

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-1
January 14, 2020
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Raul Valdes-Fauli
Vice Mayor Vince Lago
Commissioner Pat Keon
Commissioner Michael Mena
Commissioner Jorge Fors

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias
City Attorney, Miriam Ramos
City Clerk, Billy Urquia
Public Services Division Director, Brook Dannemiller

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item G-1 [10:12 a.m.]

An update from staff on the proposed notification process for tree removals in residential neighborhoods.

(Sponsored by Vice Mayor Lago)

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Item G-1, Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Lago: You should be happy. I have one item on the agenda.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: I know. I am happy. I'm very happy. I'm surprised.

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Agenda Item G-1 - Update from staff on the proposed notification process for tree removals in residential neighborhoods.

Vice Mayor Lago: I did it for you. I did it for you. If I could just get Brook Dannemiller up here.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: (INAUDIBLE) are good.

Vice Mayor Lago: Yeah. I just want -- if I could get Mr. Dannemiller up here one second. This will be brief. This -- the reason why I put this on the agenda is because I think that we -- and Brooke has already done a lot of the legwork this past week when he sent out a thorough email. I don't know if you copied my colleagues on it.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Yes.

Vice Mayor Lago: I can't remember. I imagine that you did. Where I think we can save ourselves as a community a lot of time, especially staff, if we just do a little bit of the legwork upfront before we get ourselves into a -- like a contentious issue, like we have right now, which is, for example, when somebody like myself is attached to a tree that they've seen there for 25, 30 years in their neighborhood, and for some reason or another, it's been deemed that it has to be removed.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: The best tree in Coral Gables was at the corner of South Greenway and Grenada in front of the tennis courts. It was a huge tree until one day it wasn't there anymore.

Vice Mayor Lago: Gone. So, what I was speaking to Brook and with staff -- because I've had several residents and we're always dealing with these residents in an effort to try to find some sort of common ground -- about a process of notifying the entire neighborhood. When I mean the entire neighborhood, I don't think that's been properly defined. It could be the block where the tree is on, the neighboring two blocks, basically explaining the reason why something is going to occur. And when that tree has to be cut down for one reason or another because a professional deems it so, and all the necessary information has been provided, that we remove that tree as quickly as possible, that it is not sitting there for three to four weeks or for two weeks, whatever

time that might be, where, again, people start asking a lot of questions. Why was it removed? And people get angry and we can replant the tree with something -- we can replant that area with a tree, with an appropriate tree, that again will show people that there was a reason why the tree was removed and that we've taken the necessary steps to protect the neighborhood, either the tree was rotten. If a hurricane would have come, a limb could have fallen on someone's property, their car, their house, or it could have hurt somebody who was walking by, whatever the case may be.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: In support of this, if you know that a significant tree -- and you know what significant trees are and you know where they are -- tell us about it so that we can disseminate it to the people. I mean, sometimes the answer has been, no, the tree was dying. We're all dying. We're all dying at some point. You know, we may live 70 more years or two more years.

Vice Mayor Lago: Who knows?

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: But -- who knows -- but the tree is dying. Everything is dying. I mean...

Vice Mayor Lago: I just think the frustration -- like the Mayor was saying, the frustration and then the reason why I'm doing this -- and I'll be done here, and we'll move on. I know we have a very long agenda today -- is because they take the brunt out -- not only in the Commission, but they take the brunt out on staff because when they see the tree being cut down, they're like, wait, I never got notice. Well, the tree was posted. Do you understand? So, we just -- and I think the measures that you're taking of putting a hanger on -- you don't have to -- 1,500 feet. I mean, again, just the neighboring property so the person doesn't get up, like the Mayor said, and this majestic tree is gone, and they're like, hey, why is it gone? So, I think you're -- we're taking the right steps moving forward, but I think that we have certain trees here in this community -- and I think it's a handful of trees. I think it's only a handful, where people are very, very attached, very attached. And we have to be -- we have to treat them with the respect like we always do, but I think we have to be as careful as possible with these individuals, and we have to make them understand why this tree may have to come down. Even though -- again, I'm not a tree expert, but

there has to be -- because when you knock down one of these trees to take it away, they look at the rings and they're like, hey, listen, the tree looks perfect. There's no rot in the interior, kind of like what happened three weeks ago in the tree that was cut down in my neighborhood, which is probably 70 years old, that tree. So, I just want to make sure that -- I want to make the process as easy as possible for the entire city and as transparent as possible for the residents.

City Manager Iglesias: We have a very quick presentation just to show what trees that's happening to and the fact that we will...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Good.

City Manager Iglesias: When that happens, expedite removal and expedite planting of a new tree, a large tree in the process. But if we can just look at the brief presentation that Brook has, I think it will just -- it will help maybe those watching to further understand why some trees have to come down and the reason why.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: We have about 39,000 trees in the city. And for public safety, the City manages the risk associated with those trees. So, if we're removing a tree, there is a safety or a risk to the public. We remove approximately 125 trees a year, so that's about less than a half a percent of our canopy a year, so that would take about 200 years to replace all the trees. We have five certified arborists on staff, so we have a lot of expertise looking at these trees. If we're removing a tree, there's a very valid reason for it.

Vice Mayor Lago: Can I ask you a quick question?

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Yes.

Vice Mayor Lago: Sorry to interrupt you. I apologize.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: No worries.

Vice Mayor Lago: This is to do with the arborist. Let's say you have one of these five residents that is super attached to a tree and they say, listen, I don't -- I disagree with you. Do you provide them with a secondary opinion, you know, from a second arborist that we can call in?

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: We have...

Vice Mayor Lago: Because we have that right now where we have a contentious situation where "don't cut my tree down and I'm going to tie myself to it." You know what do -- how do we, you know...

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: On occasion...

Vice Mayor Lago: Alleviate that situation?

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: The one you're speaking of is on Milan and El Rado. We'll bring in a consulting arborist and they almost always -- actually, in every case that we've done that, they've just reconfirmed what we already know because -- Jorge Rivera on our staff has over 30 years of experience. We have all...

Vice Mayor Lago: No, Javi's great. He's great. I've dealt with him...

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: So...

Vice Mayor Lago: A bunch of times. And we gave -- by the way, this Commission has given you all the necessary tools over the last two, three years to go as -- more in depth than any other city in Miami-Dade County. Correct me if I'm wrong.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Yeah. We have all -- we have RESISTOGRAPH. We have all the correct tools. So, we can tell -- we can drill into the tree, see if it's rotted, if it's mush inside. And we really -- we take it seriously when we remove a tree. And...

Vice Mayor Lago: I just want to make sure that when we have these moments where there's -- somebody is, you know, entrenched, that we can offer them a secondary opinion from a certified arborist.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: So, this -- actually, the first two photos here are from that actual very tree. The most common reasons that we remove a city tree is that the tree is dead, diseased or in decline, and that means it's in significant decline. And that's usually typically caused by fungus or a trunk rot issue, insect or pathogens or struck by lightning. We have a lot of lightning strikes here in Coral Gables. So, you can see here on the left that metal probe is about three feet long and it's over two feet stuck into the rotten cavity of the trunk. And then at the base of the trunk, you see kind of a semicircle-shaped fungal conk. That's the fruiting body of the fungus. So, when you see that on a tree that means that it's already rotten inside and that the fungus is actually fruiting and that's on the outside. It's not the fungus coming from the outside in; it's going from the inside out. And then on the far right, that's a lightning strike where you can see it actually blew up the asphalt and the concrete due to the electricity. The second is the structural integrity of the tree is compromised. That's simply cracks, cavities and rot. That's often caused by wind damage, root damage, struck by a vehicle or other mechanical damage or severe leaning. And then there's a few examples there of a tree on the left or in significant decline, a large cavity where you can actually see light going through -- all the way through the tree. And then on the far right, another cavity that's a little bit older that has begun to rot. We also -- if a tree's an invasive species, the County has a list of exotic invasives that whenever we can, we try to remove. That includes Schefflera, which is the umbrella tree which is on the far left. The middle is Australian pines, and on the far right is Brazilian pepper.

Vice Mayor Lago: I don't think you get much resistance from residents on that issue.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: No.

Vice Mayor Lago: I think it's more of the oak trees and the ones that have the staining issue, which you're...

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Black olive...

Vice Mayor Lago: The black olives.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: And mahoganies are typically...

Vice Mayor Lago: I think those are the ones that we really get the most resistance from.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: But those are the ones when we see them, we try to remove those as quickly as possible. We are also in the process of slowly removing all the ficus benjaminas that are in poor condition. We have about 160, 170 of them left in the city. They have shallow and weak roots on our coral rock. They tend to uplift in storms. They have a big canopy and small weak roots, and they also are very susceptible to a trunk rot called ganoderma.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: With the ficus -- and you can't do this everywhere, but sometimes letting the roots set in the ground would be a solution to that.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Yeah. So, the other ficus species, the native ones, the banyans, they set down the aerial roots pretty readily and that helps stabilize the trees.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: But you're not cutting those, right?

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Those we're leaving; those we keep. This is one specific species, which is the ficus benjamina. Basically, it's your ficus hedge that's been, you know, has grown way out of scale. And so it's just not -- if we get deeper soils, then -- or if they're in a big -- there's one on Riviera golf course that actually has had the ability to drop down those aerial roots and that one is quite stable.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: No, the ones on Alhambra Circle, close to LeJeune, the ones in the golf course.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Those -- most of those are not ficus benjamina. They're the native species or banyans.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Right.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Quickly, you all received this. This was the process. Basically, a tree is identified as hazardous by City staff. It's determined that it needs to be removed. A removal permit is generated. It's printed in pink, and it's posted in a plastic sleeve on the tree on the street side so as many people can see it as possible. We have door hangers, and we go and put door hangers on the adjacent property. So, in North Gables, that's usually six to eight properties. Further south where the properties are larger, it's probably more like four or five, just kind of whatever the general area that the staff feels is kind of immediately impacted. Try to leave the permits up for at least two weeks. If it's a bigger tree or a more significant tree, we'll sometimes put two permits on it and leave it up longer and then try to notify -- send an email to the City Manager saying, hey, FYI, this tree is going to be removed and -- because it's a big production, so we usually have to coordinate it and let everyone know that we're removing it. And then once the tree's removed, the stump is removed to the swale and the grass area is repaired. And if appropriate, we replace the tree in the same location, either the same species, or if it's a large tree, sometimes put two trees back, or if there were power lines or something, we'll shift it and plant an appropriate species for the location. If a tree poses an immediate life safety hazard

or is actively failing, we'll remove it immediately and we'll just do a permit after the fact. So, we're not going to wait two weeks if a tree is actively falling and poses a life safety hazard. We have -- in our TreeKeeper software, which is the GIS-based software we have to track all of our maintenance on the trees, we have 38,623 trees in it currently. Species diversity. We try -- we're trying to vary our species diversity. We don't want all oaks, all black olives, all mahogany. So, as part of the tree succession project, our post Irma plantings and our plantings currently going on in North Ponce area, we're trying to diversify our tree species because you want a variety of ages and a variety of species for a healthy urban forest. We also have our contact info. Our email is trees@coralgables.com and our phone number is 305-722-TREE, so we try to make it as easy as possible if anybody has any tree questions. And then we currently have about 18 trees that are posted out there in the field right now. And we sent those to you guys. You know, sometimes it's very, very obvious. I have all these. I don't -- we don't need to go through all of them, but lightning strikes, dead trees, poor condition, dead trees, dead palms. There's more dead palms. So, this is all the documentation we have for each one. That was a lightning strike where all the leaves are actively falling in the matter of like a day all those leaves go. Another lightning strike. This one just went to severe decline maybe. That was lightning. You can see on the base where the lightning comes out and blows the bark off. Dead tree, another dead tree, more dead trees. So, and this is the arborist report, where we had a consulting arborist come in. This tree actually lost a branch, fell onto private property and damaged a fence a couple of years ago, and now the tree is in decline and has a significant amount of rot. There's the fungal conks at the base of the trunk. They most likely entered through because of root damage. Here's the RESISTOGRAPH, where we drill it and it has the -- shows The resistance. It's kind of sideways here, but if you look at the far right, you can see how the resistance goes up. That means that it hit dense wood and it comes back down. So, it's really rotted where the surface and then it gets a little denser. So, you can see in that tree that it's very rotten on the inside. And there's some structural damage included bark where this tree has rot on the left and the tree had split apart and catastrophically fell. And there's another tree where you can see the horizontal crack. The cracks are really, really dangerous because that means the tree can fail even on a sunny day with no wind. Another dead tree. So, these are the ones that are currently posted. This coconut just has a severe wound at the bottom

and it has rot at the bot -- so even though it's green, it's so structurally unsound at the base that the whole palm could fail. So, those are the ones that we currently have.

Vice Mayor Lago: In conclusion...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Very good...

Vice Mayor Lago: I wanted to say thank you for implementing this new outreach campaign.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Very, very good.

Vice Mayor Lago: I think it's going to pay dividends. It's going to save, you know, staff and yourself time. And it's just going to always put us in a more transparent footing. So, I think that, moving forward, I appreciate that.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: And if anyone has any other additional -- we keep adding. We keep making it...

City Manager Iglesias: Oh, I just want to say something. Vice Mayor, we have -- just like a national forest is a working forest, we have a working urban canopy that we've got to maintain from a safety perspective, and we're looking at that like 200-year turnaround period and that's how we're structuring it. But we want to make sure that people know...

Vice Mayor Lago: You and I...

City Manager Iglesias: Exactly what we're doing.

Vice Mayor Lago: You and I and every single person in this Commission understand that and a lot of people in this room do. But when somebody is enamored with a tree that's been in their

front yard and you're going to cut it down, it's sometimes -- they may be surgeon, a lawyer, or they may be an accountant, or maybe an engineer, they -- but they're not an expert when it comes to trees. So, that person, the least that we can do -- and I think that this is a big step in the right direction -- is just notify them so that they can have an in depth conversation and not be woken up in -- you know, at 8 o'clock in the morning or 9 o'clock in the morning, like the Mayor said, hey, where did my tree go? It's not that...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Will you replace...

Vice Mayor Lago: It doesn't happen that quickly.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: That tree with two trees or -- the one I'm talking about.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: The one on Grenada and South Greenway?

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Yeah.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: So, on the east side, we're planting three poincianas. We found yellow poincianas because we wanted to kind of vary it up because we have a lot of red poincianas on there, so that'll -- they'll grow quickly and...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Okay.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: They're good for the golf course because you can grow grass on it. On the west side, we're doing two...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: On the east side.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Bridalveil trees. So, on the east side is three poincianas, and on the west side we're going to do two Bridalveils, so those will be planted sometime within the next month or so.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: That was it.

Vice Mayor Lago: And I think that we also need to be careful -- and we had this discussion probably a year ago -- with what happened in Ferdinand so that never happens again, where we cut down four trees in a row and basically now there's a giant gaping hole in the canopy. And then we replaced those trees with very small trees. We have to -- at that moment, I think we need to use just a little bit better judgment. Speak to the Manager and say, okay, what does the budget allow? Okay, maybe we put one big tree and we put two smaller trees.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: And...

Vice Mayor Lago: Because I've heard it from the residents on Ferdinand saying, listen, I know the trees were rotted; we all knew that they were in bad shape, but now, you know, we can't escape the sun.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Yeah, and that was a unique situation where the homeowner was putting solar panels on...

Vice Mayor Lago: Yeah, I know.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: And they didn't want the bigger trees because they wanted...

Vice Mayor Lago: The bigger trees -- the little trees are going to become bigger trees anyways.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Understood.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you very much, Brook. Very, very good presentation. I congratulate you and thank you for everything you're doing.

Public Services Division Director Dannemiller: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Vice Mayor Lago: Thank you, Brook.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you.

Vice Mayor Lago: I appreciate it. Thank you.