

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting**  
**Agenda Item G-19**  
**May 9, 2023**  
**City Commission Chambers**  
**405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL**

**City Commission**

**Mayor Vince Lago**

**Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson**

**Commissioner Melissa Castro**

**Commissioner Ariel Fernandez**

**Commissioner Kirk Menendez**

**City Staff**

**City Attorney, Cristina Suárez**

**City Manager, Peter Iglesias**

**City Clerk, Billy Urquia**

**Parking Director, Kevin Kinney**

**Public Speaker(s)**

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Agenda Item G-19

Discussion regarding Freebee.  
(Sponsored by Commissioner Castro)

Mayor Lago: Moving onto item G-19. This is one we've been waiting all day for. Madam Commissioner Castro.

Commissioner Castro: Yes. Good evening now. This is a major concern because I have a lot of residents reaching out to me and I would like an update. I know I've asked for an update myself, but I want this communicated through the residents and I have some questions, maybe I've asked before, and I'm pretty sure the residents would like.

Director Kinney: I'll just give a general overview and then you can ask any questions. So, last year we completed a three-year pilot project with FDOT. After that the Commission did approve moving into a month-to-month continuation with Freebee and the zone that we have. Just last week, we submitted for a new grant with FDOT that would fund a new, relatively new pilot project, so we are awaiting news from FDOT whether that grant funding will be available. But in the  
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meantime, we are continuing on a month-to-month till we find out what happens then. Once we find out what FDOT is willing to help us fund, there's two steps that will have to happen. One is, we will have to go to the county to get an interlocal agreement. In our previous iteration of the grant program that was not part of what happened, because we were not allowed to use PPP funds to support the Freebee service when we did our previous grant program, and now PPP funds are available to help fund this. Once we get through the county with an interlocal agreement, then we would bring back a contract to the Commission for approval. Right now, the funding that is available from the state would be available for us next summer, the summer of 2024, which is the beginning of this state's 25, Fiscal Year 25. And I believe the state tells us we will know the answer by September/October, but in the meantime, essentially the service level would remain on a month-to-month basis at the level we have currently, which is for the city about a \$40,000 a month expense.

Commissioner Castro: If the grant that's accepted, what percentage of that gets funded?

Director Kinney: 50 percent.

Commissioner Castro: 50 percent, okay. That's important to know. So right now, we're out of contract, right.

Director Kinney: We have an extension based on the Commission's resolution to go to a month-to-month, but yes, there is not a long term contract in place for any kind of new service, and that's what will happen once we find out what funding the state is willing to offer.

Commissioner Castro: So it will be month-to-month until, if possibly the funding gets approved till when?

Director Kinney: Well, the state funding is not available until next July, however, we would put together the interlocal agreement and a proposed agreement with Freebee within months after we find out what the FDOT is willing to fund. So, I would say towards the end of this calendar year, if the county helps us out and moves quickly with the interlocal agreement somewhere towards the end of the year, the first of the new year, we would bring action to the Commission.

Commissioner Castro: Why was the train station removed from the Freebee service area?

Director Kinney: The train station was never part of the zone. When we received money from FDOT, they came to us and they said, we're willing to fund this, but we need you to pull out the Freebee to go to Douglas Station. It was part of the requirement for that pilot project. We are back to what our historic contract zone is which is down to University, on the south side, and up to Alcazar on the north side, I believe, Minorca maybe.

Commissioner Castro: The reason I'm asking that is because I have residents call me saying that they had children that were using Freebee as a form of transportation after they got to the train. So, is there any possibility, at least until the school year ends that we can extend it?

Director Kinney: Well, okay, there's a couple of issues. One is, historically, I mean for the last almost 20 years now, students use the trolley because it goes from Douglas Station up and back much further north than Freebee. So, we actually staff an extra trolley or make sure we have maximum trolleys on route when school gets out so that there's space for students to travel. So, that is our preferred method for students and anything coming from Metrorail Station. In fact, our theory on the interaction between Freebee and trolley is, if you're final destination is the Douglas Station, Freebee will get you to Ponce and it's the trolley that should transport you to Douglas Station and the trolley right now, we're running six trolleys on the Ponce route, and our headways are in minutes or less.

Commissioner Castro: So, is our trolley on Sundays?

Director Kinney: No trolley on Sundays.

Commissioner Castro: So, how are we planning on transporting the people on Sunday?

Director Kinney: Sunday Freebee traffic is negligible. In fact, moving forward one of the cost-saving measures that we are considering and has been suggested by a consultant is that we no longer provide service on Sunday.

Commissioner Castro: And I had a lot of actually – we were in the Activity Center, and they had a lot of residents come up to me requesting to please have Sunday available in Freebee, because a lot of them can't see, can't drive.

Director Kinney: Well, currently there is Freebee on Sunday. What I suggested was, because there is nominal traffic on Sundays, one of the cost-saving measures that was suggested and is being considered is not to have service on Sundays. I don't have the numbers in front of me, but it's a tenth of what a normal day is.

Commissioner Castro: I think one of the bigger questions here that I've gotten is, can we expand Freebee into the neighborhoods?

Director Kinney: There are a number of things we need to look at, but that would definitely have to be one of the things we would have to speak with the county about, when we are going through the interlocal process. I can tell you, I'm 99 and nine-tenth percent sure we're going to have to have specific public meetings related to that topic, and we may have to have some sort of certification to satisfy the county on a couple of issues. But we absolutely can look at that when we're dealing with the county on the interlocal agreement.

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Commissioner Castro: Is the city considering reducing Freebee services, less cars, less days of service?

Director Kinney: Well, one of the discussions that came up from Freebee in the discussion of the possibility of moving to Freebee sedans, regular EV cars was that because they would be standard vehicles, not the Gem vehicles, that trips could be much quicker, they would be allowed to be on the highways with the faster speed limits, and so that we would actually gain efficiencies. So, if the zones stayed the same, in theory we could transport more people with fewer vehicles. So that is something we may look at. The grant we requested from the state was to maintain five vehicles, but just because the state agrees to fund the program that we offer, doesn't mean we have to put five vehicles on the road. We will do whatever is most cost-effective and efficient for the city, based on what we negotiate with the county and what the Commission agrees to.

Commissioner Castro: So, it could be in consideration?

Director Kinney: An expansion, absolutely could be a consideration, but we would have to make sure we can identify the funding for you guys and justify our – get the agreement with the county to do what is the vision.

Commissioner Castro: We're having a problem with parking and we're having a problem with traffic. While I was campaigning, I think one of the over development, traffic, parking, and I feel that if we expand to the residents, I mean, you could leave your cars at home and we're not driving them, and we don't have to park them, Freebee could really help out in that sense, not only the fact that it drops you off in front of wherever you are going, and you can drive safely if you're going to have a glass of wine or so, but Freebee drops you back off at home.

Director Kinney: I agree with everything you just said. One of the locations where Freebee is the busiest just down here on 600 and 700 Biltmore Way, because its high density residential and those folks want to go downtown, they don't necessarily want to drive downtown, and that's the purpose. Five years ago, when we started Freebee, that was the reason. We have a mess in the Central Business District. We knew we had taken out 197 parking spaces, but we were trying to help people deal with that without driving their vehicles downtown. So that's absolutely part of theory. When we start talking about a significant expansion, we actually have a number of vendors that have talked to us about services that could possibly fill that slot. So, if we start talking about expansion, we probably have to have a broader discussion about how we provide that service.

Commissioner Menendez: Commissioner, I have a quick question, if you don't mind, piggyback on what you're saying. I think we've all been resident after resident after resident wanting us to expand the footprint of Freebee, I mean for years now. So, I think there's a lot of support here, because there's a lot of support. A couple of residents have asked me, about the possibility of extending Freebee to, I guess its going west, Biltmore, Venetian Pool, the Country Club, and if

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we're able to expand Freebee there, it really starts to connect the city in an amazing positive way. Just in terms of three points on the west end and in places that our residents would like to go to. Go to Le Parc, go to the pool, spend an afternoon at the Biltmore. So residents have asked about connecting those three points.

Mayor Lago: If I may just add something Commissioner. So, I've worked on this for some time with staff, meeting with the Manager, talked to our friends for Freebee. What I recommend what everyone do is just have a sit-down conversation with the Manager. Understand the costs associated with Freebee. Sit down with my friend Claudia Miro and the Manager and understand the grants, understand moving from the electric vehicle to a new Tesla vehicle, understand the cost, and the grants that are available over the next three years. We applied for grants last week, I think we've done that work on Friday, correct?

Director Kinney: Yes.

Mayor Lago: And hopefully, we get those grants, and they can show you the cost associated with the upgrade of Freebee which would allow us to go to areas like you mentioned, Commissioner. But I think we need to understand the cost implications and the commitment that after three years, we have to assume that commitment and what it cost. We're happy with doing that and also the cost of ridership per rider. I like Freebee. I'm in favor of Freebee, especially if we have this grant. If you're talking about paying more today, if we get these grants than we're paying right now. That's my understanding from what I've reviewed from the documents that Ms. Miro gave me.

Director Kinney: It depends on how quickly we get them.

Mayor Lago: Understand. So, we're talking about kind of in a vacuum right now, and I think we need to sit down and talk about the cost, how expansive its going to be the foot coverage, the coverage of the service. Do we get these grants or we're not going to get these grants. Are we going to upgrade to Tesla vehicles? If not, this becomes very, very, very expensive. We're talking about a lot of projects. Want to make sure that if we make a commitment, a three-year commitment.

Director Kinney: And just so everybody is aware, essentially what we've committed for the next year is a half-million dollars that the city is paying.

Commissioner Castro: We also explored the ideas of advertisement on the vehicles.

Director Kinney: That is going. The last call I had was for last year, we made \$40,000 on advertising. So that almost paid for a month.

Mayor Lago: But you speak to Ms. Miro, who is here, maybe we can all sit down and have a conversation because this is a much broader conversation. It's the issue of, I'll give you another option. They'll take all the revenue and they give you a credit in regards to the fees. Would you

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like to come up here and say a few things? I think the best thing to do is sit down and have a conversation where we're moving with Freebee together. I don't think we're going to resolve this issue tonight.

Ms. Miro: Thank you Mr. Mayor. Claudia Miro with Freebee, with offices at 671 N.E. 31<sup>st</sup>, and I just wanted to chime in a little bit about some of the things that have been said. So yes, absolutely when Freebee started here over five years ago, we were coming to fix a problem with downtown. We were having the streetscape project, and so, it was brought in to really just help people connect them to the local businesses. Over the pandemic, we did have a change in ridership and now we have seen, even in last month and this month. Originally before the pandemic, we were at around 8,000 riders a month. Last month we hit 6,000, over 5,000. So now, we keep on climbing and we're confident that we are going to continue to do that. So, like Director Kinney said, at first they didn't start with the grant, but once they applied for the FDOT grant, they required the train station. Now that's the same grant that has just been applied for last week. FDOT have not been able to give us any indication if they are going to have the same requirement of tying it to the train station, so we're not sure yet, but the reason that the city was able to apply for this grant a second time, because its only for maximum of three years, is because there has to be a change in the program. So the change in the program was the Tesla vehicle was to bring that Tesla vehicle; and then as the Mayor was saying, Freebee has provided options, funding options where, if you do upgrade to the Tesla vehicle and you participate with the advertising, but instead of taking the risk, like you said, \$40,000 we made last year, but the first year that we started was like \$180,000, \$187,000 in revenue. So, as revenue keeps increasing, the city doesn't want to take that risk and say, what if we have another \$40,000 year, we'll take on that risk and offer an up-front advertising discount, which would basically mean going from five Gem vehicles to five Teslas, you'd be paying about \$12,500 more per vehicle to upgrade to the Tesla; and then the other recommendation