

# **City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting**

**Agenda Item E-1**

**February 8, 2011**

**City Commission Chambers**

**405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL**

## **City Commission**

**Mayor Donald D. Slesnick, II**

**Vice Mayor William H. Kerdyk, Jr.**

**Commissioner Maria Anderson**

**Commissioner Rafael “Ralph” Cabrera, Jr.**

**Commissioner Wayne “Chip” Withers**

## **City Staff**

**City Manager, Patrick Salerno**

**Interim City Attorney, Lourdes Alfonsin**

**City Clerk, Walter J. Foeman**

**Deputy City Clerk, Billy Urquia**

## **Public Speaker(s)**

**Richard Namon, Coral Gables Resident**

**Arva Moore Parks, Acting Museum Director and Chief Curator**

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E-1 [Start: 9:24:46 a.m.]

An Ordinance of the City Commission of Coral Gables authorizing entering into an Amended and Restated Agreement for Operation of the Coral Gables Museum with Coral Gables Museum Corp., with regard to city-owned property at 285 Aragon Avenue, Coral Gables, Florida; and providing for severability, repealer, codification and an effective date. (Passed on First Reading January 11, 2011) (Deferred from the January 25, 2011 Meeting).

Mayor Slesnick: OK. We have E-1.

Interim City Attorney Alfonsin: An Ordinance of the City Commission of Coral Gables authorizing entering into an Amended and Restated Agreement for Operation of the Coral Gables Museum with Coral Gables Museum Corp., with regard to city-owned property at 285 Aragon Avenue, Coral Gables, Florida; and providing for severability, repealer, codification and

an effective date. (Passed on First Reading January 11, 2011) (Deferred from the January 25, 2011 Meeting).

Mayor Slesnick: OK. We had this deferred; are there any other questions?- any other discussion? We have one speaker from the public, Mr. Richard Namon and Mrs. Richard Namon, we have two speakers.

Mr. Namon: Good morning, my wife cedes the extra three minutes to me. While there are few people speaking on this important subject it doesn't mean that people aren't interested. In the last meeting we had the impression from both Mayor and Commissioner Chip Withers that this museum might not be costing us really that much money. So Mr. Withers accuses me of looking at all the financial statements, so I did look at the financial statements; and I discovered that in 2009 we took out a ten year note of over three and-a-half million dollars (\$3.5M), and this was for the museum construction. Toward this year's payment for 2011, we'll pay \$305,000 principal payment and \$129,000 interest on the note. In the lease there is absolutely nothing other than a mention that there is money that is being donated to the museum. Nowhere does it specify that there are unpaid payments due, they do not tie in any unpaid money with the lease, which means if we never get paid the promised money, we get nothing for it and the museum can still operate because it's not part of the lease. That I say as a real estate broker is a mistake. Now, at a wedding ceremony we often hear a question, *"If any person can show just cause why they should not be joined together let them speak now or forever hold their peace."* We are there now. Coral Gables and the Coral Gables Museum Corporation should not be joined together. After listening to Mayor Slesnick and Commissioner Withers at the last meeting, I realize the problem is not just the lease; the Museum group doesn't understand museums. I say this very seriously because years ago Chip Withers conceived an idea for the Old Police and Fire Station, Coral Gables could have a museum for its own history. Two weeks ago he confided and I quote, *"We all realized early on this museum would never survive as a history museum,"* unquote. Rather than let this project die he continued to change and push this project forward without telling us the original idea wouldn't work. Raising construction money is the easiest part of a museum. Money is available for donors when their names are going to be placed on or inside of the building. The biggest problem for a museum is funding staff. It's very difficult to get donations for an endowment that pays salaries. A museum income never pays for its operation; otherwise the Miami Museum of Science, that's by Viscaya would be profitable. As many [inaudible] for raising money it still operates in the red, that's the nature of a museum. You need at least a director, a curator, a guard and a receptionist to operate anything that's called a museum. After seven years the Coral Gables Museum has no operating funds to cover basic staff expenses. Chip admitted they have no good business plan when he said and I quote, *"I've already started putting together a business plan,"* unquote. Ironically the Mayor compared the museum's goal to our historic Merrick House. He said quote, *"Just like our Merrick House we had people urging us to*

*meet certain standards and have it accredited as a House Museum.” A majority of this Commission stood up and said, “This is not what we want. We want an interactive house, we want one that serves the public and be open to the public and usable by the public. So we abandoned that,” unquote. If being like Merrick House is the museum’s goal, then the two will be abandoned. Merrick House is only open two afternoons a week, Wednesday afternoon and Sunday afternoon. Without accreditation it lacks supporting grants, it currently needs major roof work, exterior painting, etc. Mayor Slesnick said and I quote, “We are the ones that asked this group to be created and come to the table with us”, unquote. Quote, “We created the museum idea and went out to search for a group to work with us, so I’m willing to give them the support they need”, unquote. Unsaid is, who is the “we” and where was the RFQ (Request for Qualifications)? Commissioner Withers has stated his commitment to the museum, he promised that beginning in April, quote, “I’m personally going to be involved, probably more so than anything except for my business and my family,” unquote. Don and Chip have a right to be proud of their commitment to this public purpose, but their personal involvement has clouded their judgment, both want it so bad they are positive it cannot fail. Without operating funds, specifically the lack of an operating endowment, this idea will fail as so many museums have failed around Miami in the past. Last meeting our Acting City Attorney stated there is no conflict of interest here regarding the Mayor and Chip. Her response to my public records request on that opinion was, there is no record of the question asked or the opinion given by Robert Meyers. What kind of legal opinion was that? Stop now rethink your goals. As Chip said about changing the mission statement the goal was to quote, “Serve the people better,” unquote. The City should operate this renovated and expanded historic property as a community center to serve the people better. Leave the museum name recognition plaques in place if they make their donations, the donors deserve that. Forget competing with the ten Miami-Dade accredited museums, instead give us a City community center in downtown Coral Gables. Thank you.*

Mayor Slesnick: Thank you. We have no other speakers except Mrs. Namon, I don’t know, did Mr. Namon take her time?

Commissioner Anderson: Yes.

Mayor Slesnick: Before we do that would you please get the sense of the Commission if we are giving that, and I’d like to review that policy of donating time from one person to another. We’ve done that in large crowds before, but I think this has gotten to a point of being abused. OK. We have no other speakers. Can I have a motion and then we have discussion.

Commissioner Withers: I’ll move it.

Mayor Slesnick: I have a second.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: I'll second it.

Mayor Slesnick: Mr. Kerdyk seconds it. Anybody have further discussion? I just want to...

Commissioner Anderson: Well you can go ahead.

Mayor Slesnick: Since I was just made the brunt of the attack. All I want to say is that I'm so proud to be part of a Commission that over the ten years that we've served together has shown an upbeat vision for our City and has led us, I believe, in a direction of creating a City that feels good about itself, has a purpose and identity. It does not sit around just moping and groping about the possible downfalls of outreach and reaching for the stars. You know, there are people who want to just plug along and then there are people that want to improve the quality of life and give opportunity to young people and others to one, review their past, and two, look for the future through the eyes of their past, and to see and experience new opportunities. Everything that we have done in this Commission to try to achieve that has been challenged, has been challenged by the economy, has been challenged by people's steadfastness, and willingness to do what it takes to get done. The Biltmore is obviously a challenged wonderful and incredible piece of our history and our present and our future; the County Club is a wonderful piece of our history and our future and our present. We could just let them sift into the sand by doing nothing and just not worrying about vision and about uplifting accoutrements to our City. The Merrick House is incredibly used all week long, it's open to the public on certain days for visitation with docents, it's also open by rent to groups and organizations which it has done over the last so many months and years. Also public events, City events, we have put a good deal of money, yes taxpayers dollars money into their founders home, and into a beautiful place; and I think it's well spent money, and something that people take pride in. If you break it down into every taxpayer, we've probably spent a couple of dollars from everybody's pocket. The restoration of our historic Police and Fire Station has provided not only a museum, which is the name of it, but it's a civic center also, and it's built as a civic center; and so far has been in full use as a civic center and it's a joint and combined purpose, as well as City offices in the building too for our archives and Preservation Division. Yes, guess what?- the Art Cinema is challenged too in its use, and whether or not it will be profitable, but we took that chance move forward, and now we have an Art Cinema that people are praising throughout the southern part of the State and providing new opportunities for families and adults in this City. It's worth the gamble, and Mr. Namon is right, the museum is downtown, the accredited museum is downtown, the accredited museums are having a tough time, and guess what?- every museum in the United States is having a tough time, the zoos are having a tough time; all public institutions because of the reluctance of some people to want to pay for such important things. I know when I grew up museums were critical to my development, zoos were critical to my development, theater was critical to my development, and

I think that's true for many people, and guess what?- it takes public support to make these things work, and they are all accredited or not, they are struggling, but guess what?- I for one am willing to join that great crowd of struggling opportunities to make this a better place to live in a better world. That's all. Maria.

Commissioner Anderson: I have a couple of comments. First of all so that people can just breathe, I intend to support this, but I do have a couple of statements I'd like to make regarding the agreement past and present. First of all Ms. Birdsill, thank you for working so hard on this present agreement, I think it's a vast – it's really a necessary improvement in order for us to actually get paid. I just want to echo how disappointed – we put our trust in past administrations from a legal and administrative standpoint when other folks sat in those chairs and gave us a legal document that was not worth much, and I'm saddened because I, of all people, had to bear two elections where public trust where I've had to bear that burden and yet again I'm disappointed. I'm glad that we are passing this; I wish the museum its best. I also wish to send a message that I found out that we didn't have a director weeks, months after it happened, and while that's not my purview to hire and fire, there is some type of link that financially that a direction of a museum and its director or lack of, has some impact on our City, and on our decision-making process. So, while I am supporting it, and I wish it well, and I hope that it does because my voting record has reflected my enthusiasm, but I do want to reflect that deeply disappointed in the lack of trust – feel betrayed that past administration, past Manager and the legal document from which it was drafted was so not protective of the City. And I'm free to vote now if you want.

Mayor Slesnick: Anybody else?

Commissioner Withers: You know, let me just address Mr. Namon's comments on a couple things; and Richard you know I've always respected your point of view, but I think that you've taken a little much too liberty on some of the comments and taken things out of context. I believe I said it could not survive solely as a history museum...let me complete. So, and I think the comment was – you know, I remember growing up as a kid that I used to play baseball for Saunders Hardware at Epiphany School, and every morning I would get up about 6:30 a.m. because we had a 12:00 o'clock game, I would put on my Saunders Hardware baseball outfit and my dad would put me in the back of his Galaxy 500, and we would go out on Tamiami Trail and plant one of these dreaded markers in the middle of nowhere; and I hated every single minute of it, because I would have to get up and rush to the game and a lot of my Saturday mornings were going around town with my dad who was very much part of the historical association of South Florida. So history was something that I always thought wasted a lot of my time every Saturday morning. It changed because I saw how important through campaigning, and Bill and Don and Maria know this, when you knock on people's doors, they love the historical thread through

Coral Gables, and it really makes our quality of life something special. Besides, the Fire and the Police and the zoning, the eye on historic preservation is so keen in this community, it's really amazing. So, I really you know, was gravitated toward this incredible building in downtown and early on my vision was tunneled, the history museum, and then – a guy that I look as a real hero in this community, Randy Nimik, said you know, at some point in time people are going to get tired of looking at George Merrick's tablecloths and plates, you know there are only so much that people can handle. So the idea was to expand it as a community center that would bring people into that building; bring people in that building for Board of Architects, Planning and Zoning, and it would compliment what Coral Gables is all about. Now, I can tell you since that building has been open there have been thousands of people, everything from FIU architects, to weddings to barmitzvahs, to birthday parties to kid's camps, and I have had dozens of people calling me and saying, this is incredible. I have not had one person come back to me and say, I had a bad experience what's going on here. And Don was right, you know there is a certain point where the dollars and cents that you were talking about, I don't think is totally accurate; the City has subrogated commitments from two donors that are going to cover the debt service over the next five years or so, to cover what the City's on the hook for. So the cost to the City is covered by donors and these are fairly significant people that I think the City is very well protected. But I would encourage you to open your mind and open your heart up a little bit and kind of see a little bit more what's going on before you just skewer this as some....folly.

Mayor Slesnick: Mr. Namon this is not a rebuttal.

Mr. Namon: I'd like an opportunity to...

Mayor Slesnick: It's not a rebuttal, it's not – thank you.

Mr. Namon:....not a rebuttal, but just to give a perspective.

Mayor Slesnick: But there's not that opportunity. Thank you.

Commissioner Withers: That was just my point of view. I'd like to spend some time with you to walk you through the finances, to walk you through the programs, to let you sit down with Arva, to see the hundreds of thousands of dollars that's already been raised toward programs that are going to start to launch in March and April. I mean, there are some pretty neat stuff that's going to happen in the next three to six months out of that place, I mean, there really is, and I'm surprised that you haven't really taken more time to really look at what's going on.

Mr. Namon: I do think I'm owed the right to respond.

Mayor Slesnick: You're not. Mr. Namon, please.

Mr. Namon: He addressed it to me personally.

Mayor Slesnick: But Mr. Namon you addressed it to him personally, you had your six minutes and that's – we don't carry on a debate here.

Mr. Namon: I love museums, I support museums, I've been involved with museums for decades.

Commissioner Withers: Thank you. That's all I have to say Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Slesnick: Bill do you want to say anything? We have a letter that will be added to the record from Ms. Dolly McIntyre, that's in the record.

Mr. Clerk

**Commissioner Withers: Yes**

**Commissioner Anderson: Yes**

**Commissioner Cabrera: Absent**

**Vice Mayor Kerdyk: Yes**

**Mayor Slesnick: Yes**

**(Vote: 4-0)**

Mayor Slesnick: I'd like to congratulate this Commission and the Museum and its Board. I'd also like to say one other thing; we have so many people who have stepped up to the plate to make great donations and work hard as volunteers for this organization, this museum. We have people that come here and express their opinions, we have people who quietly give of themselves to so many different projects in the City, and who give of their time, their efforts, their skills, their talents and their treasure. Thank you to all of them, thank you.

Commissioner Withers: Hey Don, can I take a personal privilege to just ask Arva to stand up and give us just a real quick overview what you have coming up there, some of the exhibits and some of the programs, real quick that you have planned. I know that you have been working on a couple of special...

Ms. Arva Moore Parks: Well first of all thank you. I think this is going to be a wonderful center for Coral Gables and the core of the whole thing is the history of Coral Gables and all of the things that make Coral Gables what it is today. So we hope we are going to be able to use the City as a role model for others to follow in what we've done here, in this number of years, and



how the original planning has made us what we are today. So I thank you. We have a lot of exciting things planned; we opened the building to rave reviews on 10-10-10, in April or latest of May we plan to open the first exhibitions. We have three exhibitions planned, two out of the three are funded and we are working on the third; one is creating the dream that I've been working on as the curator. It will tell the story of George Merrick creating the dream. We have been working very closely with Spain, the country of Spain, which gives us some really exciting possibilities because of you know, the first idea for Coral Gables is where your castles in Spain are made real. So, that's going to be the big excitement; John Stuart who is a Professor of Architecture at F.I.U. is the guest curator for a wonderful exhibit on the Work Progress Administration in Coral Gables during the New Deal. Our building was a Work Progress Administration building and he did a book on the WPA in Florida, but the other thing we've learned is right across the street from the current museum was the South Florida Center for Art for the WPA, and John has located some of the artist family and we are going to have real art. So it's going to be all tied back together to place, is what we are doing. The third one which is funded, the Perrin Gallery, it's going to be really exciting the possibilities; it is designed, we are getting as soon as we have the money that I think will come with today's agreement, we will begin fabrication. Caroline Parker is the curator of that who has done all of our educational programs, who is terrific, I've been working very closely with her. It's going to be a fabulous exhibition about our Sister Cities, and then we are going to spin off one Sister City at a time to highlight them in the museum. So, I think the first one, I think will be Aix Provence in France, so that's going to be three things opening almost simultaneously, and the people of Coral Gables and all over South Florida, and our tourism and on that wonderful block with the Cinema and Books and Books, and Giralda Restaurant, I think we've got a hot spot about to happen right there. And I thank you very much for your confidence and I look forward to working with you to get the doors open to the exhibits and get on our way.

Mayor Slesnick: Thank you Arva.

Commissioner Anderson: Thank you.

Mayor Slesnick: Good luck.

[End: 9:47:17 a.m.]