

**CITY OF CORAL GABLES**  
**Economic Development Board Meeting Minutes**  
**Wednesday, November 4, 2009, 8:00 a.m.**  
**1 Alhambra Plaza, Suite 617, Coral Gables, Florida 33134**

MEMBERS	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	COMMISSIONERS
Mr. Bertram "Chico" Goldsmith					X		E	P	P	P	P	P	Mayor Donald D. Slesnick II
Mr. Raymond Zomerfeld	P	P	P	P	X	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	Vice Mayor William H. Kerdyk, Jr.
Mr. John M. "Jack" Thomson					X		E	P	P	P	P	P	Commissioner Maria Anderson
Ms. Haydee Polo					X		P	P	E	P	P	P	Commissioner Rafael "Ralph" Cabrera, Jr.
Mr. James Casey	P	P	P	P	X	P	P	P	A	P	P	P	Commissioner Wayne "Chip" Withers

**STAFF:**

Ms. Maria Alberro-Jimenez, Assistant City Manager  
 Ms. Cynthia S. Birdsill, Economic Sustainability Department Director  
 Ms. Jessica Wotherspoon, Business Development Specialist

**A** = Absent  
**E** = Excused Absence  
**P** = Present  
**X** = No Meeting  
**#** = Special Meetings

**GUEST:**

Mr. Jackson Rip Holmes, commercial property owner & resident

**Meeting Motion Summary:** (No Commission action requested)

- **Approval of October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Board Meeting Minutes**

Chair Ray Zomerfeld called the meeting to order at 8:04 a.m.

**1. Introductions**

**2. Attendance**

All members were in attendance

**3. Approval of October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Board Meeting Minutes**

Mr. Goldsmith made a motion to approve the Board meeting minutes of September 2, 2009. Mr. Thomson seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

**4. Introduction of the new Economic Sustainability Department Director, Cynthia S. Birdsill**

Ms. Birdsill is a real estate attorney with experience in real estate development. She came from the Terranova Corporation. Prior to that, she was with the Rouse Company and had involvement from the Rouse side with the Village of Merrick Park when it was being built. In addition to being an attorney, Ms. Birdsill has a Master of Fine Arts in painting, an undergraduate degree in Theater & Visual Arts, and is an artist herself.

**5. Sharing of Board members views of the City and relaying of the Board's goals to the new Department Director**

Chair Ray Zomerfeld read the Board's goals and expressed the Board's appreciation that the new director had arrived.

Mr. Zomerfeld noted that Mr. John O'Rourke, owner of Montica Jewelry on Miracle Mile, and member of the Board of Directors with the Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce and the Business Improvement District, is the Chamber's Liaison to the Board. Mr. Zomerfeld further stated that from working with the local realtors, attracting Class A tenants, improving the permitting process for businesses, and advocating the modernization and promotion of Miracle Mile and the City in general, the Board's and the Chamber's goals are very comparable.

In providing background for the new Director, it was brought up that the Board has for years tried to encourage the City to dedicate a full-time Building & Zoning staff person solely devoted to an ombudsman position. Mr. Thomson, further noted how when national businesses come in, they often bring in their own architects and contractors who are unfamiliar with Coral Gables Codes. This usually adds to the delay in the business opening significantly. He shared that it was hoped that the ombudsman position would help facilitate the process and thus reduce the time it took for businesses to open. A suggestion to make a list of private facilitators available was brought up. However, it was noted that there is a permitting problem not only for the large national businesses with out of town professionals, but also for mom & pop type business owners. These small business owners, who may not be able to afford to hire a facilitator, may have to go through the process on their own. The time and labor costs they incur can heavily impact their start-up expenses, and might impact their viability.

Ms. Polo commented that City staff may not feel any benefit to get businesses permitted quickly. Their priority is to see that entities seeking to obtain City permits follow the procedures as the City regulations require, regardless of what the ramifications mean to the those entities seeking permits. She further noted that these employees may feel the opposite of a sense of urgency, as they get punished when they make mistakes or approve things that don't meet the Code exactly. This eliminates the employees' incentive to act as advocates for businesses seeking permits, as they find the path of least resistance for them is to deny their area of the permit application until the permit-seeker complies to a T. Ms. Polo further stated that the employees that work in the permitting area, along with the ombudsman-should there be one, need to have an incentive to see that businesses seeking permits are being moved along in the process as fast as possible.

Mr. Thomson noted his disagreement to Ms. Polo's comment, stating that he felt the problem lay more in the fact that Building & Zoning employees' working environment is far too crowded.

Mr. Thomson asked if any senior level employees who work in the permitting area could come and speak with the Board about the permitting process as it is today. Ms. Alberro-Jimenez responded that if that was the desire of the Board, then yes, that could be arranged. She noted one employee in particular, who has a strong desire to serve, who approaches issues positively, and explains things fully, that she always goes to for assistance. Mr. Zomerfeld agreed that the specific individual noted was excellent and would make a great City ombudsman as they know everybody in the area, are well versed in the zoning & code issues, and know directly where to go to put out the fires.

Some of the other problem areas with businesses getting permits discussed were that sometimes the Code is interpreted differently and sometimes all criteria to get a permit approved is not explained

Economic Development Board Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, November 7, 2009

Continued

upfront. Mr. Casey brought up that he felt the name, ombudsman, may not be the most optimal name to give the go-to person for businesses seeking permits. Suggestions discussed included permit facilitator, permit coordinator, and permit facilitation coordinator. He also expressed that it would be great if this employee could initially be available to meet with business owners to tell them what to do when they apply for a permit, how to go about it in a step by step process, and what time-frame to expect for it to take. Mr. Zomerfeld shared that companies today express hesitation about coming to Coral Gables because they fear how long it will take them to get the City permits.

A discussion of the City's Development Review Committee occurred. While it was viewed as a good step for businesses to go through before committing to a specific commercial location, it was noted that not all businesses are required to go before it.

Mr. Thomson stated that he would like one or two of the commercial brokers in Coral Gables to come speak to the Board about trends in the City's commercial real estate environment, how they feel the City can go after corporate tenants it wants to bring in, and what they feel are the reasons that the corporate tenants move out. Ms. Polo asked that they address our competitive advantages and disadvantages too.

Mr. Thomson asked if the City would revisit making Aragon Avenue a one-way street running east to west. Ms. Alberro-Jimenez said she would look into it and discussion followed as to if that would create a one-way street where speeding would become an issue.

In relation to the Board's goal to increase tourism, Ms. Polo noted that she sees tourist buses that drive by sites in the City, but that they don't stop. She wanted to know what could be done to get them to stop so tourists could get off, shop and dine in the City. Ms. Alberro-Jimenez commented that it was a good idea and one that needed to be further explored. There was also discussion on how the trolleys could be used for large tourism-related events, and about the opportunities to market to and capitalize on the cruise passengers that come into South Florida.

**6. Additional Business**

-Verified Board members received their ID cards

Motion to adjourn made by Mr. Thomson and seconded by Mr. Goldsmith.

There being no further discussion, the meeting was adjourned at 9:15a.m.

Next Economic Development Board Meeting: Wednesday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009 at 8:00 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,  
Jessica Wotherspoon  
Business Development Specialist  
Economic Sustainability Department