

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-9
May 25, 2021
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Michael Mena

Commissioner Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Jorge Fors

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

Assistant City Manager, Ed Santamaria

City Attorney, Miriam Ramos

Assistant City Attorney, Naomi Levi-Garcia

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Jackie Collier

Agenda Item G-9 [1:10 p.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission supporting the designation of South Dixie Highway/U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, from the Miami-Dade/Monroe County line to State Road 9A/Interstate 95 Northbound as "Harriet Tubman Highway"/U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, including that portion of the roadway that lies within the City limits of Coral Gables, from SW 57th Avenue to Booker Street.

(Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

(Sponsored by Commissioner Anderson)

Mayor Lago: So, I have the -- I apologize, I have the old agenda. So, we're moving on to G-9, which is -- in mine. it's actually G-8.

City Attorney Ramos: G-9 is a resolution of the City Commission supporting the designation of South Dixie Highway/U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, from the Miami-Dade/Monroe County line to State Road 9A/Interstate 95 Northbound as "Harriet Tubman Highway"/U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, including the portion of the roadway that lies within the City limits of Coral Gables, from 57th Avenue to Booker Street. This item is sponsored by Mayor Lago and cosponsored by Commissioner Anderson. Ms. Levi-Garcia.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Good afternoon again, Mayor and Commissioners. This is a resolution supporting the designation of South Dixie Highway as Harriet Tubman Highway. For purposes of history, this first came about because the County passed a resolution in February of 2020, changing the name of South Dixie Highway for the County-controlled portions of the roadway to Harriet Tubman Highway. During that -- at the time they passed that resolution, they also urged municipalities to join in the designation. Florida State Statute 331.071 requires that municipalities -- all affected municipalities also adopt a resolution in support whenever you're dealing with a state roadway that runs between multiple municipalities. So, that's where we are today. Nine out of the 10 municipalities affected by the County's resolution have passed their own resolutions in support, with Coral Gables being the only one that has not acted.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Commissioner, would you like to start, or would you like for me to start? Ladies first.

Commissioner Anderson: Ladies first.

Mayor Lago: Go ahead.

Commissioner Anderson: Honorary designations we have for streets and roadways throughout the County have existed side by side with the name of a regular street. And what we're doing here is honoring somebody that had a significant impact upon the history of our country. For those who have studied history and enjoy history -- and I'm one of them -- I know that Harriet Tubman was a brave and courageous individual in working with the underground railroad and bringing people to freedom that were otherwise in slavery. And our city, along with the other cities, should be honored to be able to recognize her impact upon the lives of so many people. So, that's why I supported it as well and thank you for putting it on the agenda.

Mayor Lago: So, I echo all of Commissioner Anderson's sentiments, and I know that we have several people that probably want to speak. I know someone who I had the pleasure of speaking with before. But I also want to put certain other comments on the record besides repeating exactly what Commissioner Anderson said. You know, to me, it was unfortunate that the renaming of US 1 was used during our City's last election to create division and try to score political points. I'm glad we have moved beyond the political rhetoric and that members of the community living along the US 1 corridor had the opportunity to voice their opinion. A lot of them called my colleagues -- I think they all called our colleagues, and they had positive conversations with all of them. A lot of them talked about what they wanted to see on US 1, why they thought it was important to honor Harriet Tubman. A lot of other people also were concerned about the naming in the sense that they had other great names that they would like to see on US 1, which is, like I mentioned to the nice lady who I spoke with outside, leaders in this community, like Thelma Gibson, like Mary Jane Bethune, people like Padre Felix Varela, who did exceptional things in this community. And I wish that my Miami-Dade County would have made this process more inclusive so that municipalities, like ourselves, would have had the ability to make nominations from its residents and then share them with Miami-Dade County Commission. I hope my colleagues join me in voting in favor of this resolution so that we can send it to the legislators in Tallahassee for a final ratification. I also want to be clear that there will be no cost to the City of Coral Gables, and that's after us having several discussions. There is no cost in regards to any installation of signs and that

this honorary designation is well worth what we're doing today. So, if my colleagues have any further comments in regards to this issue, I will entertain a motion.

Vice Mayor Mena: I'll make a couple of brief comments. First, I want to just echo what Commissioner Anderson said. I think that Harriet Tubman is certainly somebody who merits having such a road named after her for her efforts, and that's without a doubt a deserving recognition. This issue really, I think, has been sort of tied into a broader philosophical discussion about historical names and changing those things, and some have taken it broader into, you know, discussions about monuments and statues and things of that nature at the national level, and I think, unfortunately, this issue got sort of tied into that. You know, so I'm cognizant of the fact that this particular name is very hurtful to certain members of our community. Over the last few weeks, I've had many conversations with people about that, including earlier today, right here in our chambers during one of our breaks. I do want to say, though, that I'm also cognizant that this particular issue is truly not a Coral Gables-specific issue, right? Dixie Highway spans many communities, as Naomi just described. Nine other communities have already voted in favor of this, and so this is not identified -- Dixie Highway is not identified with Coral Gables per se. It's not Miracle Mile. It's not Granada. It's not Alhambra. And so, part of this is also it's not my intent to frustrate, you know, the collective will of all of the communities that Dixie Highway transverses who's elected officials have spoken up and echoed that they want to make this decision. The only thing I want to be clear about as we move forward, and because it has also been the subject of discussion during this time period, is that when it does come to Coral Gables specific historical items, whether it be George Merrick, whether it be our local street names, I'm not in favor of trying to sort of erase or eliminate or change some of those names. I was very disappointed recently with the University of Miami's decision to remove Merrick's name from certain buildings. The University of Miami doesn't exist without George Merrick and neither does Coral Gables. And I know that there's members of the Board at the University that weren't fond of the decision, but you know, it went down the way it went down. So, you know, while this is not an item about George Merrick or really a Coral Gables specific issue, you know, I am going to vote in favor of this designation today because I think it's clear that the change is supported by, again, the collective

group of communities affected. I don't think this -- I think what happened here, as I said, is that this got mixed into things, and I don't think this is the place to take a stand against cancel culture, against the issue of changing names. I think it's appropriate here. But again, just a word of caution, that if that sentiment takes aim at Coral Gables' history, I, for one, will be strongly opposed to it. I'm not looking to take certain facts out of context as it relates to the founder of this City. I think you have to look at the whole context of a person's contributions to society. There are many imperfect people in the world who have done great things. And so, you know, as that debate continues in our City, I just wanted to say that on the record as a separate issue because I think it's -- the two issues sort of were tied in together during prior discussions. So, I'm in favor of the item today, but I did want to say that for the record, because again, there is a broader conversation happening about these issues, including at our local university, and is no doubt headed to this dais and we should be prepared and ready to have that discussion.

Mayor Lago: So, if I may add onto the Vice Mayor's comments. And I made these comments the last time that we discussed the dedication. I stand exactly shoulder to shoulder with the Vice Mayor's comments in regards to University of Miami. I'm disappointed. I support George Merrick. He was an imperfect man, but at the end of the day, if it wasn't -- like the Vice Mayor said, if it wasn't for George Merrick, our city would not exist, the University of Miami would not exist. So, those are incredible things that that man did. And we have to be very careful when you judge someone, and you have to judge that person based on the moment and the context of their moment in history. I think today what we're doing is -- that's why -- and I mentioned -- I think it was mentioned -- it was memorialized in the Herald where they stated that I didn't want to mix apples and oranges. I want to be very clear that this moment that we're voting on today that we're designating was not mixed up with a conversation about George Merrick. You know, today, we celebrate someone who has done incredible things, as Commissioner Anderson mentioned, not only for this community, but for all communities for this country, so I want to make sure that we -- today, we're celebrating -- but if it does come down to the moment of George Merrick, I will stand with my colleagues in support of his legacy when it comes to what he's done in regards to City of Coral Gables and the University of Miami.

Vice Mayor Mena: And I -- look, I bring it up, again, not because I think it's so critical for me to bring it up right now, but because, again, we've received a lot of feedback...

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Vice Mayor Mena: Over the course of the last few weeks from people on both sides of this issue, and some of it is based on concerns about really other issues more so than this specific issue. And so, I'm trying to separate the two and explain that it's distinct, but at the same time for those who are concerned out there about the broader discussion, you know, make sure that we're clear about where we sort of stand, and you know, we'll have the George Merrick discussion another day. There's been a lot of facts that have come to light about all the positive things he did for the black community and for the Bahamian immigrants and comments he made, and it wasn't perfect, though, and we can have -- and we should have that discussion and we should talk about it, and we shouldn't be afraid of discussing it. That's good, that's healthy. And I think that even people who are on the other side of the issues from each other on these types of issues should be open to that. But again, to your point, the issue before us today is different, and I'll be supporting the item.

Mayor Lago: By the way, even though it is a different issue and we're celebrating today, I'm happy you brought it up because we did -- in this past month, we had the opportunity to speak to a lot of people in this community, a lot of people who live in the City, some who don't. You'll hear from a lady who lives adjacent to the City of Coral Gables, who spoke about her history. And I don't want to steal her thunder or her story, but it's a powerful story, and it makes me proud to bring this forward today. So, if my colleagues do not have anything else to say on this issue...

Vice Mayor Mena: The last thing I'll say -- because you're -- you touched on it lightly, but you're humble enough not to go there. But you know, again, the whole idea and the whole issue with the discussion is about taking one thing and blowing it out of context.

Mayor Lago: Yeah.

Vice Mayor Mena: And whatever people felt or didn't feel about the news coverage during your election, what was done to you frankly was outrageous. It was wrong and we should oppose that. We should speak up when people are attacked in a way that is totally unfounded and is contrary to all the other things that they do. I've been with this man when he's helping our black community. I've been with him when he's supported them, and I felt very badly that you had to experience that. And so, I just want you to know that we support you and that whatever was said about you was wrong and that -- and I'm proud to stand here with you today and deal with this issue.

Mayor Lago: I appreciate that. Thank you. If none of my colleagues have anything else to say, I'd like to hear from the members of the community who are here, especially from this young lady, if I may call her a young lady.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Mayor Lago, if I may. I just want to be extremely clear, since we talked about accuracy. What you're voting on today is a designation...

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: An honorary designation, so for those who may be concerned that this would result in signs being switched out or addresses having to be changed, that is not the case here.

Mayor Lago: That's why I mentioned about cost, the cost associated.

Commissioner Fors: And I think that gets lost, and I'm glad you emphasized that.

Mayor Lago: Yeah.

Commissioner Fors: Because we're not really renaming anything. I think the state is renaming the state road.

Vice Mayor Mena: Right.

Commissioner Fors: Or is going to.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Well, this -- there were several bills introduced last session -- or you know, for the State to rename Dixie Highway. None of those bills were successful, so it would take an act of the Legislature to rename Dixie Highway.

Commissioner Fors: Right.

Commissioner Menendez: When would this take effect?

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Well, from what I understand, the signs may already be installed, so it's just a matter of unveiling the signs and compliance with state statute, and the designation would take effect, I believe, as soon as this resolution is effective.

Commissioner Fors: When you step back and analyze it, when you sort of zoom out on the George -- on the comparison between George Merrick and this honorable designation for somebody who nobody will dispute was an American hero, you simply cannot compare it. That's where I think this turns on it for me. I mean, it's an opportunity to designate an honor to an American hero, Harriet Tubman. And Dixie, at the end of the day, is not -- I mean, it's a geographic reference and it's not a person. I think it requires a more critical analysis if you're removing a person's name from something, be it George Merrick or anybody, because it is an indictment on their legacy and that you have to look at very carefully. Here, we're choosing to honor Harriet Tubman with this honorable designation. For me, it's, you know, as the Mayor said, apples and oranges.

Commissioner Menendez: By the way, I want to echo all the sentiments. The last couple of years, unfortunately, local communities have been swept away in national politics regardless of what side you are in the national debate. And at the end of the day, we're a community. This is a community decision based on our community history and what's best for our community. And I hope going forward, we can sort of isolate ourselves or build walls -- unfortunately, I have to use the word "walls" -- not allowing that -- a toxic environment to taint our ability to govern, our ability to make rational decisions, and our ability to do what's right. So, I applaud, you know, all the comments and echo all the sentiments and the comments of my colleagues here, and I think it's an important step in the right direction.

Mayor Lago: Ma'am, the floor is yours.

Jackie Collier: Good after morning. Hello, everyone. Congratulations, Mayor, and all of the newly elected Commissioners. My name is Jackie Collier. I have lived in Miami since I was six months old. Parents ran here from South Carolina because of things that happened to them there. And I want you to know that I applaud you for taking this up and for reconsidering because I don't think that any of you understand what it means to have a song sung for four years of your life at your high school and everybody thought that that was such a great song. The young people back in 1968 stood up and said that this song can no longer be played in any pep rally at Edison Senior High School. And so, today to see that the City Beautiful has come along and it's going to be a part of naming -- renaming US 1 to Harriet Tubman Highway, I feel so honored to be a part of and to have this happen. I am a part of a loosely-knit group of folks who have been working on this for a long time, and want to make sure to invite all of you to the dedication, or basically, the unveiling of the actual marker that will start at US 1 further down on the end. So, thank you, Mayor. Thank you, Commissioner. Thank you, Commissioner. Thank you, Commissioner.

Commissioner Anderson: Thank you.

Ms. Collier: Thank you. Jackie Collier.

Commissioner Anderson: Thank you for all your efforts.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. So, with that being said, are there any other further comments?

City Clerk Urquia: No, sir.

Mayor Lago: I will entertain a motion.

Commissioner Menendez: I'll move.

Commissioner Anderson: Move -- we'll all move.

Commissioner Menendez: Commissioner Anderson.

Commissioner Anderson: We'll all move it.

Commissioner Menendez: I'll second.

Commissioner Fors: Yes.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yes.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes.

Commissioner Anderson: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Thank you.