

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting**  
**Agenda Item H-3**  
**July 13, 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, Jr.**

**Commissioner Kirk Menendez**

**City Staff**

**City Manager, Peter Iglesias (Absent)**

**Assistant City Manager, Ed Santamaria**

**City Attorney, Miriam Ramos**

**City Clerk, Billy Urquia**

**Cultural Arts Specialist, Catherine Cathers**

**Public Speaker(s)**

**Patrick O’Connell**

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**Agenda Item H-3**

A Resolution of the City Commission approving proposed artists for Illuminate Coral Gables 2022, a temporary light-based public art exhibition and approving partial funding from the art acquisition fund (unanimously recommended by the Arts Advisory Panel approval/denial vote: 7 to 0, and the Cultural Development Board approval/denial vote: 7 to 0)

Mayor Lago: H-3.

Ms. Cathers: I will stay up here.

City Attorney Ramos: Its Illuminate Coral Gables 2022, a temporary light-based public art exhibition and approving partial funding from the art acquisition fund.

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Ms. Cathers: So, proposals to artists and installations was presented to the Arts Advisory Panel and Cultural Development Board by Illuminate Coral Gables for the temporary exhibition currently scheduled from January 14, Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend through mid-February, President's Day weekend. Additionally, the Cultural Development Board discussed financial support of Illuminate Coral Gables and recommended general funding of \$200,000 from the Art Acquisition Fund toward Illuminate Coral Gables 2022. The city is a participating partner, as you all know, along with the Coral Gables Community Foundation, Coral Gables Business Improvement District, the Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce and the Coral Gables Museum. Funding for the exhibition is provided through a variety of sources, including foundations, private, municipal and outside grant funds to the Coral Gables Community Foundation on behalf of Illuminate Coral Gables. The proposal list of about 20 artists and the projects were already presented to you at the previous Commission meeting, they are also attached to this item and are available to the public to see, and we are asking for approval of the proposed artist list, and we want to emphasize that this is the proposed artist list and the funding of the \$200,000 from the Art Acquisition Fund. We also have with us today co-founder, Patrick O'Connell, who can also speak to this item.

Mayor Lago: Mr. O'Connell, good evening or good morning.

Mr. O'Connell: Good morning, a pleasure, thank you all. So, as Catherine mentioned, we have been very busy with Illuminate after the closing of the last show in March. We have a very exciting show planned; we intend to do something much bigger, much brighter for a longer period of time in 2022. To date, with hard and soft commitments from the city, the B.I.D., some private sponsors, the State of Florida, Baptist Health, we have about \$515,000 pledged to our budget which is about 25 percent more than the entire budget of 2021. So, we feel like we are making great progress. This summer the focus is to actually – some of the artists that we are bringing on board need to start fabricating their works, so we need to get them under contract as quickly as possible, and so we need these funds that Catherine is asking for this summer so we can get them working on some of these pieces, so they are ready to show in early 2022.

Mayor Lago: So, if I may, I want to first congratulate you and congratulate Lance Fung and Vinney for really working hard and bringing something to the downtown which is in some of our most difficult times, brought people to our downtown and brought masses and its tangible because when you look at the amount of parking revenue from one month to another you can see that this was a significant gesture that really bear fruit. I'm ready to fund 18 out of the 20 artists. I have two problems, two issues with two of the artists that we have considered. One of them we brought up, I think at the last meeting Sandra Ramos, a Cuban artist, I don't know if that's to include in the list, and the other artist that I have a little bit of an issue with. I sent you some documentation on the artist yesterday or two days ago via e-mail and I think that we need to really take a look at it, because some of the comments to me, in the public world by this artist do not – I don't subscribe to them, number one; and number two, I'm not going to use public funds to someone who has been a long time sympathizer of the Chinese regime. So, to me, I think we need to take a look at it. I think the artwork is spectacular, is an incredible artist, but art doesn't trump my own personal beliefs, especially when you are talking about public funds. So, I'm ready to give you the funds

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that you need for the 18 artists, but for those two, I still remain very torn in regard to approving that art.

Mr. O’Connell: So, if I may?

Mayor Lago: Yes, sir.

Mr. O’Connell: So, the public funds coming specifically from the city, the budget that I put together really uses those funds to pay more of the soft costs for Illuminate Coral Gables, not so much honorary for the artists or any of the fabrication of the work. The two artists that you’ve mentioned, I think that that may require a more deeper and meaningful conversation, one that I don’t think any of us want to have here this evening or this morning rather.

Mayor Lago: Well, I’m willing to have it, if you’d like, because you’ve been here all day, so I don’t want to.

Mr. O’Connell: I understand, but I’m not really prepared to debate that, but what I would like to say and particularly about Sidewood Chang, the artist of the fireflies exhibition, the connectic work that we already have shown in the city. We actually signed an agreement with Sidewood Chang back in December, his honoraria have been paid in full for the two years. We are currently paying to store those fireflies and we are intending to bring more, we hope to. The gentleman pictured behind you has been under a lot of scrutiny lately due to some comments that I think he made 70 some-odd years ago that were taken out of context. So, I urge you, Mayor Lago specifically, based on the interview with the artist that was sent to me and another one that came out in Gables Insider, that you all read the context with which those comments or in which those comments are made by Sidewood Chang. I don’t know what is in his heart or exactly how he feels, but when you look at him, when you look at this work specifically, the way that he has been supported around the globe by many governments. I mean, Fireflies was originally commissioned by the City of Philadelphia for the centennial celebration of Benjamin Franklin Parkway and funded by the Pew Foundation or the Pew Charitable Trust rather, sorry. It was then shown again in Baltimore. The third time it’s ever been shown in the world was in Coral Gables and it was the delight of our show last year. We intend to expand that hopefully, that installation and allow passengers that have a much broader route throughout downtown. So, Fireflies has been shown, we hope to make it again the centerpiece of Illuminate Coral Gables and I just hope that before we even engage in further discussion that whatever comments or whatever excerpts have been taken out of some of his interviews are fully understood in the context with which he made those comments. So, I’m not really prepared to talk about Sandra Ramos. I do follow her on Instagram and I can tell you that if you watched what she said during what’s happening today, currently in Cuba, it doesn’t appear as if she’s in any way a sympathizer with that government, but I don’t really wish to say more about that, other than what I’ve witnessed.

Mayor Lago: Well, I think you’ve said enough, but at the end of the day I think it’s a shame that you would knock George Merrick to make a point about the artist. My opinion, as the son of immigrants who came to this country with nothing, who fled Cuba, the Castro regime, socialism, communism, a dictatorship, tyranny, to me I’m not confused by someone who sympathize with

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the communist government and says that it was successful. That is a government that has killed millions, tens of millions of people, so there is not much success when you talk to me about socialism, because when you put a concept and the ideas behind socialism and communism, you are talking about its killed over 100 million people on this planet. So, we don't have to take a vote on it today. We can just take a vote on it in August, but I'm giving you the opportunity even though that artist performance work has been already paid for, I have a concern and I don't know if my colleagues do also. If they feel comfortable with it, they can override my decision and we can move forward, but at the end of the day, I just want to put my two cents on the record where I just don't feel comfortable moving in that direction. Again, started off the conversation very clearly saying that you guys did an incredible job, the city benefited. I've been a big proponent of the arts and I will continue to support the arts, but not at the expense of democracy and liberty, because it's very easy to make comments on the record, as I sent to you supporting communism and saying that communism is a great idea, but then you are hear in the United States taking American money, and at the end of the day that doesn't bode well for me or for any decision that I have to make to support someone.

Commissioner Menendez: I share your concerns. I support your position wholly. Actions by this city government, by this City Commission sends a message, we want to make sure we are sending the right message to the world, and just because an artist, an entertainer is well received around the world doesn't mean that their position with regards to issues like freedom and democracy are sugar coated. So, I stand by you, Mayor Lago with regards to your concerns.

Commissioner Anderson: I'm equally concerned as well and I am not willing to support someone that sympathizes with Castro, regime or socialists. Same as how we contract or purchase our products and buy American. So...

Mayor Lago: We have to take a stand and it's a tough one, but we have to do it, and at the end of the day, we face the repercussions across the board. Either it is on a development project when you don't side with somebody and they call you a racist, or when they trash your family, and they intimidate you. We must take a stand. At the end of the day, we are in this position for a short time, and I brought it up to your attention, and I think we could have just had a quick discussion about potentially just saying we'll discuss it later, we will support the 18 and then we'll move on, but I think to me personally, I have a lot of respect to George Merrick. George Merrick...

Mr. O'Connell: I didn't mean to in any way disparage...(inaudible)

Mayor Lago:...was an imperfect man. He was a lot more perfect than I am, I will be honest with you, we all have our imperfections, but at least when I make mistakes, I come out and I admit them, that I have made a mistake, and I try my best to not make that mistake again. But, when you openly say that communism is something that you know, should be celebrated, and that it gave a voice to people who didn't have a voice before. When you look at what is going on in Cuba now, the internet is turned off, phones are turned off, they don't have much of a voice especially when you are being beaten with a stick over the head, over, and over and over again. So, we can visit it today, in regard to voting for it right now. I don't have a problem with it. I would like to support

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you, if you are saying these artists, if you were saying these fundings have nothing to do with Sandra Ramos or ...

Mr. O'Connell: Michael Chang...

Mayor Lago: Michael Chang.

Mr. O'Connell: And honestly, it doesn't. The \$300,000, and I can send you the budget where the funds will be applied.

Commissioner Fors: But then the question becomes about the activity.

Mayor Lago: ... the condition. We have a long agenda.

Mr. O'Connell: Right.

Commissioner Fors: I, personally, we have a long agenda, and I looked through a lot of them before getting here today. So, I personally haven't investigated the statements that are made, I have no reason to doubt what you, what those who have, per the statements that are said today, but for me it is important enough to differ until I'm able to come to any conclusions on...

Mr. O'Connell: Well, if I may? And to all of you, thank you for your consideration of this. I know that this is a tricky topic, and particularly at this particular moment. I am sure that we would be happy to set those two aside for further discussion and have it be at your discretion. If we could look at the remaining 18, and perhaps agree to the funding recommended by the Cultural Development Board for that, and then Mayor Lago, I know that we have a meeting scheduled for this coming week with my co-founder Vinny Torrie, we will have a chance to sit down and speak to this further, and then hopefully at the August 24th meeting perhaps have another discussion particularly about those two.

Commissioner Fors: I think we have an understanding even if it's in writing that we maintain discretion to ultimately backup funds, if we are not able to reach an agreement on the other two artists, you know, I wouldn't want to hold up the rest of the amazing exhibitions for that. But I'm afraid I just haven't done my own investigation either.

Mayor Lago: So moved. Exactly what you said.

City Attorney Ramos: It is worded as approving the proposed artists, so I would just amend it and say approving 18 of the 20 proposed artists knowing the two that we are talking about that we said on the record.

Mayor Lago: And I agree with you.

Commissioner Fors: Conditions on the funds ....

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City Attorney Ramos: For those two, we can add that.

Commissioner Fors: And, for instance, you have said...the Mayor said ... obviously I would... what he said what he said, I have no doubt that he did, and that's problematic with Sandra Ramos, and I don't know what she said or what she was affiliated with, and we don't have to talk about it today.

Mayor Lago: We don't.

Commissioner Fors: We have plenty of time to...

Mayor Lago: But I just want to send a very clear message. I want to send a very, very clear message. We are fiduciaries on behalf of the City, and there is no place, there is no time in this community, as long as I am Mayor and I am here with my colleagues on this Commission that we are going to entertain giving public funds for people who do not sympathize with the United States Government, the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights and what this country stands for, that's my bottom line. I will play ball with anybody. I don't care what your background is, your sexual orientation, I support everybody. I am an art collector; I go to two art shows all over the world twice a year. I believe in conceptual art, I believe in performance art, modern, contemporary. I think the artworld brings, you know, an opportunity to this community, where there is an opportunity for dialogue. Where my dialogue ends, is when you start discussing who do we sympathize with suppression, with tyranny, those things to me, you lost me. So, Commissioner Fors made a motion, can we get a second?

Commissioner Menendez: Second.

Mayor Lago: Can we get a roll call?

Commissioner Fors: Yes

Vice Mayor Mena: Yes.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes.

Commissioner Anderson: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Mayor Lago: And in closing, I want to say thank you, this has nothing to do with you. I close saying very simply, that what you have done in the last year is extraordinary, we as a Commission, as a city, we support it, we welcome it, we are increasing funding for the project...

Mr. McConnell: And we appreciate it.

Mayor Lago: ...especially in a year where financially it's a little tight, but we are increasing funding for that, but I just want to make sure that we are all on the same page and that we are very thoughtful in regard to this matter.

Mr. McConnell: Absolutely. And once again, I appreciate all the consideration and absolutely the support we cannot do this without your support. This is a collaboration with the city, and we are excited to move forward, and we'll talk further next week. So, thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you sir.

Mr. McConnell: Of course.

Mayor Lago: Have a wonderful evening. Thank you for your patients. Thank you for being here, you've been here a long time. Thank you.