

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-12
December 12, 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 Works Director, Hermes Diaz
Transportation Division Manager, Melissa DeZayas

Public Speaker(s)

Roland Rodriguez

Agenda Item F-12 [Start: 5:18 p.m.]

Discussion regarding the Alhambra Circle sidewalk connection between San Rafael Avenue and Taragona Drive (Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: F-12 – moving onto Alhambra Circle sidewalk connection between San Rafael Avenue and Taragona Drive.

Public Works Director Diaz: If you could please put up the presentation.

Transportation Manager DeZayas: Melissa DeZayas, Transportation Division Manager. So, the original plan for Alhambra Circle was to install a sidewalk with a curb because we thought that the tree roots would be under the pavement at that location and then with the curb it would be six inches higher, so it would be like less of an impact to the trees. But at the direction of the Commission, we got an arborist report, and these are the findings of the arborist. Based on the arborist report, I basically did the slides on each plan sheet. There are two trees that need to be

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removed, because they are in poor condition. The sidewalk is basically where we said to place it on the original plans except for at one location, which was just north of Trevino, between Trevino and San Rafael. There's one that's to be removed right here, which is just south and then the arborist report said to wind behind the trees north of Trevino. So, I don't know if you can see it on the screen. You can see the sidewalk with the curb and then just when you see number 12, it actually starts to wind behind the trees. And then they say to go back to a curb and remove number 16. So, basically there were 16 trees that were included in the arborist report; two were shown to be removed, they are Black Olives, they were in poor condition. There were two other ones that they identified as being in poor condition, but they said that they can remain. They said that the recommendation was to construct the sidewalk with a concrete curb, except for that one location where they said to wind it behind the trees and we're here to ask the Commission how they would like us to proceed.

Mayor Lago: So first off, thank you for coming back. This is an important project because finally we're going to finish up an area which so sorely needs traffic calming, resurfacing of the street. I know we haven't resurfaced it because we want to do all the projects together. So, I know a lot of residents keep calling, hey, that street looks horrible, but we're waiting to do it all at one time to save as much money as possible. The bridge looks so much nicer, we fixed the embankments, starting to really, really look good. Today, on the way here to City Hall, I saw a young lady, she must have been probably 16, 17 years old, running on the bridge, and as I'm coming down from Bird Road, on Alhambra, she's looking back as she's running to make sure she doesn't get run over as the cars are coming on that bridge. I could see in her eyes how nervous she was going on the bridge and then coming off the bridge and going onto the grass and then having to go on the street. That to me, again, imagine how agile that young lady is, imagine a person who's older or disabled or somebody with a young child, somebody who is just not paying attention. So, this is so sorely needed in this area, and I'm super excited that we're finally getting the buy-in from the community, we're getting the buy-in from the residents, we could finish these two blocks. We'll have a lot of connection points from here all the way down and I think it's just great to finally get it done. I want my colleagues to give me their opinion on what we've been trying to do here, and I know that, again, like I said before, let's not let perfect be the enemy of good. We're never going to hit 100 percent, but if we can get into the 90s, I think we'll be successful.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So consistent with what I saw the one tree that you could go behind, I thought was a possibility where she can't see what's down below ground level, so we needed to wait for the arborist report. I'm excited that we've gotten this far, and we can finally put in something to provide more safety for folks.

Mayor Lago: What would be the next step? After we have everything done, the design, will we now go to the community and finalize the support so that we can move forward.

Public Works Director Diaz: That was the question. There is an ordinance that was passed a while back where on non-collector street and this section of Alhambra is not a collector, there's a process in place whereby a petition which in this case, the direction came from the Commission, technically we're supposed to get a two-thirds vote and according to the ordinance the neighbors

also have half of the cost of the sidewalk. So obviously, the Commission can make the call and give us direction on how to proceed. That's what's on the books right now.

Mayor Lago: We've got to get buy-in.

Public Works Director Diaz: Right.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I thought we already voted on this as far as financial responsibility was.

Public Works Director Diaz: Do we want to take a vote? – and then what percent of the vote do we consider.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I think a higher vote is required when you make a financial, when you're obligated.

Public Works Director Diaz: Right. So, in this case, we're not going to get, we're not going to ask the neighbors to contribute.

Mayor Lago: No, I wouldn't. I think it's a public safety issue.

Public Works Director Diaz: So, what percentage of the vote do you think would be appropriate?

Vice Mayor Anderson: How about like we did on the bike lane, 51 percent.

Public Works Director Diaz: Sorry?

Vice Mayor Anderson: How about like we did on the bike lane, 51 percent.

Public Works Director Diaz: That would be your call, absolutely, and we could take balloting the same way we do for traffic calming.

Transportation Manager DeZayas: There's five residences within the project limits, we could ballot those five residences. My question would be, would it be return ballots like the traffic calming projects?

Mayor Lago: I have no issue.

Public Works Director Diaz: And we only ballot the residents that are going to be directly impacted by the sidewalk, not the ones across the street, just those five and that's it.

Mayor Lago: There's no sidewalk on the other side. We've got to get this done. Literally, everybody is bottlenecking into a bridge, and we've got...

Vice Mayor Anderson: Its dangerous.

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Commissioner Fernandez: But I still have a problem with this whole process. The arborist report that was requested was submitting the plan as the city had it. It wasn't asking whether the sidewalk should be on one side or the other. It was whether the sidewalk should be where the city had planned it on the curb.

Public Works Director Diaz: Correct.

Commissioner Fernandez: And that's not what was discussed on site. I was there at that meeting. The discussion on site was to ask the arborist what the best location for the sidewalk would be along the whole corridor, not is it okay to do it here. And they said, well, over here you should move it to the other side. I don't think a sidewalk and a curb is a safe thing to have, especially on a curb with as much traffic and high-speed traffic as we have there. I think that's a recipe for disaster. We're putting our residents in harm's way. It should be a meandering sidewalk, as was discussed, and it should be on the other side of the trees. That's just a fact. We can't make a decision, oh, I understand we've been trying to get this done for a while, but we need to do it right where the safety of residents is being factored in, and it should be on the inside of the trees to ensure the safety of residents.

Mayor Lago: Let me ask you a question. So, you're saying it has to be done right. So are you saying that the curb on the sidewalk in front of my house is done wrong, which is the same way that this is being called for. It's literally a sidewalk on the curb and it runs all the way down Camposano, in front of my house on San Amaro, that's the way it is.

Commissioner Fernandez: This is residential.

Mayor Lago: My house is residential.

Commissioner Fernandez: There's no sidewalk on your side. There actually should be a sidewalk on your side and it should be on the inside of the trees, not on the curb.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner, if you look at the other side, it could have been put against the property line and it wasn't, it wasn't put against the property line. It was put, and there was a wall there, it was put on the curb, and it's not a safety issue. I've lived in that house for 12, 13 years now, I've never seen a safety issue. I've never seen anybody get hurt. I've never seen a problem. What I like is that finally a sidewalk was accomplished and it's a long time coming, and I think it's a safety hazard if somebody gets eventually injured there.

Public Works Director Diaz: So, the rules...

Transportation Manager DeZayas: It's the green book.

Public Works Director Diaz: The green book. What it requires is when you have a sidewalk close to a travel lane, you have to be on a curb, otherwise, you need a six-foot minimum separation and

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that's the rule. Having a sidewalk adjacent to a curb next to a travel, I mean it exists, it's a matter of preference. It exists throughout. So, the curb is what makes it okay. I couldn't put a sidewalk flush with a pavement next to a travel lane.

Vice Mayor Anderson: The other issue was the roots on the side, furthest from the trees, would have to be cut which then makes the tree unstable. We went over some of the stuff while we were out there. There was one area where I saw there was a meter back there, as well, it was close to somebody's wall. You could follow that. Those didn't look like structural roots that would cause an issue. Turns out that the arborist report is consistent with my gut feeling was, but we went over the depth that you would have to cut in order to be able to put a sidewalk in on the other side of some of these trees. These are big, tall trees and you don't want to be creating another hazard, okay, they could be much more devastating when one of those trees falls on top of somebody's car, bicycle, or someone jogging down the street.

Commissioner Fernandez: The arborist report did not say that. The arborist report said, it's okay to leave it where you're putting it. It didn't say – the arborist report wasn't, there wasn't a request from the arborist on, should it be here, or here. It was, this is what we're planning on doing, is it okay? That wasn't what was promised to residents that day during the Sunshine meeting.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Diaz, could you give me a little clarity on that statement, please.

Public Works Director Diaz: What we asked the arborist report to tell us, where will the sidewalk go that will be the least impactful to the trees, and that was when we had a walk-through with them and that was our conversation with them.

Commissioner Fernandez: And both sides of the trees were considered.

Public Works Director Diaz: Well, yes, I mean we didn't tell them to put it one way or the other. We asked them just to tell us where you think it should go, that was our conversation that we had with them.

Mayor Lago: Look, it's not a safety issue. This is something that's been done before, it's done in front of my house. The arborist was consulted, he's a professional. This has been talked about for 30, 20, I can't even remember how many years. We've got to do something here, and we've got to get buy-in. This shouldn't be that much of a contested issue. There's a lot more bigger things we've got to talk about in this Commission. Let's deliver on infrastructure that is going to be beneficial for the community. If you guys want to sponsor it with me, you guys can all sponsor it with me and say it's you did it. I don't need the credit. I just want to get this done and move on, and then we have a bunch of other sidewalks that we've got to do. For example, we need sidewalks on Granada.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Definitely.

Mayor Lago: Granada all the way to Bird Road. What did I tell you, Mr. Diaz, Mr. Manager, I told you, have a conversation with the Commission, you need to get that. We need to go over Blue Road. Once you do Blue Road and then we need to connect on Granada, and we need to go up. That's the prime, prime location. I see you, Commissioner Menendez, that is the prime location for installing sidewalks. Why? – because you don't have that many residents you're going to have to deal with, because the lots are really, really big, and you're going to be able to put sidewalks because the front yards are really expansive. Case in point, the Japanese Consulate, which has their home there, and there are three or four homes adjacent to it, and I already spoke, and he wrote an e-mail this week. I took him to lunch, was the Pastor for the United Methodist Church, the church on Bird Road. I said, hey, you own that lot, do you mind if we put some sidewalks there. He sent an e-mail saying he would love to have sidewalks there. So, you're already getting buy-in from multiple different owners in that corridor. I think that should be the next one and I would love for my colleagues to get involved. There are no sidewalks on that street and people are walking through that street constantly. Commissioner Menendez, excuse me.

Commissioner Menendez: There's a reason why walking along LeJeune on the sidewalk is dangerous, it's because it's right next to the road, there's no buffer.

Public Works Director Diaz: It's a little narrower too in some areas.

Commissioner Menendez: My point is the sidewalk next to a road is less safe than a sidewalk further away from the road. So, if I'm not mistaken, where we're talking about Alhambra and the sidewalks, for example, they are close to the bridge, if I'm not mistaken.

Public Works Director Diaz: Correct.

Commissioner Menendez: And if I'm not mistaken, I heard mentioned here that there've been accidents at that bridge, people hitting the bridge.

Public Works Director Diaz: Correct. Twice.

Commissioner Menendez: And when the arborist is asked, does this endanger the trees, the arborist obviously, would answer one way or the other, but the arborist isn't a professional and answering whether the sidewalk there endangers the people that are walking along it. So, there are two issues; the trees safety and the people safety, and we have to find a compromise, and even though, like I said it's been documented here. That road weaves greatly when you get to the bridge, especially at night, they've hit the bridge.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I understand. You weren't out there. You didn't walk it, so.

Commissioner Menendez: I did. I walked it, not that day, but I walked it before.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, let's walk it together. I'll show you the roots that if you cut through them, then we've got to take down the trees. There's no easy answer. Residents don't want the trees taken out.

Mayor Lago: This is the problem.

Public Works Director Diaz: We are...as far as the location of the sidewalk. We were asked to preserve the trees and then there was a discussion about the best place for the sidewalk, we got an outside arborist to see where it would be less impactful. The reality is that any construction in that area is going to be an impact on those trees. So, the question is, where is it going to be less impactful. Could we potentially put the sidewalk in the back? – possibly. We'll probably have to observe the trees and see what happens moving forward, but we did what we were requested by the Commission. We got an arborist who took a look at what the less impact would be and that's what we're presenting. At the end of the day, what we're looking for right now is direction of how to proceed.

Commissioner Menendez: Is there anywhere in Coral Gables that we have sidewalks not along the road, but behind trees, anywhere else in Coral Gables.

Public Works Director Diaz: Typically, in most residential neighborhoods, the sidewalks are behind the trees at the property line. That is the typical progression that you see in residential streets.

Commissioner Menendez: Those are older trees, I'm sure, they are some of those.

Greenspace Director Bell: Depends on the placement of the tree.

Commissioner Menendez: They just didn't drop dead.

Public Works Director Diaz: And the issue is that they are big Black Olives, they are rather large.

Mayor Lago: They have big, exposed roots.

Public Works Director Diaz: Some of the roots aren't great, especially in the backside area.

Mayor Lago: Quick question.

Public Works Director Diaz: Sure.

Mayor Lago: Let's talk about safety, because that was an item that Commissioner Menendez brought up. Having that in front of my house, having a winding road, like San Amaro is, and it goes into Camposano, and it winds around University, do you have any data that says that having a sidewalk in that location is unsafe.

Public Works Director Diaz: No. We follow Florida Green Book and like I said, the Green Book, if you have a sidewalk next to a pavement, you need to have a curb.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Public Works Director Diaz: If you don't want a curb, then it needs to be a six-foot setback. That's what the engineering standards call for.

Mayor Lago: I want to open it up to the resident who is here. He's one of the property owners and I appreciate him being here. He's also an engineer. I just want my colleagues on the Commission too – there's no perfect solution here, there isn't. This is an opportunity to leave a legacy of public safety in an area that none of live by, which is traversed constantly. This area needs sidewalks and then you've got to go across the street. Once you get on the other side of the bridge, it's a good opportunity to start working on sidewalks all the way to Bird Road, and then you can do things, or just do Granada.

Vice Mayor Anderson: A follow-up question. The speed limit on LeJeune is 45 miles and vehicles frequently exceed that to 55-plus miles per hour. What is the speed limit in this section?

Transportation Manager DeZayas: This section – well...

Public Works Director Diaz: It's not a collector street, it should be 25.

Transportation Manager DeZayas: It should be 25 for this portion because south of Coral Way it's a local residential street, so it should be 25 miles an hour. Right now, its posted at 30, but we're going to replace it.

Commissioner Menendez: Cars go 35 even 40, because it's a cut-through street, especially rush-hour traffic one way or the other.

Commissioner Fernandez: And we're narrowing the street, we're narrowing the street more.

Public Works Director Diaz: And the narrowing actually helps slow people down, so.

Mayor Lago: Commissioners, you're making my point, you're making my point. We've got to do something, whether it's a street – a curb, or no curb, nothing's been done because we haven't been able to come to consensus. We're not going to make everybody happy, but at the end of the day, I promise you, we've heard from a lot of residents there in the neighborhood. Just putting a sidewalk, putting a sidewalk is a big step forward in a positive direction. So, I'd like to hear from the resident, if possible. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: We have somebody who would like to speak.

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City Clerk Urquia: No sir.

Mayor Lago: He did not sign up.

City Clerk Urquia: No.

Mayor Lago: Do me a favor, just tell us your name, where you live and then fill out a card, if you can.

Mr. Rodriguez: Will do.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, my friend. Thank you for being here. You've been here a few hours. I appreciate it. Thank you.

Mr. Rodriguez: My name is Roland Rodriguez, I'm at 3310 Alhambra Circle, and the property they are talking about going behind the trees is my property. So, ultimately do we like the sidewalk back there? – no, we don't like the sidewalk. We would prefer it in the front with a curb. Like the Mayor mentioned, I'm an engineer, and I've worked with...

Mayor Lago: What type of engineer are you?

Mr. Rodriguez: Excuse me?

Mayor Lago: What type of engineer are you?

Mr. Rodriguez: I'm a civil engineer.

Mayor Lago: The reason I ask is for them to understand that you know about sidewalks, curbing, infrastructure, all that kind of stuff.

Mr. Rodriguez: I've been working with the Department of Transportation for 25 years and if you go down Kendall Drive, three lanes of road and they all have curb with sidewalks. If you narrow the sidewalk, it lowers the speed. You have a curb, like you mentioned, you are allowed a sidewalk, otherwise with no curb, you have to have a certain depth. So, we've seen the plans now and we've always been requesting information. We just now saw the arborist report, so this is the first time I get to speak on it and kind of see what's happening. So, we're still concerned with the sidewalk. The only home behind the sidewalk if there are trees is our home, and if you see the size of these trees and the size of the roots, and there's an old report here that shows depending on the diameter, breath, height. Even on this it says, no excavation over four inches within half of the clear zone. So, this is 12 feet and now you're coming in to excavate, putting the sidewalk, and I see in the arborist report they also put in their protection of the root, which I've done before. This is for half of the tree and if you see the size of this tree, you're now weakening the root system on that side of the tree, which is coming toward my house, and this is for both of them. So yes, it's a concern.

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The other concern is, it's an 8-foot sidewalk, or the plans that I've seen at least are an 8-foot sidewalk. Is it necessary to have an 8-foot sidewalk. The standard sidewalk is 5 feet. All the side streets are 5-feet. 8-foot sidewalk creates a higher cost, more maintenance, and everything else. So, I've been the only resident that spoke on this situation. The resident behind me bought the house, nobody lives there, so I don't know what they are doing with that home. The next one on Trevino just moved in, and he started asking questions, why were there sticks in front of his house again. Nobody informed us about putting stakes and doing anything.

Mayor Lago: But we've talked about that.

Mr. Rodriguez: Yes, but all the other neighbors haven't been informed. So, there was a Sunshine meeting. I wasn't there. So, I think there's a little bit of lack of communication with the residents that are directly affected by this sidewalk.

Mayor Lago: But I think that before they go out, before staff goes out and has like a formal discussion, they wanted to talk to the Commission, because they wanted to get consensus from the Commission moving forward to say, okay, this is where we're going to attack this issue, so that we can move forward, and then they were going to, and correct me if I'm wrong, then the plan was to sit down with the residents to say look, this is the plan, how do you feel about this. Like you brought up right now the eight feet. I hadn't caught that before.

Public Works Director Diaz: No, I just want to make sure that what we're looking to do is a cycle sidewalk with a potential of narrowing further around trees where needed. You could narrow the sidewalk in some areas as little as three feet, if necessary.

Mayor Lago: That's fine.

Public Works Director Diaz: When you are running into some issues, but your standard sidewalk is six feet not eight.

Mr. Rodriguez: Even that would reduce the impact and also for the future. Construction-wise, cost and also maintenance on this. Our concern is those trees. If you go out there, I think all our neighbors that we've spoken to would like to voice their opinion as well with the Commission on site and those trees are concerning. I think their...is fair, at least one of them is in very poor condition and its my arborist that told me. I'm not an arborist, I'm a professional engineer, so I can speak to the areas about sidewalk and placement and everything else and safety, but I can't speak to the arborist report.

Commissioner Fernandez: What I would like to do is, maybe have a Sunshine meeting on site with the arborist and the neighbors, so that we can go over this plan and any questions that the Commission has, and the neighbors have can be answered before we give a final go-ahead.

Mayor Lago: Again, I don't have any issues with that, but I think that we need to come to consensus and the Commission needs to come to an understanding that not everybody is going to be happy. There's no way to build consensus and make 100 percent of everybody happy.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, the tree that you're concerned about, I believe is going to be designated to be taken out, two trees.

Mr. Rodriguez: No. The trees on my property are sure to stay and they have a root barrier on my side of the property.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I don't have the map in front of me, nor can I see it on this screen that's...

Public Works Director Diaz: So, the trees on the property are the ones are being asked to be taken out.

Transportation Manager DeZayas: It's the one south of his property, the resident south of this property and the one directly north. The three that are in front of his property are actually to remain because they were in fair condition, according to the arborist.

Mayor Lago: So let me ask you a question. If we have this Sunshine meeting now, how long would we need to host this meeting.

Public Works Director Diaz: I would have a discussion with the arborist, some time after the New Year.

Mayor Lago: Okay. We've got to move. We've got to move.

Commissioner Menendez: Let's have it before the first Commission meeting in January.

Vice Mayor Anderson: On Saturday.

City Attorney Suarez: Well, depending on when you set the dates, that might be January 9th.

Commissioner Menendez: Well, I don't think Hermes will have it on New Year's Day, assuming its later. Let's find out what the date is and then.

Public Works Director Diaz: January 9th.

City Clerk Urquia: January 9th. You haven't voted on it yet, it's up for...

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'm available on the 8th.

Commissioner Menendez: You pick, we'll show up.

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City Manager Iglesias: I think before the second meeting in January.

Commissioner Menendez: Okay.

Mayor Lago: Alright. Sir, thank you for being here. We will invite you to the meeting, along with the other residents.

Mr. Rodriguez: I look forward to meeting with you up there and also the neighbors as well.

Mayor Lago: I appreciate your input and your guidance.

Mr. Rodriguez: I'm in communication with them now, so at least the one neighbor on Trevino and then we've also had small conversations.

Mayor Lago: Do me a favor, if you'd like, are more than willing to pick you guys up over the weekend, if you want and I'll take you to University so you can see what we've done on University with the sidewalks there.

Mr. Rodriguez: My father-in-law lives right there, right next to...

Mayor Lago: They are not done yet, they are not done yet, but they are going to look really nice. Okay.

Mr. Rodriguez: Thank you.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I see students on them all the time. Alright. Figure out when the arborist is also available.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.