

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Items F-14 and F-16
September 26, 2023
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Melissa Castro (On Zoom)

Commissioner Ariel Fernandez

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Finance Director, Diana Gomez

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz

Agenda Items F-14 and F-16 are related [5:05 p.m.]

F-14: A Resolution of the City Commission directing City staff to work with Commissioner Fernandez to formulate an economic stimulus plan with the purpose of providing financial relief to residents. (Sponsored by Commissioner Fernandez) (Co-Sponsored by Commissioner Menendez)

F-16: A Resolution of the City Commission establishing a Senior Relief Grant Fund and directing City staff to identify a source of funding. (Sponsored by Commissioner Fernandez) (Co-Sponsored by Commissioner Menendez)

Mayor Lago: F-14.

City Attorney Suarez: F-14 is a Resolution of the City Commission directing City staff to work with Commissioner Fernandez to formulate an economic stimulus plan with the purpose of providing financial relief to residents.

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Commissioner Fernandez: This is part of the presentation I made last Budget Hearing. Staff recommended that anything that we do as far as economic stimulus and the Capital Improvements that I had presented, we should remove from the budget. So, what I am presenting here is the opportunity to work on an economic stimulus plan that I have already been working on with staff, working on putting some finishing touches on it, over the next two weeks, but before I expended staff time over the next two weeks and resources to put it together, I just wanted to make sure that we had the support on the Commission to create an economic stimulus plan to benefit residents. There's actually a second item which is part of it, which is item F-16, which we would be able to pass today, which is the resolution establishing a senior relief grant fund. That part we are ready to approve. It would mirror Miami-Dade County's requirements for seniors who are the most in need in our community and staff has told me would be sending a check to about 250 households in our city, during a time that they most need it. So, those two items technically do go hand-in-hand.

Mayor Lago: The check is for \$100, right.

Commissioner Fernandez: Correct.

Mayor Lago: So, it's \$25,000 per year. Are you planning on doing this repeatedly, this is the plan, or is this just a onetime?

Commissioner Fernandez: What I would like to do is to work, and I've already told staff, I want to start working on next year's budget already, to find areas where we can tweak the budget and make sure that we have a budget next year that's leaner, and where we can maybe take advantage of some of the funding for Capital Projects; and yes, this is something I would like to do next year. This approval is just a onetime approval at this time. I would like to bring it back next year, once we work out the budget details.

Mayor Lago: So, these funds are coming from the reserves or are they coming from another line item?

City Attorney Suarez: So, Mayor, can I read the item into the record since we're going to discuss them both together.

Mayor Lago: Of course. I apologize. I'm sorry about that.

City Attorney Suarez: So, F-16 is a Resolution of the City Commission establishing a Senior Relief Grant Fund and directing City staff to identify a source of funding.

Commissioner Fernandez: Madam Director.

City Attorney Suarez: So, as the Commissioner said, it mirrors the county program, except that I know the county this year increased the amount of the grant, but it would be \$100 to each household that receives that senior exemption. One change to the resolution that was published. It says that it would be those who have the exemption identified as of a certain date of a preliminary
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roll that Finance received, but we would do it based on the first certified roll from the Property Appraiser that is provided to the Tax Collector, if approved of course.

Commissioner Fernandez: Question from the Mayor was where's the funding coming from.

Finance Director Gomez: So, we would find it in the current year budget. We would just look to see where there's maybe some available funds to find the \$25,000-ish.

Mayor Lago: I would like to see like an actual line item that if we're going to do this repeatedly, I would like to see it funded in one form or another, so that we don't have to take it, for example, from reserves. I would like to see that.

Finance Director Gomez: Yes – and we're not planning on taking it from reserves and as I understand it, this is a onetime this year only, we're at year-end, we can find some money in the budget somewhere to fund this.

Mayor Lago: And by the way, the people who qualify for this, based on an affidavit, right. They would have to provide actual like financials or tax returns. I know how the county does it.

Finance Director Gomez: Sure. We're going to take it from the county's database. The county provides the city the municipal roll and they tell us how many seniors that qualify for this senior exemption are in the city and they give us that information, and so, the information would come from the county, based on the roll, the first certified tax roll that the Property Appraiser sends to the Tax Collector, which I believe is going to be issued this week. And so that listing will tell us who qualifies for the senior exemption, and so that is what would be used.

Commissioner Fernandez: One of staff's concerns was regarding having to receive personal information from individuals to see if they qualified. This simplified the process, because the county already has a mechanism in place which we would be using, and it would also limit the need for staff time to go through an application process and an approval process.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Couple of questions. My mother always told me there's no such thing as a dumb question, so I'm going to ask it. Do the folks that qualify under the program for the county, did they receive a check from the county too?

Finance Director Gomez: They do receive a check from the county, and I believe that county changed it recently.

City Attorney Suarez: Its traditionally has been \$100 for each household. It's my understanding just from user ports that the county and their budget increased the amount of the grant for this coming Fiscal Year.

Finance Director Gomez: And the paperwork I received from the county as well, it did show an increase.

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Vice Mayor Anderson: And I believe if I heard correctly was about \$500 from the county.

Finance Director Gomez: The county has changed it to about, I want to say \$522 is what I remember seeing in the paperwork, but somewhere around \$500 what the county changed it to.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Okay. Alright. And so, essentially, we wouldn't have any paperwork to do, we would just rely on what the county has.

Finance Director Gomez: That's the way that I understand that the way the resolution is written, if you qualify per the county's exemption standards for the senior exemption in our city, then that's the database that we would use based on that roll that is going to be provided later this week per the Property Appraiser's Office.

Vice Mayor Anderson: And would the checks go out automatically or would someone have to ask for them.

Finance Director Gomez: No, we would just get that database and my understanding, would get that database and mail those checks to the mailing address on file. Again, all the information is coming from the county's municipal roll information, and it would go based on the information on that roll.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'm fine with it, with F-16. F-14, I'm not clear on what we're doing.

Commissioner Fernandez: So, F-14 is basically – I'm trying to get a sense of the Commission's will to work on an economic stimulus package for residents, based similar to the numbers that we had last time, which were about \$3.5 million dollars, and continuing to work on that to present at the next Commission meeting for consideration.

Mayor Lago: Well, let me ask you a question. I'm a believer that the millage rate continues to pay dividends if you cut the millage rate, that's long gone, we crossed that. There is no free lunch. So this money you're going to be taking it from reserves. Let's say we do it next year, we cut these people a \$210 dollar check. The following year it's another \$3.5 million dollars, you've got to find it. Do we not do Capital Projects, or do we take it again from reserves, because I'm talking about the whole issue here is reoccurring revenue versus onetime. So, I'm a believer that a \$210 dollar check today becomes a \$210 dollar check every year versus a standard millage rate cut, is a millage rate cut in your taxes and it's across the board. I don't want to vote – I will vote in favor of the 250 checks for the elderly any day of the week, because it's based on a formula, it's based on a very small minute of individuals and it's a small amount of money, especially affecting those who are probably in most need, because they are the elderly and they are the ones that are retired, but I don't see how we can continue to fund three and-a-half million dollars a year unless we're taking it from reserves. If you tell me, you have a way of doing it.

Commissioner Fernandez: This is a onetime thing, and again, I've already had the conversation with staff. I do want to have a reduced budget next year, to make sure that we can tackle some of

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the additional Capital Improvement Projects that we have, and we will see where the economy is next year regarding the millage as well.

Mayor Lago: But how are you going to do that? If you're not going to lower the millage rate, what mechanism are you going to use to produce \$3.5 million. It's going to be from reserves.

Commissioner Fernandez: This will be from reserves, correct, which was the presentation that I made at the Budget Hearing.

Mayor Lago: I can't support that, because I think that it goes – when you do a onetime payment it's not reoccurring, there's no mechanism behind it to be able to provide that onetime payment, to provide you a continued life of that program. It has to have something that has legs where you can continue to produce it. Case in point, we've written legislation to address issues with parks restoration and acquisition. We have an actual formula; we have a system that works where developers pay into it when they pay for their permits. That is a mechanism in place to deliver something. This is a one-time payment and it's a great idea, but I'm of the belief that it has to be something where it's reoccurring and its sustainable in the city.

Vice Mayor Anderson: It's a bit confusing. You're talking about economic stimulus and its money to go to residents, but it's actually a millage rate discount, is what it is. It is. You're giving money back, so therefore there's less money to work with. There are ways that we can help residents out, helps those in the lower income bracket more than just pulling money from reserves, because in essence unless you weren't watching the presentation that was done on the actual cost that it's going to translate for all residents in the future. Those interest costs, the millions of dollars that will be lost if this is done. You're talking penny wise and pound foolish, but there are things that we can do. Have another budget planning process starting in February, that's where we need to really put our heads together and look for those things that can help residents out the most. Things I get complaints about hey, I only put out a bag this big and I get charged this much. Just like the folks elsewhere in the city. We need to look for solutions to have conversations, we're talking garbage, for some folks is a touchy issue, but perhaps that's one of those things where when we have the priorities for residents for looking for ways to help bring down their cost that there might be an option there. I don't want it to be an explosive topic. I'm not making the decision. I just want to hear from residents. It's called seeking information. How do you think we can help bring down the cost of garbage collection, because if we all put our heads together, I think we'll come to a better solution. Economic stimulus plans are usually injecting money into businesses and its therefore the language is very difficult for me to wrap my head around when you're talking about a tax rebate. That's what this is, it's a tax rebate. A tax rebate in essence is a millage rate reduction.

Commissioner Fernandez: But it's not. And again, this is going to be a plan that will be equitable so that everybody gets the same. The biggest issue with the millage rate cut is a lot of people are going to bet big checks. The people who most need it are going to get \$20 or \$30. It's not going to be a major issue for them. So, the plan that I'm working on is to make sure that everybody across the board gets the same amount of money and why is it economic stimulus, because we're putting money back into the economy. We're taking money out of a bank account and putting it back in

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the bank accounts of residents, who are the ones who should be utilizing that money. So that's my take. I understand the two of you disagree, and again, that's fine.

Mayor Lago: What I'm trying to understand is, how do you continue to provide this program year over year over year also without tapping into our reserves? That's my concern.

Commissioner Fernandez: This is a one-year plan.

Mayor Lago: I think we're opening up Pandora's Box and it could be a major problem for us.

Commissioner Fernandez: This is a one-year plan. This has not been discussed as a year over year plan, it's not an annual plan, it's a onetime plan.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I think we can do a onetime plan with the garbage fees, but we need to set a schedule to discuss the real cost. There's a lot of moving parts there and I hope we can have a robust discussion about that, not only the methodology in which we pickup. We've had a couple of different plans on how we can reduce tipping fees by reusing material. I had a discussion with one of our State Reps, he says, you know one city used to take all that refuse and turn it into mulch, and they stopped doing it. Paying tipping on something that's useful biproduct of our green canopy in passing those expenses onto the residents. If we really want to do a good thing for the residents, we're going to take that expense off of them.

Mayor Lago: Vice Mayor, I'll give you an idea. I'll take those \$3.5 million dollars that you're talking about, and I'll invest it in the program that I brought before the Commission which we were supposed to look at, Mr. Manager, in Tallahassee and that also Miami-Dade County is running a pilot program, which is that program that takes the green matter and basically recycles it so it doesn't go into the waste stream which cost money, tipping, tipping. We're going to look at that. Remember we've been talking about it for over a year, so why not invest in something that we have a lot of foliage here, a lot of green matter, especially a lot of illegal dumping that's occurring throughout Miami-Dade County here in the city, we can invest in a program like that. Use one of our sites on 72nd Avenue and have this machine take all that green matter out of the waste stream, basically recycling it, giving it away to industries like, for example, the concrete production industry that needs that for concrete, a biproduct. And then with the return on investment, we could lower the garbage fees or, I forget, I think we're \$3 ½ to \$4 million dollars in the red in regard to our garbage. We can find ways to lower things and make a long-term investment that will pay dividends. I think that that is a better investment that will pay investments year over year over year and also do something that's sustainable and environmentally friendly that, again, will just limit the amount of waste. By the way, garbage fees are going up, garbage fees are going up every single year, especially with the issue they are having with Covanta, so they are going to pass all those fees off to the residents. So, I'm of the belief, let's try to find an answer like Miami-Dade County is already pilot programming this project, Tallahassee is doing the same thing, and let's see if we can drop our garbage fees and give that savings off to the residents, year over year over year, that's a mechanism to deliver savings and we can turn that over to the residents. I'm for that. I'm not just for a onetime payment that doesn't have any ROI. There's got to be a return on investment on your money.

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Vice Mayor Anderson: I do think we can do it. I mean if you look at the interest that we get in our reserves and utilize that into an investment. I don't know how much the machinery costs, but we have \$543,000 per year, okay, and we could permanently impact garbage fees in the city substantially. Look at the quantity of stuff that we tip and how much of it is green waste, as opposed to other stuff. There's a lot of green waste in the city and it's an all-useable material. So, there are two programs, one is grinded up and the other biochar, which by its name I was a little concerned about was a burn thing. When I looked into it further and I've shown it to the County Commissioners, they're all in support of it. I've shown it to our State Reps, because that's another appropriation item we could get assistance for, because it makes sense. Why would we want to be trucking that stuff up to the middle of the state which is what we're going to be forced to do at that time and, my God, the cost that we will be passing on will be tremendous at that point. We can turn this into useful material. Every time they farm in South Dade, they remove a little bit of the soil. This will be putting some back, because that can become something for the landscape folks to use as potting soil, it can be something for the farms to amend the soil and I'll send to the Manager again these presentations we haven't shared with you all. We could save people a tremendous amount of money, if we reuse those materials. We're not recycling our yard waste and you can talk bottles and cans all you want, but the vast quantity is what we dump is yard waste. So, I'm all for trying to save residents money and it pains me to see when I talk to some residents that are just putting out the equivalent of a little Publix plastic garbage bag in their pan to be paying the same rate that somebody has a can this big and its overflowing. We have to be equitable in this and I'd like to find a solution and I'd like to ask staff when we can set this for either a discussion item or a Sunshine meeting. Let's have an internal discussion and try to find the best route to give relief to the residents on something that is only escalating. Let me give you an idea of when I went to one of the presentations and I know that our tipping rate is around \$48 per ton. There are some tipping rates on this recycling program that are less than that, so we'll have immediate savings. If memory serves me correctly, I think it was like \$10 less per ton. The presentation speaks for itself. Been in the northeast, where we're going to be heading in the future with that type of collection method and have to haul it further away, its \$75. It's almost twice as much as what we're paying. I don't want to pass that off to residents. We ought to find a better way. That's where we can really help the folks that are hurting the most, because this is going to be tremendous increase for them. I don't how much more they can sell, if they have any furniture left to sell at that point. You know I've had that discussion about that.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes, and I agree. I think we need to do something to really tackle that issue.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Are you willing?

Commissioner Fernandez: Well, let's start with item F-16, I think we do have consensus.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes.

Commissioner Fernandez: So, I'll make a motion.

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Commissioner Menendez: I'll second.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, we have a member of the public requesting to speak on the item, Maria Cruz.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Ms. Cruz: Since there's consensus, you don't need my voice.

Commissioner Fernandez: I think she said if there's consensus you don't need.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 5-0)

Commissioner Fernandez: So then, I guess we're back to F-14.

Commissioner Menendez: I have a question, F-14. Madam City Attorney, basically F-14 says come back at a later date.

City Attorney Suarez: Correct. And just to clarify, it says some back October 10th, and as you all know, the agenda for October 10th, the drop deadline for publishing would be next Thursday, so it's not a lot of time, and so, I don't know if staff would be ready. I don't know how much information staff has or needs from the Commissioner to prepare this economic stimulus plan.

Commissioner Fernandez: October 26th.

City Attorney Suarez: Sorry, I was just saying that the resolution for F-14, which is the economic stimulus plan provides that it would come back October 10th and that means it would have to publish next Thursday.

Finance Director Gomez: Diana Gomez, Finance Director. I do not believe that's enough time. I'm assuming – The way I read this item was that we would meet to start discussions regarding this.

Commissioner Fernandez: I've had some conversations already with others and staff, so we do have some parameters that have already worked out, but let's do October 26th, amend it to October 26th in order to give enough time. Gives us a month to work out the details and I would move that item as well. Vice Mayor, I agree. I think we should set a date for a discussion on a permanent plan for garbage fees and find a solution. The Mayor's idea is not a bad idea, creating a way where we can offset some of the cost and give the money back to residents. I'd still like to get a vote on

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this item just to see if there is consensus on even having the discussion with staff and continuing to work, but if not, we just move on.

Mayor Lago: So, can I ask you a quick question. Can I respectfully task you to wait a Commission meeting and research what I presented through a memo, which I think it may be what you're looking for which would give reoccurring revenue and it would be economically and sustainable, probably one of the best things we can do for the city, and it would avoid taking more money from the reserves.

Commissioner Fernandez: And the resolution as it is today does not mention the reserves. It is tasking me to work with staff to find a way to create an economic stimulus package. So definitely I will be looking into that option and exploring other options where we may be able to find a way to do it.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I've got the memo on Leon County. I've got also this other option and...

Commissioner Fernandez: You can send those to me through the staff.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes, I'll send it. I don't think you really need our permission to work with staff. Staff works with me on this other presentation. You can just do it. I would like to flush it out more and perhaps we should discuss all the options, so we can make the best choice.

Commissioner Menendez: Well, I think the good thing is that we push it a month later, gives Commissioner Fernandez enough time to get all the information. He made a point that you all had very good arguments and very good ideas. So, at the end of the day, there might be a hybrid solution, but I think that the fact that we're working on something finding creative ways to give money back, then maybe like we do sometimes option A, option B, option C. So, I think that the fact that we're towards some goal, I think is productive.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I think F-16, together what we're doing on the grant program septic to sewer and F-16 will put some immediate relief in for those folks that are hurting the most, and then we can work on some long term goals here that will carry on into the future that this Commission can make a significant difference for our residents, especially those that find it difficult to pay that garbage fee every year.

Commissioner Fernandez: So, I'm going to motion with the amendment to October 26th.

Commissioner Menendez: And I'll second, to give the opportunity to look into all options, but I do ask Commissioner Fernandez to take into consideration, obviously the concerns of the Vice Mayor and the Mayor, so we can hopefully come up with a plan that everybody embraces.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, we have a member of the public requesting to speak on this item, Maria Cruz.

Mayor Lago: Okay,
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Ms. Cruz: What item is that?

Commissioner Fernandez: F-14.

Ms. Cruz: It's been killed already. Go ahead.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes. Bring it back up October 26th, we'll have a robust discussion.

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 5-0)