

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-4
June 8, 2021
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Michael Mena

Commissioner Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Jorge Fors, Jr.

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Attorney, Miriam Ramos

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Assistant City Attorney, Naomi Levi-Garcia

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item G-4 [1:44 p.m.]

Annexation discussion of High Pines and Ponce Davis
(Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: G-4 is a discussion of High Pines and Ponce Davis. I wanted to talk to my colleagues and have a brief discussion about their appetite to have staff commence moving forward in a bifurcated approach. We are not currently discussing Little Gables; we are discussing High Pines and Ponce Davis. I've been speaking to a lot of residents and new residents of that area that have called me or that I have run into, one of them being my brother and I want to put on the record, he just recently moved to Ponce Davis, who has asked me if they would be interested in potentially having the City of Coral Gables consider annexation of this area. I wanted to know what my colleagues how they felt on this issue, especially now when we have, some of the people who were concerned about the service, and you heard some of the individuals that voted against annexation of High Pines, but they wanted to still use our new Fire Station. So, you have a lot of things that are coming down the line where potentially considered.

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Vice Mayor Lago: I'll give you, my feeling. I feel very strongly about it actually, just because we went through the process already once. I'm 100 percent in favor of annexing High Pines and Ponce Davis. I was in favor the last go around. My problem is the process with the county. We went through an entire lengthy process. It was very painstaking, a lot of community workshops, getting votes from the residents to make sure the people who live in the neighborhood were on board. This was a whole thing, right. And at the end of the process, after being led to believe that the county was on board with idea, it was a bait and switch from the county. First of all, at the end, they wanted to sort of horse trade and impose financial terms on the deal that had never been brought up once throughout the whole process. They wanted us to give them...

Mayor Lago: A piece of property on 72nd Avenue.

Vice Mayor Mena: A piece of property on 72nd Avenue worth millions of dollars. At the end, at the finish line, Oh, by the way, we also want this piece of property; and then even then, what became evident is that because this is a community of high worth homes and therefore high property tax revenues that its valuable to the county and what I recall happening is that the county's fire union got involved, there was a gentleman, I forget his name now, was running for Congress at the time, he was the President of their fire union, and they kind of got torpedoed. So, the only thing I would say, and I don't think it's a lot to ask and maybe Commissioner Regalado who is new now and wasn't there at the time can spearhead.

Mayor Lago: And Mayor Cava.

Vice Mayor Mena: And Mayor Cava. My ask to them, which I think is a fair ask would simply be, tell us upfront, commit upfront, tell us what the process is, and if we follow that process and the people that live in this community support it, then it's a done deal, but you know upfront. What I don't want is to reengage in the entire process just to have the county pull the rug out from under us at the end again. It's a famous saying, fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me. I don't want to go through the same process just to have them pull it out from under us.

Mayor Lago: If my colleagues would support me, I would ask that they give us the leeway from the Manager, the ACM, and our City Attorney and myself to go have a conversation with the County Attorney, the County Mayor, the County Manager, and our representative on the Commission, Commissioner Regalado to have this discussion.

Vice Mayor Mena: Absolutely.

Mayor Lago: I think that we have new members at the county, and I think its an opportunity to discuss why this makes sense and move in that direction. But first, I want your guidance and I want your go-ahead on this issue.

Vice Mayor Mena: I'll let my colleagues chime in, but from my perspective, again, and I want to be incredibly clear about it, to me it's a no-brainer for both sides, in terms of annexation for this area, because first of all, I live about a block and-a-half away from High Pines. I know the area very well. It is kind of bizarre that its unincorporated Dade, it makes sense for it to be part of Coral
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Gables. We talked about this then. I've had many people who live in High Pines upon news of the new Fire House we are putting in there on Sunset telling me, are you telling me that this Fire House right there across the street can't service me? – and I'm like, no, they can't.

Mayor Lago: I have a better kind of issue that I've been dealing with lately is, people who have moved into High Pines and Ponce Davis and they've called me and they say, wait a minute, I had to wait 15 minutes for a police officer to come to my home over something as simple as slip and fall, or my alarm went off – that didn't happen in the Gables, I go, I understand, but you left the Gables, and you moved into High Pines-Ponce Davis, you found a lot, you built your home, whatever the case may be. It's a beautiful area. You are not going to get the same service. So now they are starting to call and advocate on behalf of us entertaining going to the county and restarting this process.

Vice Mayor Mena: And look, we all remember from the first go-around, there were people in those neighborhoods that are against it, they don't want to change and there always going to be.

Mayor Lago: But I've spoken to people who are against it, who are in favor.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yes – and so, what I envision the process being is the county says, okay, here's the process you have to go through, and if you go through it and the answer is yes, we are committed. We then have to do whatever we do, but the final decision will be with the people who live in those neighborhoods. I agree. If they don't want to be annexed, then they should certainly have a voice in that process. Last time, based on our polling, they were in favor and I think we had a higher, I don't remember now the exact numbers, but we had a higher threshold than what was even required, and we still met that threshold, as far as people in the community, in that community supporting it. But the last thing I would say is also, because I think it's a good idea, I think it's a no-brainer for both sides. I also think we need to get feedback from our current residents, current residents of Coral Gables, whether they think it's a good idea to annex this neighborhood as well, but I think that would be part of the process, the community workshop process and feedback process that we would undertake. So again, my main point is, we need buy-in and commitment and really binding commitment if that's possible, from the county on the frontend, because I was really disappointed that after all that last time at the end, it just completely changed at the end and it was really a colossal waste of time unfortunately; and I know you don't want that, none of us wants to go through a process that's a waste of time. We want it to happen and so, we just need to make sure the county is supportive.

Mayor Lago: I agree.

Commissioner Fors: I think the benefits for both us and the folks that live in that area definitely merits another shot. I think it's a great start to commence a dialogue between our top city officials and the county's, especially with new leadership there, with different points of view on the matter and the new Fire House. I've also spoken to folks who are against it the first time around that is now for it for various reasons. I also know people who remain against it, but I do know people have changed their mind. I also think that its not our first rodeo with the same exact area, so maybe I'm wrong, but I presume that some of the work, some of the groundwork has already been laid,

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in terms of annexing that specific area. Regarding getting a commitment from the county ahead of time, that would be fantastic if it was possible, probably not possible, but I was discussing this with the City Attorney. She explained to me that there is a proposed change in the procedure possibly, or that we had heard something about that which would at least, I don't believe it bind anybody ahead of time, but it would potentially allow us to find out sooner in the process whether its going to be something that the Board of County Commissioners is going to support or not.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Good afternoon, Naomi Levi-Garcia, Assistant City Attorney and Intergovernmental Affairs Manager. Yes, there's a proposed change in the process an ordinance has passed on first reading, which would basically empower the Board of County Commissioners to have more discretion on whether to refer complete annexation applications to the Planning Advisory Board. So, they could decide not to refer it based purely on a political decision and then we'd know pretty early in the process there is no legs, and it won't be moving forward.

Commissioner Fors: Okay. So, its slightly changed. Certainly not binding, they can go to the committee and then come back and get voted against anyway. Is that true, my assumption that it would be slightly less work this time around, because we've done it once already or not really?

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Well, the feasibility report, I believe it would be easier to update that, so you all up-to-date numbers and you'd be aware of what kind of staffing adjustments would have to be made, but we'd have to start the process over in terms of petitions, community meetings, and all that, that would have to start from inception.

Commissioner Fors: And by the way, I want to say even if we have to start from inception, I still have an appetite for it.

Commissioner Menendez: I think this is the right way to proceed and I agree with everyone, all my colleagues, we need some assurance from the county. We want to go through that entire cycle then at the end find out that's a possibility. And I agree with Vice Mayor Mena, that we also need to make sure that current Coral Gables residents are comfortable, well informed as to why we are doing this, how we are doing this, and how it benefits them too, because I'm sure they'll be, I think it was mentioned earlier, staffing issues perhaps with Fire and Police. Obviously, the folks in that area the response time is going to be much improved, but I'm sure they'll be concerns in other parts of currently Coral Gables and we just need to make sure that everyone is comfortable and assured that it can happen, and it should happen and for the right reasons. I support the initiative.

Mayor Lago: Perfect.

Commissioner Anderson: I share all your concerns, Commissioner Mena, with the concerns I've heard from residents is concerning the staffing issues, are we going to increase staff. So, I think with the education period we can accomplish that.

City Attorney Ramos: I was just going to ask if the Commission wanted to direct staff today, or you want to bring a resolution back at the next meeting?

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Mayor Lago: I asked the Commission to give me guidance and I would request that myself and our team can go to the county and start these conversations with Chairman Diaz and the Mayor, along with our Commissioner who represents the district.

Commissioner Menendez: How best can we collectively as a body...

City Attorney Ramos: I suggest a vote directing staff to initiate the annexation process for that area and to make Mayor Lago the Commission's representative in those meetings.

Commissioner Menendez: I'll make the motion.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Just to clarify, Madam City Attorney, are we to the point where we want to initiate the annexation process or are we to the point where you want to just begin the conversations and see.

Mayor Lago: I want to have a conversation, like the Vice Mayor mentioned with the individuals in the county that would lead us down a direction where we could have, again like Commissioner Fors mentioned, we are never going to get that signed, sealed and delivered with a bow on, but at least we can get more assurances that with the change in government and the change in leadership at the county that they'll be more interested in listening to us and allowing us to present our case, and by the way, allowing for the people to speak, because a lot of these elected officials in the county one day they will go back to cities and we know what's in the best interest of the residents, because we speak to the residents every single day and what I believe is in the best interest is shoring up that 57th Avenue corridor and its completely in line with our aesthetic what we are looking for in regards to greenspace and I think that we as a community can offer a lot to that area, and I think it just makes sense. So that's what I'm asking for. I'm asking for the Commission to approve me, along with the Manager, the City Attorney, and the ACM and whatever other staff we may need, like yourself, to start having conversations and schedule meetings with the county.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yes, I think that's an important distinction. I would say to have initial discussions and then the Mayor can come back and kind of tell us.

City Attorney Ramos: You are just making him your delegate for right now.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yes – without committing to the full fledge process until he has a better sense of where the county is.

City Attorney Ramos: Somebody wants to make the motion.

Commissioner Menendez: I made it.

Vice Mayor Mena: I'll second it.

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Commissioner Anderson: Yes
Commissioner Fors: Yes
Vice Mayor Mena: Yes
Commissioner Menendez: Yes
Mayor Lago: Yes
(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Thank you.