13 [12:22 p.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission directing staff to proceed with the installation of a sidewalk with a concrete curb along the edge of pavement as approved by the property owners along Alhambra Circle from South of Salvatierra Drive to San Rafael Avenue. (Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: Item F -- Item F-13.

City Attorney Suárez: F-13 is a resolution of the City Commission directing staff to proceed with the installation of a sidewalk with a concrete curb along the edge of pavement,

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Agenda Item F-13 - Resolution of the City Commission directing staff to proceed with the installation of a sidewalk with a concrete curb along the edge of pavement as approved by the property owners along Alhambra Circle from South of Salvatierra Drive to San Rafael Avenue.

as approved by the property owners along the Alhambra Circle from south of Salvatierra Drive to San Rafael Avenue.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Madam City Attorney. Do we have anyone from staff here to...?

City Attorney Suárez: They might be coming up, Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Okay, no problem. We'll take a second. Since we have a moment -- oh, here we go.

Commissioner Lara: Here we go.

Mayor Lago: There's my moment.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Got your steps in.

Mayor Lago: Director Diaz, how are you, sir?

Public Works Director Diaz: Good morning. Apologies, there's a delay on the TVs.

Mayor Lago: Not a problem.

Public Works Director Diaz: We are keeping track, so...

Mayor Lago: Not a problem.

Public Works Director Diaz: Good morning. Hermes Diaz, Public Works Director. We are here for Item F-13. And I'm here with Melissa DeZayas. So, we have a very brief presentation.

Assistant Public Works Director DeZayas: Good morning. So, Melissa DeZayas, Assistant Public Works Director for Transportation. So, we have a short presentation. This is a project that we have been discussing for a few years. Last Sunshine meeting was January 2024. Based on feedback from the Commission, from the residents, concepts have been developed. We mailed out those concepts to the residents for balloting, and the residents selected the option with the curb. So, this is the option that was selected. You can see that there's a curb along the edge of pavement. With this plan concept, there were

two trees that were recommended to be removed initially. This was one of them because the arborist noted that this was a tree that was in poor condition and there were two trees in private property that if we remove this tree, it would help those grow and, you know, and it would be a more ideal situation for those two oak trees that are in good condition.

Vice Mayor Anderson: You have the tree number on that one? For the one that was in poor condition?

Mayor Lago: Madam Vice Mayor, if you -- can we finish the presentation?

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yeah, okay.

Assistant Public Works Director DeZayas: Okay. So, the second tree that was called out to be removed for the original con -- for this concept with the curb was tree number six. This particular one, we had some back and forth because our arborist report had actually stated that this tree was in poor condition. But the resident at this -- the property owner for this property actually did their own private arborist report that they provided to us. That they said that the tree was in fair -- you know, in fair condition so what we're recommending for this one is that we monitor the tree to see, you know, like, you know, when we do the sidewalk construction, you know, what the impacts to the tree are because, obviously, when we start excavating, you know, that's when we'll see, you know, the tree roots and everything, and we'll monitor the tree, you know, after construction to make sure that it's not a safety concern.

Public Works Director Diaz: And I want to add that it is possible that when we start digging to put the curb in, that we may find that the tree may need to be removed anyway depending on the findings. So -- and if we find that it's probably okay to leave, then we'll probably have to monitor moving forward to see what the impact will be to this tree and whether it needs to be removed or not in the future. Other than that, I think we're done, right? If you could put the presentation back with the plan view.

Assistant Public Works Director DeZayas: Okay, so...

Public Works Director Diaz: The Vice Mayor wanted to see where the trees were.

Assistant Public Works Director DeZayas: So, the tree number one is the one that I talked about. That's the one on the northern limits of the project. You'll see it on the bottom

plan. That's the one that our arborist had said was in poor condition, and they recommended removal because there's two healthy oaks on private property that since this one's in poor condition and it's going to be impacted by the sidewalk construction, they would just recommend removal.

Public Works Director Diaz: Yeah, the existing oaks are much larger, so they're kind of overshadowing it. So, the arborist thinks that once that tree is gone the larger oaks will eventually cover the space that is taken by the existing tree.

Assistant Public Works Director DeZayas: And then tree number six, I don't have it marked off as removed, like with an X. That's the one that you'll see on the upper portion of the plan. It's on the right side of the drawing right next to the driveway. That is the one that we are recommending not removal, but monitoring based on, you know, like what the impacts for the sidewalk construction will be.

Mayor Lago: Okay. Anything else in the presentation?

Assistant Public Works Director DeZayas: No.

Public Works Director Diaz: Any questions?

Mayor Lago: No. We'll do it after when we make a -- Mr. Clerk, do we have any public comment?

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, I have one person in Zoom requesting to speak. I have not been able to get their entire name yet, but his name is Robert. So, we're going to go with Robert on Zoom.

Robert Ruano: Hello?

Mayor Lago: Yes, sir, we hear you.

Mr. Ruano: Hi, can you see me?

Mayor Lago: Yes, sir, we see you.

Mr. Ruano: Okay, great, thank you. So, can I share my screen real quick?

City Clerk Urquia: Cable TV or IT could make Mr. Ruano co-host.

Mr. Ruano: I wanted to be there, but I'm sorry. This kind of came out of the blue. I didn't realize it was going to be so -- so quick.

City Clerk Urquia: All right. Mr. Ruano, you're able to go ahead and share your screen. Please state your name and address for the record.

Mr. Ruano: Sure, Robert Ruano, 1544 Mercy Avenue, Coral Gables, Florida, 33134. All right, let me share this. And I want to kind of share with -- so thank you, thank you all. Can you see my screen?

Mayor Lago: Yes, sir.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes, sir.

Mr. Ruano: Okay, so for those that maybe were not aware, this was a plan that was developed back in 2014 when the City did its bike and pedestrian master plan, and they decided they wanted to complete the sidewalk segment. Fast forward to 2019 and Commissioner -- I'm sorry, it went to the City. The City was trying to push it forward, trying to put a sidewalk and bike lanes. It met some opposition in this area. And so that got killed, and here we are today. But I do want to share a couple of things on this. So, let me go to the next one. Oh, I think I got stuck. Hello, can you hear me?

City Attorney Suárez: Yes.

City Clerk Urquia: We can hear you, sir.

Mr. Ruano: Okay. I want you to see this.

At this time, an audiovisual presentation was made.

Mr. Ruano: So, that is -- that is your director of Public Works stating that an option behind -- behind the sidewalk -- behind -- I'm sorry, behind the trees would be a safer option. And here's a screenshot of a podcast just last week where Mayor Lago was stating, so safety is number one. So, safety is number one. It's paramount. Paramount is the most important

thing. So, here's the Florida -- and I've shared this before, (INAUDIBLE) Manual. It says, on roadways with flush shoulders -- on roadways with flush shoulders, a new sidewalk should be placed as far away from the roadway as practical. And I mentioned this before, this is for the safety of all residents and children. This is -- sorry, let me get this out of the way. This is the option that is being proposed. This was originally proposed for no other reason than, I'm not sure, this is a sidewalk with a curb where there is no sidewalk with a curb here. So, I'm not sure why this is. Historic Alhambra Circle, the bridge is to the left. This is what the proposed and the residents -- four out of five residents voted for this. The residents -- I should note that the residents on the opposing side, on the east side, were not asked, even though there are going to be dividers in the street, and the street will change considerably. This is option three. This is an option that is actually proposed and would achieve...

Mayor Lago: Mr. Ruano, if I may? Would you please be so kind to finish your sentence over the next 30 seconds?

Mr. Ruano: I'm sorry?

Mayor Lago: Would you please be so kind to finish your sentence over the next 30 seconds?

Mr. Ruano: I mean, is it going to be three minutes already?

Mayor Lago: Yeah, we're at three minutes and 20 seconds.

Mr. Ruano: Oh, I'm sorry. Well, wow. I mean, it's a big thing, but okay, I'll try to do it. I mean, it's very tough. I know. I'm sorry that I couldn't be there too. So, this option three, we went through -- this is the area. We went through and modified it. This is the option. Basically, you know, the sidewalk fits. I'll stop sharing. I'm getting cut off, even though this is an important thing. Listen, I guess to Commissioner Lara -- because you are going to be the swing vote on this -- please don't put a sidewalk with a curb on Alhambra because four residents, four residents, even though a hundred residents a day walk in this area, four residents want it.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir.

Mr. Ruano: They haven't asked anybody else but these four people.

Mayor Lago: I appreciate you.

Mr. Ruano: Please don't do this.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Mr. Ruano.

Mr. Ruano: This is a travesty. And this is not safe. And this is not for Vision Zero. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk, next speaker.

City Clerk Urquia: So, Mr. Mayor, I don't have any additional speakers at this time. I did, however, received an email from a resident who wished to have it read into the record.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

City Clerk Urquia: It's from Emilio Mascaró. And it says, "Good morning. I cannot attend the Commission meeting today, so I'm writing to you, and I'm asking that you please read this into the record at the meeting. My name is Emilio Mascaró, and I live at 1526 Sopera Avenue, and have done so since 1997. For years, I and many of my neighbors have been in favor of the construction of the sidewalk along Alhambra from the footbridge on Tarragona to connect to the other sidewalks, three blocks and five houses north of San Rafael, approximately 800 feet. My family, like so many in the area, frequently use the footbridge on the waterway, the bridge to nowhere, as it connects to no sidewalk and leaves residents dodging cars on Alhambra. I was under the impression this was happening. We went to a neighborhood meeting years ago with the other Commissioners studying the best way to do so. At the site meeting, many alternatives were presented, and proposals to save the trees were discussed with the City arborist as well. The five homes that would be affected are all on board, as are the vast majority of residents in the area. I understand that one person, Mr. Ruano, who does not even live along the road is protesting and slowing down the implementation of this sidewalk. Respectfully, I ask that you please get this very short sidewalk done. It is crazy that we have a footbridge that throws pedestrians onto a busy street and the tree roots along the route also make walking there hazardous. There's no alternative path other than Alhambra in this area. The completion of this incomplete sidewalk that clearly was always intended should be done as soon as possible for the safety and enhancements of our community. Coral Gables values walkability and this is clear and

easy spot to improve that. I respectfully ask that you get this no-brainer of a project done.”
Thank you, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. We’ll close the public comment. I’ll entertain a motion.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I’ll move it.

Commissioner Lara: I’ll second it.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I’d like to...

Mayor Lago: Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I’d like to bring a few points forward. Unless you’ve done or lived the life of someone in a wheelchair, you do not understand the sloping challenges that exist on these sites. Going back a line is not the safest thing to do all the time for a number of reasons. One, it would require you to slope into someone’s driveway, whether you’re in a wheelchair, using a walker, have a child riding a bicycle that gets ahead of you and they’re, you know, going down the slope, while it might be fun for the child, it’s harrowing when someone gets run over. As an individual that has a sister who was run over by a truck because she wasn’t seen, you have to keep in mind that the visibility is critical. Putting a sidewalk next to property lines is not the best situation in all situa -- in all instances, because you have driveways, maybe not in this area, but in other areas where you have walls, hedges, et cetera, blocking visibility. There are a number of reasons why putting a sidewalk on a property line or meeting the property line is not the best solution. Although in history we have done many sidewalks right next to the trunks of trees, we then pay the price of having to replace those sidewalks time and time again because they get broken. So, from that perspective, this is the best plan. I am going to implore staff to carefully look at the under-canopy tree that you noted because it will also enable you to be able to get a better slope, I think, over to the crosswalk as well. And as a final note, I had the opportunity, as most of the members of our Commission did, go to the Literacy Festival this week. If you didn’t notice the difference in temperature of about 15 degrees between being under that canopy and not being under that canopy, you have missed something special. It’s like going from air conditioning to the blistering heat. An option that would require the sidewalk to go back to the property line would impact significant roots on the trees that, although they might not kill the tree, will affect the stability going forward. These are large heritage black olive trees that they’re 60 feet in height and cutting the roots when it comes

to hurricane time will most likely block the street. I've seen these trees go over before. The City used to have a practice of cutting the roots at the sidewalk, and we saw the results during the storms as the trees went down. So, for all those reasons, I'm in favor of moving this forward, and let's listen to the residents and follow their choices going forward.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Anyone else before we take a vote?

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor, before I became commissioner, I treated children and young adults for 12 years with developmental disabilities. I had one patient in particular in Oakland Park. He was a young adult, 20, 21 years old. He was on the sidewalk, on the curb, and he was killed by a car. So, when you guys tell me that it's the safest sidewalk, is the safest sidewalk on the curb, it's very, very hard for me to believe. When I was elected, I was elected here to protect my constituents, to protect my residents. And it's not only the people that are living in those homes that are walking on those sidewalks. It is normal pedestrians, it is families, it is women and mothers pushing strollers. So, I cannot support this the way it is right now. I was trying to work for a healthy balance, a healthy medium that was supposed to be presented, that we had it already; right or wrong? We worked on this. We had another option that was a healthy, healthy balance between the City, safety, which we should put first, trees, and the residents. For some reason, it didn't make it on the agenda. I don't know why. I got -- I received several opposing emails regarding this legislation, and it's really a shame that we really couldn't work out something better not to put the sidewalk specifically on the curb, just for aesthetics, or whatever the case is. I think that moving forward -- I think we did several things wrong when we addressed this situation, but I think moving forward, I would like to recommend that, yeah, we need to ask residents if they want a sidewalk. But I think it should be to the City's discretion and best practices where we decide if that sidewalk goes, not residents. And my answer is no.

Mayor Lago: Okay. Anyone else?

Commissioner Lara: Well, I'll just say that I agree. To the Commission goes the decision, right? Where we balance all the issues that are being raised and that -- that's why we were elected to make these decisions.

Commissioner Fernandez: Through the Mayor, I did receive the emails as well, and I've understood the plight of the residents in the neighborhood who have been fighting for this for an extended period of time, and they received a ballot. Whether that ballot was

premature or not, that's neither here nor there. We have a decision to make before us today, and I think we've talked this issue to death at numerous meetings. I do not believe this is the safest option, so I cannot support it.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. The contradiction and how did we get here? It's very simple. Go to the University of Miami, drive around the University of Miami, and you will see the same sidewalk with a curb. There's over 5,000 plus people that are accepted into University of Miami every single year. So, there are 15,000 people working on that campus, and they all use that curb in front of my home. I know it because I live in front of it on San Amaro Drive, and it's the same situation that's here. We're trying to find the balancing act, save the trees, and also provide a sidewalk. It's inconscionable that there's no sidewalk there. I see elderly people walking with walkers, I see mothers with a stroller, I see people running. It's -- to me, we can't politicize everything. This is better than nothing. And by the way, very clearly, Mr. Diaz, Mr. Director, Mr. Engineer, is this sidewalk, the way it's designed, safe? Yes or no?

Public Works Director Diaz: It is. It is in accordance to the Florida Design Manual, along with the curb.

Mayor Lago: So, we have to stop. Stop the politics. This is the way it's done. University of Miami has the same exact sidewalk around the entire school. They have thousands of children, so I don't want to hear about people dying when there's thousands and thousands of people that use that sidewalk every day in front of my house. We have to politicize everything. When we talk about residents first, the residents are in favor of it. The residents are the ones that are asking for it to be done this way. If not, the options are to cut the trees down. I'm sorry, I'd rather compromise and not cut the trees down. Mr. Clerk, please call the roll.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes.

Commissioner Castro: Before I cast my vote, Mr. Diaz, is this the safest way or the safest spot where this sidewalk can go as far as for pedestrians?

Public Works Director Diaz: The typical cross-section for these kind of roads is the sidewalk, but this is perfectly safe. I mean, we're not talking about safest.

Commissioner Castro: No. Is it the safest option?

Public Works Director Diaz: Well, the safest option would be to put up a wall in front of the sidewalk. I mean, there are all sorts of different things that we can do.

Commissioner Castro: Would the safest option be in the property line where the sidewalk belongs?

Public Works Director Diaz: The property line will be standard for this kind of cross-section, but this cross-section is perfectly acceptable. It's within the engineering standards in the Florida Design Manual.

Commissioner Castro: So, from all the options -- I'm going to ask you one more time -- the one in the curb, is it the safest? Is it the number one safest option to put the sidewalk?

Public Works Director Diaz: The...

Commissioner Castro: I know you're saying it's safe, but I'm asking you, is it the safest option?

Public Works Director Diaz: No, the safest option would be to put it against the property line, but...

Commissioner Castro: Okay.

Public Works Director Diaz: You know, we're -- it's kind of semantics, right? Because we could make a safer and put a retaining wall, or a barrier wall, or you know, we can -- you know, it's -- at the end of the day, the Design Manual prescribes several options. You want to have a sidewalk at grade, you need to maintain a minimum of a six-foot clearance from the edge of pavement. If you want to have a sidewalk adjacent to a travel lane, you need to have a curb.

Commissioner Castro: And we did have a...

Public Works Director Diaz: And that's what the standards allow.

Commissioner Castro: And we did have a plan and another option that you guys drew up that was a safer option than the one that's being proposed.

Public Works Director Diaz: We drew up that there was an alternative that had the sidewalk weaving behind the trees where approximately, off the top of my head, five or six trees will have to be removed.

Commissioner Castro: Members of the Commission...

Mayor Lago: Commissioner, we're moving forward. We're in the middle of a vote.

Commissioner Castro: Okay, I'm...

Mayor Lago: I'm asking you to vote, please.

Commissioner Castro: But I'm still talking. Please don't interrupt me, okay? Members of the Commission, we're here to represent our residents.

Mayor Lago: We're in the middle of a vote.

Commissioner Castro: I understand we're in a vote.

Mayor Lago: So, I ask you to please move forward.

Commissioner Castro: And I'm about to vote, but you're going to let me talk, okay? Please don't be disrespectful. Members of the Commission, we're here to represent the residents, those residents, the ones living in there, and all the residents of the City of Coral Gables. This is not the safest option to put the sidewalk in. Please keep that in mind. My vote is no.

Commissioner Fernandez: No.

Commissioner Lara: So, I'll just say that with respect to teeing up the issue, which is the safest versus which is the -- which is safe. It's important I think for the residents to know, right? And Mr. Diaz, you probably agree with me that the safest option would be to ban cars, right, that they don't drive down the road.

Public Works Director Diaz: Sure.

Commissioner Lara: Okay, so that's not practical, I would say. But you're saying to me, because I'm not the expert, it's safe what's being proposed.

Public Works Director Diaz: It is.

Commissioner Lara: Right. So, with that, yes.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Diaz, quick question.

Public Works Director Diaz: Yes?

Mayor Lago: I think the safest infrastructure would be not to leave your house. Correct?

Public Works Director Diaz: Sure.

Mayor Lago: I mean, right? I mean, I know that Commissioner Lara was saying cars, but I said the safest would be not to leave your house. Let me ask you a question. If this is not safe, what are you going to do about the University of Miami and the sidewalk that goes completely around a school where there's thousands of thousands of students that walk every day by my house? What are you going to do about that sidewalk?

Public Works Director Diaz: Absolutely nothing.

Mayor Lago: You want to know why? Because it's safe. Less politics, more action. My vote is yes.

(Vote: 3-2)

Mayor Lago: We move forward; we deliver on the sidewalk. It's only taken three years. Thank you very much.