

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-4
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

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item F-4 [Start: 4:12 p.m.]

Discussion on the new city replacement lights
(Sponsored by Commissioner Fernandez)

Mayor Lago: F-4 – Discussion on the new city replacement lights.

Commissioner Fernandez: Mr. Clerk, do you have the images that I sent.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes Commissioner. Cable TV can put up the images.

Commissioner Fernandez: I brought this up last Commission meeting, the issues that the new lights, this is the old light that we had in the North Gables. We still have a few of those left. Next image. As you can see, they are visible. They are not in the trees, they are lower, and then the new ones, as you can see, have been put up there within trees, which of course, hat-raken the trees in order to not affect the lights. This is just from a drive I did this morning, just a few that I took. That one you can't even see. It's lit in daytime because the sensor can't even sense that it's daytime outside. That one you can't see either, kind of tucked into that tree.

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Vice Mayor Anderson: It would be good in the middle of the golf course.

Commissioner Fernandez: What was that?

Vice Mayor Anderson: You can see it in the middle of the golf course.

Commissioner Fernandez: Well, the point is...

Vice Mayor Anderson: I got your point.

Commissioner Fernandez: And I think Mr. Maxwell wrote about it in the Herald.

Vice Mayor Anderson: He did.

Commissioner Fernandez: And he spoke about it here today. The process of getting here was a process, from my understanding, that took place years ago. It was a conversation regarding the funding and having FPL take this project over. I think something that he mentioned here is extremely accurate. Had we put FPL on the spot, they could have had a pole that was either similar or identical to what we currently have in the city. I think we're going away from the look of Coral Gables and into – they're nice poles, don't get me wrong. I like the look, but they are not appropriate in some parts of our city, or they may be in others. In South Gables we don't have the historic lights or lights have been put in, in the 1980s, as he explained, but in North Gables it doesn't fit in. We had the issue on San Sebastian where the lights are just too tall. These lights are almost six feet taller than the silver light poles that were in there. So now you have people who had hedges, this light goes above the hedge and straight into their homes, and even if you put the blocker, the houses across the street are being impacted because the lights are too tall. So, although I understand, the Manager tells me we're not in the business of putting up light poles and it is a savings to the city. I think we need to revisit this and find a happy medium with FPL that works for our community, not something that works for every community. Coral Gables has always been Coral Gables. People want to move to Coral Gables. We shouldn't have the same light poles that everybody else has, because it was the only thing in the catalog. So, I honestly think, again, maybe appropriate for some parts of the city, but definitely in our historic North Gables area, they are just not appropriate.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Well, the height is an issue for starters, and the color of the light, which we can resolve is a secondary issue, as well as the color of the pole, so there's three factors there.

City Manager Iglesias: The lights that are in the golf course are not Coral Gables lights. They are silver, but they are only ten feet high, they are fiberglass and not a very expensive light. The White Way Lights are 14 feet tall, these are 15 feet, rounded off. So actually, these lights are more in line with the original White Way Lights. The ten-foot lights that are in the golf course right now, those are actually not historical, they are made of fiberglass. They are actually not an expensive product, and they are not part of anything that's original to Coral Gables. So, it's not a historic issue, because those are not historical lights.

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Commissioner Fernandez: I'm not saying its historical. My concern is we're doing a complete change of the look of our city. We had a recent discussion about Art in Public Places about some red lights that are being put up in a neighborhood and the recommendation we made was, we really like for it to be the same as what's across the street. Now we're completely changing the look of the city, even if they're the same height as the White Way Lights, they are not the same look as the White Way Lights and I think, like Vice Mayor Anderson said, these poles might be able to be cut. The bottom of the pole is very similar to the silver poles and if they can make them silver and a similar height to what we currently have, it doesn't have to be fiberglass. It could be the current material that they are using. Some of them aren't even – the black paint that they are using on them, isn't sticking well. There's two of them on the golf course that are already graying. They are already graying. They don't look like the black of the actual light, they are too toward the center, they are kind of just gray already. Either they are dirty, or the paint is already fading.

Mayor Lago: If I may, Commissioner. Mr. Diaz, I walked the site the other day with Mayor Slesnick and the City Manager last week. I have a question for you, maybe you can find out for us and get back to the Commission. Are those intrical paint or is that spray-on?

Public Works Director Diaz: I'll find out. I don't have the answer to that.

Mayor Lago: It's a concrete pole. It's a concrete pole.

Public Works Director Diaz: Yes.

Mayor Lago: I want to know if its intrical inside the actual concrete mixed into it, or – I have a feeling it is, have a feeling it is, because it would weather better, but I would like to know if it was painted on.

Public Works Director Diaz: It isn't just the pole, it's the pole and the fixture; and based on our discussions with the FPL rep, there's an issue we're finding the fixture itself in gray or silver just the same, but I can definitely find out that information. I don't have an answer.

Mayor Lago: I got these fixtures installed in my neighborhood. Again, my neighborhood is different than this neighborhood. The residents in my neighborhood only had good things to say about it, because we never had any lights in our neighborhood. Now we have actually lights. One of the points that was brought up here which is a very valid point is, that we need to especially on the UM side is, we need to address the issue with the lights being in the trees, especially near Kokoris Park adjacent to, there's one there, its basically in the trees. We need to have our team go or the FPL team go and prune some of those trees so you can see the light better. The height of the light doesn't really bother me, because at the end of the day the White Way Lights are 14 feet and change, but I would like to have somebody in your staff, through the Manager's office, have a conversation with FPL to say listen, is there anything that we could do. I like the lights. These are the same lights that were installed in Coco Plum. Right now, we spent how many years, like five years.

Public Works Director Diaz: It was a while.
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Mayor Lago: It was a while. We spent several years preparing them for the lights that they went out and got. I like the lights. I don't have an issue with the lights, but again, if people are asking for them to have a more softer touch, I don't have an issue with that, as long as it can even be done. The problem is that to change those lights would be two and-a-half million dollars, which is a cost that FPL assumed, and not only that, besides that significant number, it's a fact that we don't have the infrastructure. God forbid a hurricane were to come and there would be an issue, all those lights would go down. FPL is the one that would be responsible for making sure that they are maintained that they are put back in working order. I just want to find out what options do we have to meet this resident request.

City Manager Iglesias: And Mayor, if I may say, one of the reasons for the White Way Lights, the restoration was so expensive is because we had to re-electrify everything.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

City Manager Iglesias: We're under a national electrical code, utilities are under a national electrical safety code, and they are allowed to do quite a number of things that we're not allowed to do. We would have to provide disconnects, meters, totally different electrification techniques. So, if we take something over from FPL, it's not just putting new lights in, its doing everything new. This project here would be about \$2.5 million dollars. Through FPL it's about \$34,000 a year cost over 20 years. So over 20 years we paid 680, initially we paid \$2.5 million. So, it's a substantial amount of money because of all the costs involved. So, we can't just take over. In addition to that, FPL maintains it, and it's an FPL responsibility. So, if a hurricane wipes out all the lights, it's FPL's responsibility to put them back. So, we just do not have the ability to do what a utility does. We don't have the legal authority to do that kind of work, because we fall under a completely different code, and we also are trying to minimize our liability in case of a major hurricane where we would lose all these lights. We're not in the pole business and FPL is.

Commissioner Fernandez: And I understand that. My concern is not about finding a path forward with FPL. I just think that the path forward with FPL needs to be a path where everybody is happy, FPL, but also the City of Coral Gables. Mayor, what I was trying to explain about the height is really about the trees, and Vice Mayor Anderson can attest to this. There are certain branches in those trees that cannot be cut because it will compromise the integrity of the tree. Any tree branch that's over two inches in diameter if you cut it, could compromise the integrity of that tree. It could hurt the tree permanently. So, a lot of those branches that these light poles are in are very thick branches, as you saw in those photos, and if you drive down North Greenway and South Greenway, you'll notice a lot of those branches, like the one right there, that's a good six or seven inches in diameter the branch that that's behind; and now you're compromising that tree because most of the tree canopy on this side comes from that one branch. So, you'll have a top-heavy tree on the opposite side. Same with this one here.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I have a couple of questions. I know that there was discussion and so forth, but where the base of that pole is governs a lot as to whether or not its up in the tree canopy. What

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FPL entertained moving it more centered so its not blocked by the trees, because they are placing them smack into the trees that appears to be here, aside from the issue the height of the pole.

Public Works Director Diaz: Right. What they did was basically replace the poles where the old pole was. That was the essence of what FPL was doing and going back to the whole discussion about the color. I can attest that, actually because this conversation started even before I was working at the city, the discussion about asking FPL for silver lights, a discussion was had, and the discussion actually continued, and the answer we're told eventually was no. The light comes in green and black, and it was the closest thing to a decorative light that was available under the FPL catalog. We can certainly go back to FPL and ask about the integrity of the color on the pole and all that information, but I will say that we did ask originally, do you have a silver light, can you bring a silver light. And at first it was well, I don't know, let's see, maybe, and then eventually the answer was no.

City Manager Iglesias: Actually, we did not just ask. This happened four, five years ago, we were very adamant about that, but they did not have a silver light component in their tariff, and so, it wasn't that the discussion wasn't had, and this decision goes back about four, five years, and this new tariff is something that saves the city quite a bit of money and also remove a lot of liability from the city should we have a major hurricane.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, I'm going to go back to my original question and that is, especially where those poles are like right up into the core canopy of the tree. Can you move them ten feet? If they moved them ten feet away the light would actually shed better than being blocked by tree trunk and other branches, even if it was wise to trim that branch blocking the light.

City Manager Iglesias: We can talk to FPL about that. I'm sure they've done some photo metrics on it, because trees on one side, but not on the other, so you have coverage on either side. So, I'm sure there were photo metrics done and I'll have our Public Works Director check.

Vice Mayor Anderson: You can never assume that's a dangerous thing to do, and the other is the Calvin rating on the light, the color of the light.

Public Works Director Diaz: 3,000 Calvin.

Vice Mayor Anderson: 3,000.

Public Works Director Diaz: That's what was on the specs that I signed up. Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: What was the Calvin rating on the lights we had previously? – 2,500, 2,000?

Public Works Director Diaz: I'll have to double-check. I want to say probably 2,700.

Vice Mayor Anderson: 2,700.

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Public Works Director Diaz: But the new lights are LEDs, high pressure sodium. I'll have to double-check for sure, but that's my recollection.

Commissioner Fernandez: The lighting hasn't really been that big of an issue. In fact, I drove by a street that had them on both sides and it was adequately lit, but I felt like the old orange lights were more in your face than these are.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Okay. Well, I mean, we all hear from different folks.

Commissioner Fernandez: Exactly, of course, in front of your house, that's a different story.

Public Works Director Diaz: The LED lights tend to have a more even distribution than the old high-pressure sodium. You get used to one, you notice a difference when you still see both.

City Manager Iglesias: High-pressure sodium is something that's passing away.

Public Works Director Diaz: Right, and that was actually some of the discussion with FPL that we don't know when, but eventually they are going to go the way of the incandescent lightbulbs. You'll eventually they just won't be available anymore.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, from a public safety standpoint, I can tell you that the sodium lights make it very difficult to identify somebody skin color, okay. So, moving to LED will make descriptions or identifications of subjects much more accurate – clothing, color, everything.

City Manager Iglesias: That's correct Vice Mayor. It provides you much higher visual field.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes, because the color of the light that's hitting an object will affect what the color of a painting is or this surface here. I noticed that many years ago, but of course I took the physics of art, not typical physics when I went to college, so I understood that concept early on. So, that's my concern about any suggestion that some folks would make is stay with sodium vapor, besides from the energy impact, that's color distortion that's going to be a problem for enforcement purposes.

Mayor Lago: So, kind of close it out because we have a lot of things on the agenda. What is the will of the Commission?

Commissioner Menendez: Mine is based on what everybody is saying. My two points are the concern of the community on these changes is prevalent and I still think that...

Commissioner Castro: So, a discussion with the community regarding this?

Commissioner Menendez: Well, I think people seem to have been caught by surprise that these changes were made and its like I'm going to use my reference is TV – Bewitched, Darren Stevens, they switched Darren, her husband, hey its Darren – yes, but that's not the same Darren. Same

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thing with these lights. People are used to the lights in the community and then all of a sudden, we made the switch without maybe engaging the community.

Vice Mayor Anderson: That was before you and I were elected.

Commissioner Menendez: Well, I was around when Bewitched was on, but yes, I agree with you.

Commissioner Fernandez: To your point, I think that's one of the issues here. This decision was made before most of us were elected and I know that they told you back then black and green were the only options, but there may be an appetite for a different option. So, what I would like to see is for the city to halt any installations in the North Gables until we address this with FPL trying to find a different color option and height that works better with our community and addressing the concerns that the Vice Mayor has about the possibility of moving them so that they don't impact our trees.

Commissioner Menendez: And my only other statement basically has to do with the trees and everything else, which is a biblical statement, Luke 8:16, no one lights a light and hides it in the clay jar or puts it under a bed, I guess or puts it in a tree. So, that makes no sense why they would not even notice FPL like hey, its inside the tree. These are two things that just common sense tells you there's something a little bit off.

Commissioner Castro: So would you like to...

Commissioner Fernandez: Make a motion instructing the Manager to...

City Manager Iglesias: Stop all work.

Commissioner Fernandez: In the North Gables. The Mayor mentioned in the South Gables people don't have an issue, it's not the historic part. I would say north of Coral Way.

City Manager Iglesias: Where are we on the current project?

Public Works Director Diaz: The only three locations and just to clarify, the only lights that we're doing – the city entered into a certain agreement, called a PL-1 Agreement, between 1990 and 2002, its about 400 lights in that agreement, but only 140 of those are actually the silver lights, the rest are black already. So, the only locations that we're talking about is North and South Greenway, that's about 86 lights; 19 lights along Harlano and Wood; 32 lights along San Amaro and Camposano; and then there's 3 lights on San Lorenzo east of Ponce, and most of the lights in that area they are already black.

Mayor Lago: San Amaro, Camposano, those are already met.

Public Works Director Diaz: I think they are mostly finished. I'm not 100 percent sure, I have to touch base with FPL. I actually drove by Camposano the other day and I don't think there's any left, and I'm not sure what the status is on Harlano and Wood. When I talked to them last, they
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were planning on being done by January, so I have to touch base with FPL and see what's left and follow your direction.

Mayor Lago: It's not my item but work with the Commissioner. I spoke to Mayor Slesnick about it. If that's the case, then we move on to try to find a way to see if we can modify the lights, to make them a little bit more palatable in the North Gables. I think that is the next step in the right direction to find a solution that will kind of soften the approach. I don't have an issue with the way it looks. I haven't heard from anybody that they are concerned – we didn't even have lights on San Amaro, to be honest with you. Now it's well-lit and it looks beautiful, in my opinion. But I think the North Gables area is the one that we should pay most attention to in regard to what the residents are concerned about, the issues of the aesthetic appeal. And also, please make sure we notify individuals when they call, this is my last point on this issue, that these are not historic lights.

Public Works Director Diaz: Correct.

Mayor Lago: They are not historic lights. They are not made of metal, they are made of fiberglass and when you get really, really close to them, a lot of them were just falling apart. Just so people know. They'll drive by and say hey, those are metal poles, and its historic, its not. Those are the White Way Lights; they are not the White Way Lights.

Public Works Director Diaz: The lights in question that are being done right now that were installed between 1998 and 2002.

City Manager Iglesias: These are essentially inexpensive lights. So does this apply only to areas where we have silver lights. Where we don't have silver lights we can proceed.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes, wherever we have the silver lights, not where we don't have lights or where we have the black lights, I think that's fine. It's where we have the silver lights.

Vice Mayor Anderson: The areas that I have heard concern were around the golf course. You're talking Granada where people have such bigger yards, big wide street. I've heard no concern about placing...

Commissioner Fernandez: But you still have the tree canopy issue there and they still haven't gotten into that area, or at least as of this morning they hadn't.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Alright.

Mayor Lago: There's direction. Good, Mr. Manager.

City Manager Iglesias: Yes.

Public Works Director Diaz: I'll get on the phone with FPL.

Commissioner Fernandez: Can we take a vote.
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City Manager Iglesias: I have no issue.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Can we vote on it.

City Attorney Suarez: If you'd like a resolution, you can make a motion. The Manager seems to...

Commissioner Menendez: Everybody seems to be in support.

Commissioner Fernandez: I will make a motion.

Commissioner Castro: I'll second it.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Do we need a motion?

Commissioner Castro: He did. He did do it.

City Clerk Urquia: All in favor.

All: Aye.

City Clerk Urquia: Thank you.

City Manager Iglesias: And just to be clear, this only applies to where there's silver lights.

Commissioner Fernandez: Silver lights.

City Manager Iglesias: And any other area new or where there's non-silver lights we can proceed.

Commissioner Fernandez: That's fine.