

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-1
September 28, 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

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

Assistant City Manager, Ed Santamaria

City Attorney, Miriam Ramos

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Planning and Zoning Director, Ramon Trias

Public Speaker(s)

Joe Gimenez

Agenda Item G-1 [10:18 a.m.]

Discussion regarding low-density PAD bonus in Central Business District core, in properties of a certain size.

(Sponsored by Commissioner Anderson)

(Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: Moving on to G-1 -- because we have a 10:30 times certain -- I want to talk about G-1 first. Commissioner Anderson, would you like to discuss this item as you and I are both sponsoring this item?

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Agenda Item G-1 - Discussion regarding low-density PAD bonus in Central Business District core, in properties of a certain size.

Commissioner Anderson: Yes, our City has a special quality, and that is we can attract folks that looking for high-end products. Our Central Business District -- and I'm going to ask staff to bring up a couple sections of our Code -- allows -- there's no density limitation in our Central Business District. And that is the outline of our Central Business District. And the Code provisions I'm referring to are 2-401. B-1 says there shall be no density limitation in the Central Business District, and it also was repeated in Sections 2-200 and in our Future Land Use Element Map under commercial low-rise and mid-rise and high-rise intensity, that there is no density or population density for the limit for these types of structures. Because we have the ability to attract high-end products where people -- if you have been by some of the products lately -- want a higher ceiling limitation. We can incentivize low-rise -- low density by providing an incentive for people to build that. Our typical method is by allowing a little more height, and there are people out here that are -- developers out here that are interested in having a little more height, 15 feet more height to be exact, to bring the density down to 100 units per acre, as opposed to the unlimited amount, which could conceivably reach up to 300 units per acre. It's a substantial reduction in the density that could potentially be built in our Central Business District, and yet bring in an extremely high-quality product to the core of our City. I'm only suggesting this be done for the core. You saw the map earlier. I did a very cryptic highlighted section of the concept. We're going to need some people much brighter than me defining what the core would be to determine how it would be still within Merrick's vision that we start off with the low rise and then increasingly get up to the higher rise, the 15 additional feet. I don't feel anybody will even see, but we'll reap tremendous benefit in a way of less impactful traffic in our central business core and some high-quality residential tenants in that area. So, Mayor do you have any additional thoughts and comments?

Mayor Lago: No, what -- listen, first off, thank you for framing it so well. I think this is an opportunity to have a discussion because we're talking about congestion, and I didn't plan it accordingly that way by the way, discussing the issue of Sunset, but we're talking about congestion. We're talking about, you know, quality of life issues. So, you're talking about a developer or an area that can build, let's say, a significant amount of units as of right. It puts a strain on our public

amenities. It puts a strain on our infrastructure. Obviously, our streets are at capacity in certain areas as a result of poor infrastructure planning, for example, in the TPO, which I serve on the TPO, and I say it shamefully. Our infrastructure is sub-par in comparison to other major municipalities throughout the United States, but we're working on it. Hopefully, we'll be able to deliver something this century. So, my point is, the reason why I wanted to bring this up on the Commission, and I was happy that Commissioner Anderson and I were able to collaborate on this, was that we need to find different answers and we need to be cognizant of the fact that potentially maybe we can -- and I was having this conversation today with Mr. Pardo when I met with him to talk about the Mediterranean bonus discussion, the Blue Ribbon Committee this morning at 8, was that there has to be a little bit of a give and take. Not I give you a finger and you take my arm. But there has to be a little bit of give and take and wiggle room to be able to get green space. There has to be a little -- there has to be, you know, a beautiful amenity as a park in the downtown. There has to be a little give and take to reduce density, to reduce the intensity on a project, but still produce an exceptional designed building, an exceptional development, which complements the City standards. So, that's the reason we have this discussion. I wanted to put it out there for my colleagues to have a discussion with staff, have a discussion with their colleagues to see what they think is an opportunity. But I think that this is something that we need to really address. If a developer is going to come and say, I'm willing to slash -- not ask -- because developers come, "I want more units." I'm willing to slash my development rights to produce a certain unit type, and I'm willing to lower my density by 50 percent and potentially give a green space or potentially reduce my density. What are the trade-offs that we have to give? I'll be very clear; I've always said it. I am not against 5 percent, 10 percent increase in height to receive an amenity, which will be in our downtown forever, which would be an amenity that increases green space, that increases the quality of life of the residents and the business community here. So, this is just a discussion, and I wanted to commend my colleague, Commissioner Anderson, for working on this also, and I think that there's a real opportunity to deliver something world class. If not, we just go setback to setback and we just drop a building as prescribed by the Code. And I think that we are -- I think we're a more sophisticated community than just that.

Commissioner Anderson: Alright. Just want to add one last thing. I did -- on Friday, I did have what I call my pre-agenda residents meeting, and for the folks that were present, I gave them this concept with this general poorly highlighted map to get across the idea that we're not going to go up to Le Jeune Road. We're not going up to Ponce. We're not going up against any residential area, that this is a step-down technique. Because the south border of this on Almeria is still the south area that still looks like a Central Business District, but that is the south border. And I did get a good reception to this concept because people are interested in reducing the density so that our central business core does remain inviting for people to come into. So, I pass it to you all for additional comments.

Commissioner Fors: I think it's a good idea to explore. I'd like to see what it looks like when we actually put pen to paper and talk about, you know, when we say slash the density, what does slash mean? How much are we prepared to give in return from -- for that slash in density and what that slash is really? But other than that, I think it's something definitely that is worth exploring. I think like the Mayor suggested, at the end of the day, a slight increase in height really isn't something that people notice from the pedestrian standpoint. And if it can result in these higher-end larger unit, higher level residences that don't put a strain on our Public Works, traffic, and amenities, definitely worth exploring.

Mayor Lago: And by the way, if I may add one thing also, we're not talking about increasing floors. So, this would just be providing a better amenity in regards to -- and we've discussed this before because this came -- I don't know if anybody was here, and I don't know if Commissioner Mena was here, but this came to us before in the industrial area in regards to the project that never came to fruition, which was the Columbo building, and we discussed that also. They didn't want additional floors. What they wanted was just a little taller ceilings, which would be a better product for their project. But this would -- this legislation would codify that discussion that we had a few years ago.

Commissioner Menendez: I think it's a wonderful idea. I think it opens opportunities for quality work in the -- in our urban core, and I actually like the idea perhaps of less units, larger units, so families can move in, you know, just not the single or the young couple, but you know, families. And nowadays, you know, you have the grandparents living with families, you know, that's happening more and more each day. And it'd be nice if they could be walking distance to all the things that our City offers on Miracle Mile and that area. So, I, you know, applaud the two of you for bringing this idea. It's innovative, and I definitely would like to see it at some point. Obviously, it needs to be fleshed out, but come back to the Commission so we can take action on it when it's ready. But I think it's -- we're going down the right direction. I think it's an improvement going forward.

Commissioner Anderson: Yeah. And Mayor, do we have any members of the public who would like to speak?

Mayor Lago: You want to speak?

City Clerk Urquia: No one.

Joe Gimenez: I'm sorry, Mr. Clerk. I didn't sign up. I'm just taking the opportunity. Joe Gimenez, Codina Partners, 2020 Salzedo Street. Mr. Mayor, Commissioner Anderson, thank you for bringing this up. And I know that we've had conversations about it. And to put a less abstract face to this, we do have a project that we would like to propose to the City. This is a rule that we would happily take advantage of. And our numbers tell us that on the piece of property that we have with a normal unit distribution and a 985 square foot average apartment, we could do 313 units. Our proposal would be 175 or 100 to the acre -- it's a 1.7-acre lot -- and the smallest unit would be 1,300 square feet. Those aren't finalized. The largest would be about 10,000. So, we are looking at a product that does require high ceilings. We've designed it at 190.5. The geometry of the architecture simply doesn't work for the product. We didn't add one single unit when we designed it to 205. There is a certain amount of FAR that any developer would have to get to make a project

financially feasible, but from an impact perspective, and the way that every city and the county charges impact is per dwelling unit. And we think that a product like this would change the meaning of luxury, and it would be a rental and people are looking to get out of homes. And Gables Estates and the Golden Triangle and North Gables everywhere, and there'd be something for everybody in this building to stay in Coral Gables, to not get into a condo lifestyle, which sometimes grows less attractive, but to rent, take that -- a professionally managed building that feels more like a home. And in order to do that product -- I've lived in one of our buildings, I've lived in one of our rentals. It was very nice, but it is not -- it is an apartment, as you said, Commissioner. This would feel more like a home, and that's what we would ask for this policy to reflect. And we have no problem reducing our density by well over half, and I don't like to necessarily stand up here and say as of right because these are conditional uses, but I think we all know what we mean when we say that. And I would appreciate your consideration of this and know that there is a project out there that intends to be what this is striving for, and that is a quality high-end product.

Commissioner Fors: Can I ask you a question now that I have you here?

Mr. Gimenez: Sure.

Commissioner Fors: I think I read about the project you're talking about over a year ago in the Miami Herald. And was there minimum lease terms of five years? Is that still the plan?

Mr. Gimenez: That's not for -- there's two types of product in the building. They're all high-end finishes, higher than anything that's out there right now. But the top -- I want to say six to seven floors -- are what they call the sky homes. If you sign a longer-term lease, you would even have some design input, which you don't get in a rental. I mean, there's certain things. A wet wall is a wet wall, so the bathrooms are where the bathrooms are, the kitchen is where the kitchen is, but finishes, things like that, what you get if you buy in a new construction condo, you can pick your tile, you can pick your backsplash, certain fixtures, things like that. And that would be available

with a long-term lease, so if you wanted to sign something longer for that, and if you wanted to take a whole floor and your apartment's 12,000 square feet, you can't do it, but you know, if somebody can, they do look for those -- for that level of design input, and we're trying to cater to that as well.

Commissioner Fors: I was just curious.

Mr. Gimenez: Yeah.

Commissioner Fors: Thank you.

Mr. Gimenez: But it's just -- it's a spin on normal rental practices.

Mayor Lago: Well, I appreciate you being here. Thank you for....

Mr. Gimenez: Thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: Obviously putting your comments on the record. And as we discussed, I look forward to not only potentially seeing this project come online after we've discussed which route we're headed, but I also want to see a little bit of green space added to the project, and I know that we're working on that. That's important. So, we've...

Commissioner Anderson: Yeah, we've had that discussion too.

Mayor Lago: Yes, we have. We have, and there's a great opportunity that I will be bringing to Commission for your consideration if we can find a suitable partnership that we're working on. It has nothing to do with developer. The developer is working as hard as possible to give us what I think is appropriate, but we're trying to see how we can figure this out. Moving on, we have a 10:30 time certain.

City Attorney Ramos: Mayor, if I may, on this item. I think staff is looking for direction on the drafting of an ordinance to bring back and what parameters the Commission wants to see.

Mayor Lago: Well, I think it's pretty clear. Everyone on the Commission spoke and they thought it was potentially a good idea, and I think that staff should start reviewing this process and seeing -- outlining the benefits and bringing it back before Commission.

Commissioner Fors: Of incentivizing lower density, and I would encourage staff that have -- I'm sure there's more than one way to skin the cat. If there's different ways to do it, bring it both or all three to us.

City Manager Iglesias: We will look at the density issue and the height issue. We will also look at the core issue, Commissioner Anderson that...

Commissioner Anderson: Right.

City Manager Iglesias: You were discussing as to what is the appropriate core so there is a -- so it's not in the perimeter. And with the Commission's approval, we will bring this back and Planning will be bringing back what we feel is appropriate. I know there's a density issue. Unlimited density is truly not unlimited because it's governed by height and parking. However, the density of 175 versus 313 is a substantial, substantial reduction in density and traffic, impact fees, et cetera, impacts on that area. So, we'll be -- Planning will be bringing that back and we will certainly look at it as the Commission stated.

Commissioner Anderson: Yeah, I might suggest that even the Blue Ribbon Committee might help us with a definition of what the core should be and where to draw the line.

City Manager Iglesias: I do think that Planning has a good grasp on that as far as that core area, and we will be bringing that back to you. The Blue Ribbon Committee is really working -- we will have one final meeting that we're trying to wrap up everything for that, so hopefully we can do that. So -- but I do think Planning can do a very good job on this and looking at that density to height, which really is needed for the larger units, and probably will not be noticeable. When you look up, you see 190 versus 15 feet more, I don't think -- but...

Mayor Lago: 14 -- 14 feet and a half, I think.

City Manager Iglesias: 14 and a half feet. It's actually 190.5 versus 215.

City Attorney Ramos: Does the Commission want this to go to Planning and Zoning first...

Mayor Lago: Yes.

City Attorney Ramos: Or to first reading first?

Mayor Lago: No. I would like it for it to go to Planning and Zoning first. I'd like it for it to follow -- go ahead, Mr. Trias.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: thank you. As Commissioner Anderson has explained, the comp plan has to be amended also, so it's a slightly longer period of the process, just so you're aware of that.

Mayor Lago: That's perfectly fine. When you say longer, when you say longer, it's (INAUDIBLE)...

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: It has to be reviewed by the state between first reading and second reading...

Mayor Lago: That's fine.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: Because it's a text change to the Code.

Mayor Lago: I want there to be...

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: There are multiple changes.

Mayor Lago: I want there to be...

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: Yeah.

Mayor Lago: I want to follow the necessary protocols that are in place.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: I would advise you to follow...

Mayor Lago: I want there to be...

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: Yeah, the process.

Mayor Lago: Sufficient community input as required, like we do at all meetings, so everybody can speak about it, and I want people to understand the purpose of why this legislation is being considered. That's it, very simple. I want it to be as transparent as required, just like we're having a discussion here. We're not -- we're having a discussion. We're bringing this up with an understanding of what are the positive benefits and I need to understand what are the negatives. I don't see many negatives except for the additional 14 feet, but I want to be very, very clear, so people understand in this community that we had this discussion in the, you know, Sunshine.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: So, I see three amendments to the comp plan: the height from 190 to something else, 205; FAR perhaps also would have to be amended in the comp plan; and then the map. If you do want to have a smaller area in the CBD, that has to be amended in the comp plan.

Mayor Lago: But I don't want it -- I want it...

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: That's the way I understand it.

Mayor Lago: I want to be very careful that we're not like spot zoning just for properties that if someone is going to engage in this legislation or in this Code change, I want to make sure that they're meeting the stringent requirements because they're going to lose a lot of units. It's going to be significant. If they want that additional 14 feet or 15 feet of height.

City Attorney Ramos: So, Mayor, if I may.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: I think the...

City Attorney Ramos: There's two kinds of different things going on here. There's an ordinance of general application...

Mayor Lago: Of course.

City Attorney Ramos: Which is this PAD bonus ordinance.

Mayor Lago: Of course.

City Attorney Ramos: Which can apply to any project that wants to use it. And then there are...

Mayor Lago: It can't apply to any project because...

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: Within the area.

City Attorney Ramos: Assuming that they meet the requirements.

Mayor Lago: So, we got to be very, very, very careful the words that we use.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: If they meet the requirements of area and location.

City Attorney Ramos: Right, so if anyone in the core of the CBD, however we define that...

Mayor Lago: There you go.

City Attorney Ramos: That has 1.5...

Mayor Lago: There you go. That's the key.

City Attorney Ramos: Acres...

Mayor Lago: So, it's not anybody. It's the core in the CBD, so you see how the circle keeps tightening and tightening and tightening. I want to be very, very careful because we want to -- we don't want to use any words here that could confuse anybody here.

City Attorney Ramos: And that has the right amount of land could potentially use it. So, I wanted to make that statement in response to the spot zoning comment.

Mayor Lago: Yeah.

City Attorney Ramos: Separately, the project that Mr. Gimenez was speaking about will need -- in order to go forward -- several amendments; a comp plan change, site specific zoning potentially, and others. Does the Commission envision the general application ordinance coming first and then the things specific to this project or taking them all at the same time?

Mayor Lago: Again, I only see benefits in this legislation, so to me, unless you educate me of a drawback of why we shouldn't vote for this...

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: I don't see...

Mayor Lago: Or why we shouldn't consider this...

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: Right.

Mayor Lago: I don't have a problem moving and start working on this now and go through the process. Go through the process moving forward.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: I think you're looking for quality and quality...

Mayor Lago: I am.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: Needs transparency.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: If you don't have transparency, then it's impossible to...

Mayor Lago: Exactly.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: Expect quality. So, I think if we -- we can propose something to you. I just want to advise you that it includes comp plan amendments and also the Zoning Code amendment that the attorney has explained.

Mayor Lago: I have no issues with that.

Commissioner Anderson: Right, right.

Commissioner Menendez: I just want to comment. And I agree; I echo the statements. And Commissioner Anderson, I think, mentioned that at her meeting the other day, there was initial support or interest. And I get the feeling by some of the folks in the community, there's interest there on moving forward to make the best possible quality projects we can have for the City, maybe the gold standard that other cities pick up after they see what we're able to accomplish. I do -- would like to see it fleshed out before it comes back to us and something that goes back to earlier statements by the Mayor and our colleagues is I want to get out in front of this in the community, because as you know, once we start going down that road, sometimes it gets derailed. No fault of ours; no fault of our residents, but every once in a while, someone wants to take things their way. And so, I would like the information to go out to community as to broad picture what we're trying to accomplish, what direction we're headed and why we're doing it. So, the earlier we can get out in front as to why we're going down this road, the less chance there's misinformation circulating. Because if it's good for the community, it's good for the community, but we need to make sure that no one sort of hijacks what's good for the community.

City Manager Iglesias: And I think it's -- I think the Commission's been very clear what we want is -- what we're looking at is a lower -- a substantial lower density requirement for increased height for the larger units. We want to establish the central core in the Central Business District where this would apply. And we want to establish certain land size that -- and we need to look at that to make it effective, and Planning can certainly do that. And if a developer wishes to go concurrently with that, that's up to them.

Commissioner Fors: And I...

Commissioner Menendez: And the thing is we -- and I apologize, Commissioner Fors. We understand that, and the folks here understand that, but I think we have close to 50,000 residents. We need to make sure they understand it early in the process, so that we're allowed to go down that road down through that process, and everybody understands why we're taking that road. We understand that we need to get the message out clear to the community so that their concerns are brought down, and we're allowed to work the way we should be able to work.

City Manager Iglesias: And I understand what the Commission is trying to do. It's trying to lower the impact by having less density with a little bit of height, and that is the idea. Less impact, less impact on the area overall.

Commissioner Fors: And what piques my interest about this idea is especially the word "substantial" decrease in density. That's what really gets me interested in taking a closer look at this, or you can use the word substantial or a slash in density, like the Mayor said. I think it's too soon to say whether we would consider the other amendments that would be required for any project that takes advantage of this ordinance right away. I think that we should probably hear the ideas from Planning and Zoning at the next meeting, you know, how we're going to approach this, and then at that point, we'd make a decision of what we're going to do at the same time, or not at the same time in order to see what we're looking at here.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: The next step of the process is next Tuesday is scheduled for DRC, the project -- the specific project. At that point, we may be able to have some basic discussion also for you to...

City Manager Iglesias: And let me just say that we are not looking at an FAR issue. We will not be looking at -- the FAR will be staying the same. What we are looking at is basically a height -- a small height increase for lesser impact.

Commissioner Fors: Yeah, for bigger units.

City Manager Iglesias: That's what we're trying to do.

Commissioner Fors: Less people coming in and out of it, less cars, less water, less everything. I get it.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: The number of stories.

Commissioner Fors: Less 911 calls; I get it.

Planning and Zoning Director Trias: Just for transparency sake, the number of stories that the Zoning Code has right now, 16 and they're requesting 18. So, we need to think about that too.

Mayor Lago: Yeah, okay.

City Manager Iglesias: Well, we need to look at that because this will be a PAD, so we need to look at...

Mayor Lago: Yes.

City Manager Iglesias: The overall benefits of the legislation.

Mayor Lago: Okay, so let's move forward. We've got a time certain item at 10:30. Thank you.