

**City of Coral Gables
Special City Commission Meeting
Agenda Items B-3a and B-3b
May 6, 2025
City Hall Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL**

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Melissa Castro (Absent)

Commissioner Ariel Fernandez

Commissioner Richard D. Lara

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Alberto Parjus

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Deputy City Attorney, Stephanie Throckmorton

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz

Jackson Rip Holmes

Agenda Item B-3a and B-3b [9:50 a.m.]

B-3a: An Ordinance of the City Commission amending City Code Chapter 2, “Administration,” Article II “City Commission,” Section 2-29 “Compensation of Mayor, Commissioners; Travel Allowance,” to adjust the compensation and expense allowance of the Mayor and Commissioners; providing for severability clause, repealer provision, and providing for an effective date. (Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

B-3b: An Ordinance of the City Commission amending City Code Chapter 2, “Administration,” Article II “City Commission,” Section 2-29 “Compensation of Mayor, Commissioners; Travel Allowance,” to adjust the compensation and expense allowance of the Mayor and Commissioners to one dollar annually; providing for severability clause, repealer provision, and providing for an effective date. (Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: Moving onto item B-3a.

City Attorney Suarez: Mayor, just for a point of organization. Do you want to consider 3 and 3b together?

Mayor Lago: Perfectly fine.

City Attorney Suarez: So, I'll read them both into the record and we can consolidate for purposes of the public hearing.

Mayor Lago: Yes ma'am.

City Attorney Suarez: So, item B-3a is an Ordinance of the City Commission amending City Code Chapter 2, "Administration," Article II "City Commission," Section 2-29 "Compensation of Mayor, Commissioners; Travel Allowance," to adjust the compensation and expense allowance of the Mayor and Commissioners; providing for severability clause, repealer provision, and providing for an effective date. Item B-3b is an Ordinance of the City Commission amending City Code Chapter 2, "Administration," Article II "City Commission," Section 2-29 "Compensation of Mayor, Commissioners; Travel Allowance," to adjust the compensation and expense allowance of the Mayor and Commissioners to one dollar annually; providing for severability clause, repealer provision, and providing for an effective date. As noted on the agenda, both of these ordinances cannot be adopted, only one can be adopted by the Commission.

Mayor Lago: Madam City Attorney.

Deputy City Attorney Throckmorton: Thank you again. For the record, Stephanie Throckmorton, Deputy City Attorney. I'll go over 3a first, if that's alright with you, Mr. Mayor. So 3a adjusts the compensation back to that level at the end of the 2022-2023 fiscal year with those included CPI increases that are set forth in the current code provision. So, the amounts are detailed in the ordinance itself. It also adjusts the expense allowance back to that amount at the end of the 2022-2023 fiscal year and it eliminates the car allowance which was added in the 2023-2024 fiscal year. So that's item 3a. Item 3b, as the City Attorney mentioned in the title, adjusts the compensation to \$1 annually until October 1, 2026, when it will revert to that fiscal year 22-23 amount, with any CPI increases as set forth in the ordinance. It reduces the expense allowance to \$1 annually and then it eliminates the same car allowance that was added in 2023. That expense allowance will also go back to the 2022-2023 levels in 2026. So, apologies for all those numbers, but I'm happy to answer any questions about those two items.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes, Mr. Mayor. I have members of the public requesting to speak on this item. First speaker, Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mayor Lago: Good morning. Thank you, Madam City Attorney.

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. I thought it was required to say your name and address every time you spoke. I guess I was wrong, maybe it only needs to be done once, because not everybody is following the order, as established. This is very interesting and once again, I'm going to put on the record that we did have a referendum petition and we did have signatures collected for over a year, actually almost a year and a half. They collected 7,718 signatures; only 2,103 were valid; thrown out for not being valid 5,615. So here we go again. Billy, with B-3a and 3b, because it's important for people to know that we're pushing what the people did not sign for. We are doing what we, what we, some of the people sitting on the dais think its important, even though they've been collecting the money, even though they said that they were going to give it to charity, but they cannot produce that information when requested. So, some hypocrisy here. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Again, I remind everyone, please provide your name and your address. Do not insult anyone on the dais. We will be professional. We will conduct ourselves like the City of Coral Gables. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Jackson Holmes.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Mr. Holmes: Good morning. Reverting back to the last thing. What I didn't say well, but what I was trying to communicate about buying elections is that the money provided by developers to their favorite candidates paid for the communications which ended up controlling what information voters got, because the people who were not financed by developers did not have the money to get their word out. Now fortunately, the Coral Gables Gazette has reactivated, so far, they've shown the courage to stay active and we can get what my side considers the truth out, as opposed to the message which won the election, because there was no Coral Gables Gazette to set the record straight. Money does influence elections. It influenced the last election. So anyways, on this item, again I think we get back into the influence of money. The reason that these salaries were raised to begin with was to make Commissioners independent of money from developers. It's the same principle as publicly financed elections. When people can get taxpayer money if they reach a certain threshold to run their campaigns, then they are free of influence by lobbyists, and I don't understand why this vindictive thing to just give a dollar for the next year and a half is being undertaken. Its beneath the... The Mayor has a pretty good reputation. He may run for higher office. Why poison the water. Why invite Joe Carollo politics into this. We should be doing things in a high-brow way. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: That's it, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Alright. Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'd like to move 3a but have an opportunity to speak on 3b after we have a second on the motion.

Commissioner Fernandez: I'll second.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner Lara.

Commissioner Lara: I'll second on 3a, but comment on 3b.

City Attorney Suarez: Is there a motion and a second.

Commissioner Fernandez: I seconded.

Vice Mayor Anderson: We have two seconds.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner Ariel Fernandez, would you like to speak?

Commissioner Fernandez: The Vice Mayor was just waiting for the second.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes. I was just waiting for the second. I did read Robert's Rules.

Mayor Lago: Let's make sure that we speak through the Mayor. Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, already indicated that I'm supportive of 3a, but on 3b, Mayor, you bring a very valid point, because this body had received without transparent means and this is one of those election issues that residents were upset with how it was done, lack of transparency of doubling of salaries and receipt of expense monies without the requirement of keeping any receipts whatsoever, okay, and a car allowance that was not required to be used for a vehicle. 3b, I think it is a very valid point to bring to the voters. Should our salaries be a dollar or should they be at another level? This is something that I think that we need to continue to have a discussion about and determine whether or not we should put this item to the voters in November.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Commissioner Fernandez.

Commissioner Fernandez: I put out a statement a couple of weeks ago regarding this issue. I too have heard from residents over the last year about this issue. When this issue first came up, there were only two residents who spoke out against it. We had numerous residents who came into this Chamber, spoke on Zoom in favor of the compensation changes. One of the main issues that was brought up was, it opened up the opportunity for more members of the public, regular residents, to participate in the process and be part of this Commission. The concern that others have brought to my attention since then is, a lower compensation provides an opening for deals that members of the Commission would have to do in order to receive compensation. And that has been a concern that's been brought up for numerous months. I do believe like the Vice Mayor that the issue should be put up to voters and for residents to have a say on what compensation should be going forward. That was one of the proposals that I was bringing up at the May 20th Commission meeting, was to

have an item on the agenda, I'm sorry, on the ballot for residents to decide for a process for compensation. I think that bringing the compensation down to a dollar is a measure that although novel, I don't think it brings about the change that residents are asking for, and residents on both sides of the issue, whether supportive of the compensation or not, have voiced their concerns about that change. So, I am supportive of 3a, Madam Vice Mayor, and I look forward to working with you in the coming months on a potential ballot measure that we can put forward, so that residents can decide what adequate compensation is.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner Lara.

Commissioner Lara: So, let's – I'll try to be clear and to provide some context as I see the impetus for this agenda item. As those may recall, two years ago, a majority of the Commission at that time, Commissioner Fernandez, Commissioner Castro, and former Commissioner Kirk Menendez voted for themselves overall a doubling of their total compensation, including the addition of a prior unawarded and now awarded car allowance, to conduct business in the City of Coral Gables of almost \$9,000 a year. So, this was outrageous, in my view, because there was no meaningful discussion with the public. There was no separate item agenda to be able to have meaningful public discussion, take questions, Town Hall meetings, anything of the sort. Let's not forget that these three Commissioners, with all respect, ran knowing exactly what the salary was when they sought elected office. They did not run on a campaign promise of doubling their pay and yet, that's what they did, and I'll quote one of my colleagues here, that simply because it's something that can be done doesn't make it the right thing to do. That's my view and it happens to be the overwhelming view of the residents of the thousands of doors that I knocked on over the last year and a half. So, in my view, what this all is in a simple way is a reset. I'm not here to determine what a Commissioner should make. I believe that should ultimately be what the residents decide, because the residents are the bosses of the Commissioners, not the body in and of itself when it comes to compensation. What the salary was during the 2022-2023 period is what, I believe ethically and morally and also what the people believe it should be and whatever it is that the people would want in terms of the change in compensation, whether to increase it, keep it the same, lower it, should be put, I believe to referendum. In the meantime, I believe that this should be brought back to what it was before the Commission majority at that time decided to double it. With respect to item 3b. I think I understand the rationale behind that. It is not a dollar, if I understand it correctly in perpetuity, but rather a dollar for a two-year period where it would then mean that at the conclusion of the four-year period, the Commissioners that doubled for themselves their compensation would have a true-up to be what it was, if they in fact had kept to the same compensation package that was in place at the time that they ran for elected office. So, I don't see this punitive. Arguably it would be punitive to me, as I wasn't elected two years ago, but I want to be clear that on 3b, it's perfectly fine with me if it's a dollar. It's perfectly fine for me if it goes back to what it was in 22-23, but in an interest of moving forward, in the interest of trying to dissuade anyone of the thought that what we're doing here at the dais is something that would be punitive or politically motivated, which is decidedly should not be, I'm supportive of 3a for those reasons.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Commissioner. I will try to be as concise and quick as possible. I'm in favor of 3a. The reason why I brought forth 3b is we are under the Sunshine, and we have to put forth all our ideas in an effort to ensure that the residents get what they deserve, which as we knocked on thousands of doors, what I heard over and over and over again was, restitution, and that this was egregious and disrespectful. I was forced, along with the Vice Mayor, to vote no on the budget, because this was tucked in on the budget. This was hidden in the budget. I pleaded and begged to have this excluded and heard at a Commission meeting. Commissioner Fernandez, Commissioner Castro, and then Commissioner Kirk Menendez emphatically said no. I requested that this be brought before the voters in a referendum. The answer was no. And for further backup, Mr. Clerk, would you please roll the tape.

[Video]

Mayor Lago: My point is simple. During the budget hearing, if you remember, I requested for transparency, I asked who on the dais had requested this be placed on the agenda, placed in the budget. Both the Vice Mayor and myself stated unequivocally it was not us. At that point, then City Manager stated that he had received three requests from three Commissioners. I'm in favor of 3a and again, I'll reiterate those three Commissioners were Ariel Fernandez, Kirk Menendez, and Melissa Castro. You can walk this back in whatever way you want, but that shows a lack of sensibility towards the residents and a true understanding and respect for taxpayer dollars. Moving forward. I would like to move forward with 3a, and I will be requesting on second reading, Madam City Attorney, that any further discussion or consideration of salary increases be put forth via referendum for the residents. This is something you and I have been discussing for some time, and if we are going to increase salaries let it go before the residents for consideration and approval.

City Attorney Suarez: So, we can bring the resolution at the next meeting this one's considered, if it is adopted. It will be a resolution approving ballot language, so a question is put forth to the voters for a Charter Amendment so that changes to compensation must be approved by the voters. We can work on that sir.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk, with that amendment, I call a question on 3a.

Commissioner Lara: Yes

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 4-0)