

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting  
Agenda Item C – Public Comment  
October 10, 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**

**Public Speaker(s)**

**Maria Cruz  
Billy Corben  
Jorge Espinosa  
Jackson Rip Holmes  
Kayla Riera-Gomez  
Christina Villamil  
Jodi Budin  
Linda Dann  
Karen Shane  
Caroline Miller  
Alberto Alvarez**

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Agenda Item C [10:28 a.m.]  
Public Comments

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk, we'll move forward on the agenda to the Public Comment. Thank you.

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City Clerk Urquia: Good morning, Mr. Mayor, we have several speakers today for public comments. The first speaker is Maria Cruz.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Cruz, good morning. The floor is yours.

Ms. Cruz: Good morning. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road, a resident of the City Beautiful since 1976. Somethings need to be said, and as you know, I never shy from saying what I think needs to be said. So here we go. For a long time, you, Mr. Mayor, used to tell us that you did not do business within city limits. What has happened? Now you brag about all the business your company does in this city. Yes, you say, my company. You do not say a company, you don't say somebody's company, you say my company. Several times at the ribbon-cutting, you have mentioned your company as the one doing the work. Are those paid ads? Frankly, should you be mixing official city business, like ribbon-cutting, as the Mayor of this city and your private business. I have a problem with that. I think that when you're acting as the Mayor of the City of Coral Gables, you should talk about the City of Coral Gables and not about your private business. Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is Billy Corben.

Mr. Corben: Thank you, Clerk. Good morning, Commissioners, Billy Corben, P.O. Box 403004, Miami Beach, 33140. I'm here to speak on annexation to respond to the Mayor's defamatory lies and to ask the Commission to take action. At the recent Sunshine meeting, I spoke out against the High Pines/Ponce Davis annexation boondoggle that nobody wants, except for a small handful of insider real estate hustlers, like the Mayor here, who gleefully does business in the city, as the young lady just said, ignoring myriad conflicts of interest, and of course ethics laws. The Mayor didn't like what I had to say, so he responded in the way that all bullies respond. He, with lies, threats, and intimidation, telling Telemundo that I'm paid by firefighters. I didn't know that was a thing, and it is in fact not a thing, because it is a comical science-fiction work of art that the Mayor seems to have invented out of whole cloth, and I'll prove it. I will take a lie-detector test, a polygraph on my podcast, Because Miami, to prove that I'm not paid by anyone, as long as the Mayor agrees to come on the podcast as well and take a polygraph to answer questions about your dealings with your real estate partner Bill Riley, his co-conspirator and now co-defendant Alex Diaz de la Portilla, who is also your political consultant, your real estate client, disgraced developer Richi Kapor and any other ways in which you exploit your public office for private profit. I challenge you to take that lie-detector test with me, live on my podcast, because that's the thing when it comes to politicians like the Mayor, every accusation is a confession. Its impossible for paid-to-play people to fathom that anyone will say and do things just because it's the right thing to do for our community, and not because we're being paid, but

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people like the Mayor who only act in their own self-interest cannot understand such a concept; and its no wonder that Lago is losing it and lashing out. He's left in the lurch. Everyone around him, his friends, political allies, and business partners are under investigation or under arrest for crimes like bribery, money laundering, fraud in illegal campaign contributions. They probably have enough dirt to make him afraid that there're singing in surround sound to law enforcement right now. Now we expect this from the City of Miami. This is the MO of the Mayor's BFF, Francis Suarez, of Commissioner Joe Carollo and Lago's political pal Alex Diaz de la Portilla, but that incestuous cesspool of Miami corruption cancer has metastasized to the City Beautiful via Vince Lago. Commissioners, I respectfully request that you one, put a stop to the absurd annexation scheme; and two, that you formerly ask the FBI, FDLE and SEC to investigate the City of Coral Gables and its officials to stop the spread of corruption that victimizes your constituents. Mayor, you can sell your soul, but please stop selling out your city. Coral Gables deserves better. Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Jorge Espinosa.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Cohen, you may step down now. Out of respect...

Mr. Corben: What did you call me? What did you call me?

Mayor Lago: I called you Mr. Cohen, out of respect.

Mr. Corben: Why don't you just say Jew. Isn't it appropriate that you're sitting under the portrait of a noted antisemite and racist.

Mayor Lago: What I said was, out of respect for the residents, I will not respond. We'll address this later in court. I will be formerly bringing you in, in regard to a lawsuit and we'll address that in the future. But out of respect for the residents, I will not allow you to make this into a circus like you make everything else into a circus. I hope you have a wonderful day. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Corben: You're the Ring Master, sir.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Jorge Espinosa.

Mr. Espinosa: Well, it's certainly very hard to follow that, but I'm going to try to. I am here also to speak of the annexation.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Espinosa, if you don't mind, bring up the mic. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Espinosa: First of all, I wanted to thank Commissioner Fernandez for your very insightful questions at the last Commission meeting. We say it on Zoom, and we really appreciated the fact that you got to the crux of important issues. You asked for answers and that's all we can ask of a public official. I remember when I sent to the University of Miami, for many years I wanted to live in Coral Gables. I love the city. I think it's a very nice city. I ended up living in High Pines; and High Pines and Coral Gables have become very different over the last 20 years. How? – because of the wild and rampant development in Coral Gables that has changed a lot of the character of the city. And maybe it's fine for Coral Gables. Coral Gables is still a wonderful place, with a wonderful street scene, a wonderful commercial environment, but it's not High Pines. What we bought into in High Pines is a different type of community, and our concern when we see annexation, especially the way that it was done here with a single vote yes ballots sent to everybody and without even consulting the citizens of Coral Gables to get their input, makes us wonder whether there isn't going to be rampant commercialization and business development along the margins of our neighborhood if this annexation goes through. There's a big consensus in our community that we don't want annexation and we proved this three years ago, and here we are all over again going through the whole annexation process. And perhaps it's not this Commission that can put a stop to so many frequent annexation efforts, maybe we can set some more time between annexation efforts and for that, maybe we need to go to the County Commission. But I wanted you to know that it's a concern for us. And finally, it is possible that the city, by investing enough money and making enough promises, could end up annexing our community, but I want you guys to think of something. We're very politically active. We're very active voters, and if we are driven into an annexation that most of us do not want, the efforts we currently put to not doing annexation, we will be putting out of office those people that annex us improperly. Thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: Sir, thank you for being here, as always. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Jackson Holmes.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Holmes, the floor is yours.

Mr. Holmes: Thanks. I'm sure my comments will be very tame by comparison. I've been absent for a while, so I want to touch on four points. Number one, the great news, what is  
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the great newsworthy of our City Manager is, we can sue the people causing climate change. The State of California, with U.S. Supreme Court approval is now suing Exxon, suing Chevron, suing Mobile and the U.S. Supreme Court denied....petition from Bill Oil, so we – I just mentioned to City Attorney Suarez, I submit, we should sue the people trying to drown us. That is to say, climate change is causing sea level rise and sea level rise is predicted to drown Miami Beach and so on. I'm going to move on, because I have some other points to cover. My greatest fear – I'm not happy with the recent State Legislative Governor DeSantis laws that were passed. One of them is essentially, you can't sue a developer. If you sue a developer and lose you have to pay their attorney fees and even though if you win, they don't have to pay yours. So, Governor DeSantis and the Legislature are going to make it impossible for retail. Why? – because you're going to have street closures all up and down everywhere throughout the state. What am I talking about. If we remember streetscape, which City Manager Iglesias helped pull us out of, but by the time you got on board it was too late. My store, here on Miracle Mile, and if you remember Giralda Restaurant Row, the fellow went bankrupt. My own tenant had to sell, because we were closed for ten months, and he lost \$2 or \$300,000. When you have a street closure, think if you had to, if you wanted to open your own store, probably that's passed through a lot of people's minds, maybe I'd like to open a restaurant, a clothing store, this or that, well, one thing you don't need is a street closure because you not only lost your profits, you may go into bankruptcy. It happened to my own tenant. So, what I ask of you is to keep these things in mind. In fact, there's an Achillies heel; I've had to research this intensely. If you can believe this, I'll brag to you for a second. I've been coordinating a little bit with Laura Lumer of President Trump. They say, and this is going to get me in hot water, but its less hot water than what I'm already in, President Trump is saying that DeSantis bribed the Speaker of the House to get the law changed for "resign to run" and that is a criminal bribe. He's not invulnerable. Did I run out of time?

Mayor Lago: Bring it in for a landing, if you may, sir. Yes.

Mr. Holmes: Okay. I have to speak up on behalf of my wife. We're facing a communist Peru. I think that the administration can do a better job. For instance, why is this not the perfect time to liberate Cuba. We have five communist countries now in South America. We're spending a lot of money on Ukraine, which is good, but I submit that our own hemisphere is more important to us than Ukraine and yet we're spending – well I could go on. I'm going to leave it there. Thank you for listening.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Kayla Riera-Gomez.  
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Mayor Lago: Ms. Gomez, good morning. The floor is yours.

Ms. Gomez: Good morning Mr. Mayor, members of the Commission. Thank you so much for allowing me to speak today. I live at 4321 S.W. 16 Street in Little Gables. I'm here in support of annexation. I want to thank the Commission for initiating this process and for giving the residents a path through the petition to re-engage with our neighbors to have these conversations. There have been several in the community. We even had a neighborhood picnic where we could all share our comments. I met neighbors I didn't even know, and I've lived in my home since 2010. I believe what we'll hear later is that enough petitions have been collected to move forward. I actually, I live on 16<sup>th</sup> Street, which is the border street to Coral Gables. I actually bought my house thinking that we were going to be annexed sooner than now, and we've been there for 13 years, and my children attend Coral Gables schools. We do all of our after-school programs and parks and rec programs through Coral Gables. We very much want to be a full member of this community and we look forward to this process moving to the County Commission and we thank you for your support. We hope that that support will continue. We know there are more steps to be done and our true wish is that, as it relates to Little Gables that the residents have an opportunity to have this on an August ballot where we can actually hear from all of the registered voters who chose to participate. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much for being here. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Christina Villamil.

Mayor Lago: Good morning. Thank you for being here.

Ms. Villamil: Good morning. Thank you all for having me and giving me the opportunity to speak. My name is Christina Villamil. My husband TJ grew up here in North Gables his whole life. His parents are Cuban origin. This has been his home, which is why I'm clearly not from Miami, but he jokes that he imported me down from Daytona Beach. We met in college, moved here, and we knew that Coral Gables is where we wanted to live. AT the time, we found a great opportunity in Little Gables, which is where we've been for the last five years. I have two little kids ages 3 and 1, and we're very much part of the community. We go to the Youth Center, we're at Granada Golf Course, you can see us at the tennis courts. We're very much engrained in the Coral Gables community, which is why we want to proceed with allowing this process to continue down the democratic process where we want our residents to be able to continue to vote on this. We're very excited that we did hit the 20 percent threshold. Not only did we hit the 20 percent threshold, but we exceeded it.

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And when you factor in the updated voter count for the Little Gables neighborhood, according to the Supervisor of Elections, we actually have 1,502 residents who are registered to vote; and of that, we have 356 petitions we collected, which gets us to a little over 23 percent. That's all you know, who are elected officials, getting above 20 percent threshold is not an easy feat during any election, whether it's your all election that you guys' host earlier in the year in April, or if it's a November election, getting past that is a big feat. So, we're very excited about that. We hope that you can continue to support the residents' wishes, both of Little Gables, but also North Gables, we are all friends, we're all neighbors, and we just want to continue allowing people to vote. One story of why I am personally invested in the Little Gables annexation. I was home alone one night with my two little kids; my daughter was an infant at the time. I had a guy knock on my door at midnight yielding a knife in his pocket. Had his phone with Facetime with another guy on it, pointed it at my house, screaming, yelling, banging. Thankfully, for the dog, I'm trying to call the police to say, please come, I have two little kids, I'm alone. Don't know what to do, please get here. It took them over two hours to get to my house. I'm alone with two little kids. So, you can imagine the fear and anxed that I have, and I know with Coral Gables being able to secure those perimeters, we're going to have not only a faster response time, but we're going to secure the neighborhoods, not just for Coral Gables residents, for Little Gables residents, but that whole community. It's not like a burglar is going to stop in Little Gables boundaries and not cross over to Coral Gables. They are walking over to you all as well. So, that is personally my reason and I hope that you continue to listen to the residents, not people who live in Miami Beach or Aventura or Broward County, but listen to us, the people who live there. And I appreciate the time and thank you so much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Jodi Budin.

Mayor Lago: Good morning. Thank you for being here.

Ms. Budin: Jodi Budin and I live in High Pines, and I've been a member of High Pines for the last 33 years. I'd like to just point out that this is the third time, I guess in the last ten years, that Coral Gables has tried to annex us in the last 33 years. And my issue is, I bought back in the 90s, a lot of the pioneer families that bought in the 60s, 70s, 80s, still live in this community, and a lot of us were middle class or many were working class at the time when they bought in the years earlier, and a few thousand dollars in taxes, a couple of hundred in garbage fees, these small things add up when you're on a fixed income and honestly, it will push many members out of our neighborhood. They just won't be able to stay there. We all have the same increase in insurance cost, increase in maintaining our

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homes, as well, and its significant. High Pines is a little different than Ponce Davis. I understand we're keeping looked at as a package, but they are in a little different bracket than us, and what's happening to the neighborhood is the old pioneer families, those homes are being bought out, knocked down and they are building these big old homes and their tax base is no big deal to them, because they're starting a hundred times higher than we are, but those of us who have been there who are in that place, it's the difference between staying in the neighborhood. So, I really do want that to be considered. I have no complaints with my services. My property value has done very well. I couldn't own now, but I bought back then, and I would hate to lose it and then where do you go. And that's my situation. So, I do want that to be considered and I'm not unhappy with my services and it's a very charming, unique neighborhood, and I'd like to keep it that way. We walk, we talk, we socialize, we interact with each other, and the price of doing work on your home would be significantly different if we're Gables, its just a lot more red tape, and getting your new windows, a permit in one place is \$750 and when people go, oh, you live in the Gables, that will be \$2,500. It seems simple, but to people on fixed incomes that's huge, that's huge. So, in order to stay in your home, you have to be able to maintain it. So, I hope that you'll consider these factors and I thank you for your time.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for being here with us.

City Clerk Urquia: Linda Dann.

Mayor Lago: Good morning. Thank you for being here with us.

Ms. Dann: Thank you. My name is Linda Dann, I live at 4550 S.W. 74<sup>th</sup> Street, right on the line. Before I talk about annexation, I would like to thank two people, Vince Lago, who appointed my autistic granddaughter, Ciena, to be Mayor for a day and it was very uplifting to her and her companions. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: May I say something in regard to that. I appreciate that, but what those individuals, what those young kids do for this community, we can never repay them for.

Ms. Dann: I'm sorry, I couldn't hear.

Mayor Lago: What those young children do for this community when we bring them here to the city, when they engage with the city, when they are involved with the employees, when they are involved with staff, like I was mentioning before about Project Victory, we can never repay that back. We all, this entire Commission, our City Manager, City Attorney, all our directors, every single person here, our Police Chief, Fire Chief, they have

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such a soft spot for those kids, because they're pure. They are well-intentioned individuals who are just full of love, and they give so much that we can never give what they give to us. So, I wanted to say thank you for bringing that up. I've never met you, but I appreciate that.

Ms. Dann: I wrote you a note thanking you, but I wanted to say it in person.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

Ms. Dann: Thank you. And I might just add at this point that Ciena and her family live in High Pines, as do my daughter and her children, as well as us, and I'd like to thank Billy, who kindly was so polite and helpful yesterday when we were checking to see if there were any misdeeds when you were counting the petitions, and he was very kind and he explained something to me that would have taken a lot of the heat out of my upset. He explained and it should be acknowledged, we should know it, but I didn't, that when they send out a petition, all petitions are only yes, because quite a few of us were very upset about not having the yes/no, and I didn't know that about petitions. The point was we were worried that maybe some of the elderly or the timid would think this is from the city, we've got to send it in, and that would skew the vote, and I don't know about that, but I'm now educated about petitions. Thank you, Billy. As I just mentioned, my family and my son and daughter's family live in High Pines, and some of them are really going to be stressed if their taxes go higher, and of course his parents will help them, but money is money. Turn out your lights, remember that. I'm just losing my train of thought. I feel for a lot of these very, very friendly people who are on tight budgets and who love our community and you could lower our taxes, I'll be in Coral Gables in a minute, because Coral Gables is lovely. I used to live on the corner of Anastasia and Anderson and my boys were able to walk to the Youth Center and play football. One reason we moved was after that great huge hurricane, I think it was Andrew, we lost a lot of our beautiful coral tiles, and they were the nice ones that were made on the thighs of Cuban women or some women. We replaced it but my husband said we have to have a metal roof, so we've got to move, and so, we bought a property and built where we now live and know now you allow metal roofs. Thank you very much for your time and I hope we don't get annexed. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Send my best to your family. I appreciate you being here. Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Karen Shane.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Shane, good morning.  
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Ms. Shane: Mr. Mayor, Commissioners, my name is Karen Shane, I live at 4375 S.W. 13<sup>th</sup> Street in Little Gables. When I purchased my home in 1994, annexation was already in the air, there were newspaper articles about it; and back about 22 years ago, I wanted to see us starting to look like Coral Gables. So, I got a grant for trees, and we planted about 50 trees along the street, and we continue to plant throughout the years and because of my enthusiasm, unfortunately, I was made, I want to say Mayor, President of the Neighborhood Association. So, I've really had my ear to the ground and the pulse of the neighborhood for a good 22 years and fighting zoning changes, etc. So, I've been at this annexation movement for many, many years and so has the neighborhood. The neighborhood is growing, changing. We have a lot of new, young families moving in, and I think there has to be a lot of education, because there's a lot of misinformation going around. There's a lot of emphasis on political corruption, which really has nothing to do with us. What we really want are faster response times. We want to feel part of the community and there's so much to gain from being in Coral Gables. I know that we hit our mark. We went over our 20 percent. I appreciate continuing the process and giving us an opportunity to vote. Thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for being here. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: We are going to Zoom next, Mr. Mayor. First speaker is going to be Caroline Miller.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Miller, the floor is yours. Thank you for being here.

Ms. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Mayor and distinguished Commissioners. My name is Caroline Miller, I live at 7541 S.W. 52<sup>nd</sup> Court, which you'll recognize as High Pines. I've lived in High Pines since 1995. And I would like respectfully to speak against annexation and to urge and suggest that the Commission give thought to stopping this process now, at least as it regards High Pines and Ponce Davis. It's my understanding that the petition threshold for this neighborhood has not been met, and the evidence that people of High Pines do not want annexation is really overwhelming. If you haven't driven through the neighborhood yet, I would invite you to, because it's a beautiful neighborhood, but also you will see that the streets are bombarded with "no annexation" signs. People don't want to be annexed and you know, there are many reasons for that. We've heard about issues with higher taxes, more difficult permitting, other issues, but I want to speak about a very personal issue that I think is a thread that runs through all these, and that is, the sense of community and distinctness in High Pines. It is wonderful that you have communities that have a sense of cohesiveness. Coral Gables does, but so does High Pines, and people really want to

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preserve that. In terms of services, High Pines services have been excellent. I've had the misfortune in my life of having to call on emergency medical services twice; once was in Coral Gables, once was in High Pines. Both times the response I got was fantastic. They were there within moments. It's really a testament to modern logistics and dedication to public service that that is possible. So, I would urge the Commission to give thought to the fact that for High Pines, at least, this is a question that hasn't been asked by our population. We don't want annexation. The signs for it being successful are very slight, as you'll see with regard to petition results, and this is a cause that really is not worthwhile Coral Gables sinking further resources and reputational values into. So please, I would ask the Commission to pull the plug on the effort to annex High Pines. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for being here. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is Alberto Alvarez.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Alvarez, thank you for being here with us.

Mr. Alvarez: Can you all hear me and see me.

Mayor Lago: Yes sir.

Mr. Alvarez: Thank you, Mr. Mayor and Commissioners. I've been a resident of High Pines about 12 years, before that I've lived on Manatee, South Gables and then Coco Plum. You have a beautiful city, but to speak to the fact and what Caroline mentioned and Jorge and those before me, we really enjoy being in High Pines. I chose High Pines over Coral Gables when I moved, because it's that sense of community that I not necessarily got in Coral Gables. As far as services, they are excellent. I too had the misfortune of having to call rescue services and they came very quickly. So, what I would like to ask really the Commission is, if they could as soon as possible table this. When you have 12 ½ percent return on the petitions and you need to reach that 20, its my experience that your first rush of mail comes at the beginning, and then it slows down to a trickle. And it would be very appreciated if the time and effort we've dedicated to this of anti-annexation could be rewarded by just tabling it now, because I don't see it going through and I think its an extra effort and time consumption for Coral Gables, for the City of Coral Gables and also for us. And lastly, I'd like to thank Billy. I was with him yesterday during the vote count with Linda and my wife, and I too was enlightened about the petitions and the yes. I had seen it before as something that was one-sided and so I'd like to thank him for his courtesy and professionalism and that's it. Thank you very much for letting me speak.

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Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir, for being here.

City Clerk Urquia: That's it, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Alright. Perfect. Then we will close the public comment and we will move forward with today's agenda. Thank you to everyone that was here and spoke. We appreciate your comments and your insight and your guidance. I hope everybody has a wonderful day. Thank you very much.