

Raul Valdes-Fauli

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Sent: Friday, January 17, 2020 1:09 PM
To: Vince Lago; Michael Mena; jfors@coralgables.com; Raul Valdes-Fauli
Subject: My thoughts on Coral Gables' attempt to designate a ranch style home historic

What appeared to be a seemingly mundane hearing at the Coral Gables Historic Preservation Board to determine if a ranch style home should be designated historic for the first time ever uncovered a series of troubling issues with long term consequences that should worry residents and property owners. The historic preservation staff is seeking to designate a home built in 1937 and stop the new owners from demolishing the unkept structure to build a new luxury home. By the way, the move for designation came only AFTER it was purchased.

City rules essentially allow historic designation to be sought if a property is over 50 years old, like this one. It happens to also have been designed by renowned architect Russell Pancoast.

Staff argued passionately in a 45 minute presentation that "ranch style", which originated in California, is emblematic of Coral Gables' architectural richness and represents the evolution in which there was a movement towards more modern designs over the original revival Spanish Mediterranean style implemented by George Merrick. They also offered a sweeping recount of the history of the ranch style home in the US.

Coral Gables is replete with thousands of ranch style homes that were mostly built in the 1940s and 1950s and, in many ways, proliferated as a less expensive and more practical alternative. The introduction of this style also represented defiance by residents at the time to Merrick's insistence on Spanish Mediterranean architecture, as explained by Arva Moore Parks in her book *Son of the South Wind*.

Ranch style homes are not emblematic of Coral Gables nor are they original to Coral Gables. People do not refer to Coral Gables as an oasis of ranch style. These types of homes can be seen in Westchester, The Falls, Richmond Heights, Hialeah, Pembroke Pines and everywhere else in South Florida. Over time, people have also made significant modifications that deviate from the authentic ranch style by adding Spanish barrel tile roofs and coral or marble features, many times at the insistence of the City government itself in an attempt to reinforce Merrick's original Spanish Mediterranean feel. To now say that these homes are characteristic of Coral Gables and should be protected is absurd.

That is why this debate is not simply about one home and, in reality, presents a major public policy decision that puts at risk the future of property rights and real estate values. The first ever historic designation of a ranch style home sets a dangerous precedent that then allows "open season" for the City government to arbitrarily seek designations for other similar homes, thus directly impacting the value of those properties. Real estate values - which fuel our municipal budget - can crash. Every year more and more homes turn 50 in Coral Gables and will be eligible for historic designation based on that factor alone.

This is an illogical and unjustified overreach by the Historic Preservation department that needs to be stopped. Just because something is old does not make it historic. Most people, like myself, live in Coral Gables because of its historic nature. That does not include ranch style.

The Commission should also evaluate the utter lack of fairness with the existing process residents are subject to when staff seeks a historic designation. We currently have a system in which tax dollars paid for by the public are used limitlessly by city staff to fund a case that would have an adverse impact against us. That is like paying the opposing lawyer when someone sues you. On top of that, you then have to reach into your own pocket to pay for your lawyers

and consultants. That is patently unfair because city staff has no limitations in their pursuits. Even if the resident wins they still lose.

The Commission should develop a pro-citizen policy that spreads the risk and burden evenly between the public and the City by reimbursing the costs incurred by the resident to defend their rights if they prevail against a historic designation attempt by City staff. There should also be a mechanism for a property buyer to know upfront if the City is contemplating historic designation before they make a financial investment. Lastly, the static 50 year old criterion that by itself qualifies for historic preservation should be revised to reflect present day conditions.

The City Commission needs to see this matter in a broader context and recognize what this means for the future. Everyone is in favor of protecting our architectural treasures. Commissioners should remember that their number one obligation is to stand by their residents and defend their rights.

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