

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-2
January 26, 2021
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Raul Valdes-Fauli

Vice Mayor Vince Lago

Commissioner Pat Keon

Commissioner Michael Mena

Commissioner Jorge Fors

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Attorney, Miriam Ramos

Assistant City Attorney, Naomi Levi-Garcia

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item G-2 [10:18 a.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission supporting the designation of South Dixie Highway/U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, from the Miami-Dade/Monroe County line to State Road 9A/Interstate 95 Northbound as "Harriet Tubman Highway"/U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, including that portion of the roadway that lies within the city limits of Coral Gables, from SW 57th Avenue to Booker Street.

(Sponsored by Commissioner Keon)

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Then City Commission items. Vice Mayor, you have several and Commissioner Keon has one. Let's take hers first.

City Attorney Ramos: G-2 is a resolution of the City Commission supporting the designation of South Dixie Highway/U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, from Miami-Dade to Monroe line State Road 9A/Interstate 95 Northbound as "Harriet Tubman Highway"/U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, including that portion of the roadway that lies within the city limits of City of Coral Gables, from SW 57th Avenue to Booker Street. I know Ms. Levi-Garcia is also available if needed.

Commissioner Keon: I -- Yeah, I would like -- could she present this, please? Naomi, are you there?

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Yes, I'm on. Can you hear me?

Commissioner Keon: Yes.

City Attorney Ramos: Yes.

Commissioner Keon: Thank you.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: I see that my camera is malfunctioning, but as long as you can hear me. So, this is a resolution supporting the designation of South Dixie Highway as Harriet Tubman Highway, including a portion that lies within the City of Coral Gables, from 57th Avenue to Booker Street.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Naomi, you're not coming through very clearly.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Can you hear me now?

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Better, I think, yeah.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Okay. So, this resolution supports the designation of South Dixie Highway to Harriet Tubman Highway. The County passed a resolution supporting the designation and urging the renaming back in February. They requested that all municipalities that have a portion of South Dixie Highway also support the designation. At this time, all other municipalities have done so, so it is now up to the Commission whether to take this action. At this point, no existing signs would be switched out. We would simply -- FDOT would simply add two designation signs within the City, likely around the area of Booker Avenue, one facing northbound and one facing southbound. So, no existing signage would be switched out. That is a separate effort that needs to be undertaken by the Florida Legislature. So, this would really just be the addition of two of those brown historic designation signs. I've included a photo of what those signs would look like with the item. So, I'd be happy to take any questions.

Commissioner Keon: Could you just explain where this goes from here? This was first approved or started at the County Commission level and went to all of the cities. We're the remaining city that hasn't acted on this. In order for them to take it -- do they take it from here to the State Legislature? Is that right?

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Yes. So, in February of 2020, the County passed their resolution, so assuming that all the municipalities involved also passed resolutions in support -- and you are correct. We are the remaining city that hasn't done so -- those signs, those designation signs will be erected. Now, for the actual renaming of South Dixie Highway, it needs to go to the State Legislature. They need to approve of it. And at that point, the feasibility study needs to be completed by FDOT to look at the cost and the time that would be involved with actually switching out signage. And if that's successful, you know, which again is a separate effort, we might see signage switched out in the future. But at this point, we're only looking at the installation of the brown designation signs, and there would only be two within the City of Coral Gables.

Commissioner Keon: Okay, thank you.

Commissioner Mena: What do you mean by a separate effort? I'm not really understanding what that means. The -- are we changing the name or not changing the name? Isn't it the State...

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: So, there...

Commissioner Mena: That changes the name. And also, can you explain to me what update you have, Naomi, since the last time we discussed this and voted?

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Sure. So, the County's resolution combined efforts; one, the designation of South Dixie Highway to Harriet Tubman Highway, and it also -- and urged and in addition to their legislative priorities for the renaming of South Dixie Highway. This resolution before you today is for the designation. We've parsed them so that it's easier to consider, and so that the outcome is very clear for you. So, the designation can take place without State action. It's the installation of those brown signs. As long as the cities are on board, FDOT can move forward. The renaming of South Dixie Highway so that it will no longer be South Dixie Highway, but Harriet Tubman Highway, moving forward and all signs will have to be switched out, is a larger effort that requires State action and acceptance. And as far as an update from the last time this came before you, at that time, only some municipalities had passed their resolutions in support. Today, nine of the ten, with Coral Gables being the tenth, have passed resolutions in support of a designation or renaming.

Commissioner Mena: Is there any particular...

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Does that answer your question?

Commissioner Mena: Yeah. I guess -- well, my only follow-up there would be, what is the logic behind -- it sort of seems like putting the cart before the horse. We're going to designate, but then the process is going to start with the State. Why don't we allow the process to play out with the State, who really is the decision-maker over this highway?

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Well, I think the answer to that is that FDOT wants to move forward with the installation of the signage. All other cities are on board with it, and so do we want to be the one city that's left out of the loop.

Commissioner Keon: I don't mind being the one city that's, I mean, left out of the loop if I didn't think that there was some merit to what they're doing. And I don't know whether we need to put up signs yet or not. I mean, I think that we are -- I think the name -- you know, someone had talked earlier at the first reading that we -- I guess we just deferred it because I didn't really understand what the issue between -- of Dixie was and why it -- you're so used to calling it that. We're used to it being that. I -- you know, I guess I -- it didn't -- I didn't live in an era or live in a family or live in a community where those issues seemed to be particularly big issues, so it was, you know, after that meeting, when I looked in -- because someone brought up that it was -- you know, referred to the Mason-Dixon line. Actually, I think that Brett Gillis had sent us something that it was -- the north-south connection was called Dixie Highway, just as there was a east-west connection road that was Lincoln Highway, and a north-south road that was Dixie Highway to encourage, I guess, some transportation of goods or get whatever between the North and the South. What I do know is that after reading on the issues of, you know, where the Mason -- you know, that it was related to the Mason-Dixon line, and that, you know, historically, that boundary later became informally -- was the parallel that separated the free states from the slave states. And during the Civil Rights Movement in the 50s and 60s, African-Americans frequently spoke about Dixie as a relic of the Confederacy and a reminder of decades of white domination, segregation and the exploitation of African-Americans. So, based on those issues and that history, I think that it gives us reason to change or to begin or be part of that process that changed that name. So, just changing -- you know, passing this today gives the opportunity for the County, as its legislative priority, to move forward with the State and change the name of this from a name that has taken on a meaning of exploitation and is...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Commissioner.

Commissioner Keon: The minds of many a, you know...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: For discussion purposes, you want to make a motion?

Commissioner Keon: Yes, I'll make the motion to move it, please.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Is there a second?

Vice Mayor Lago: I'll second the motion for discussion.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Alright. Commissioner Fors, you want -- Do you have any comments?

Commissioner Fors: You know, I'm inclined -- I think I'd be viewing this differently if this dealt with a City right-of-way. The fact that now nine out of ten municipalities have voted in favor of changing the name, and that we're talking about a state road that runs through many of those municipalities, it sort of inclines me to play ball with the rest of the municipalities and the County that wants to change the name, but I'm curious to hear what my other colleagues have to say about it, who haven't added in their thoughts, if any.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you, Commissioner. Commissioner Mena, you have any other comments?

Commissioner Mena: You know, I...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Vice Mayor? Oh, I'm sorry.

Commissioner Mena: I'm very uncomfortable with this whole process. I don't think it's our decision. I think it's the State's decision. I don't know why FDOT has decided to move forward

with this designation prior to any actual name change, so this is really -- I don't know what's going on behind the scenes here. I don't know what politics are at play. I don't understand why we don't allow the State, who's in charge of naming this, to make a decision. And if the State, who's in charge of this highway, decides to rename it, then it will be renamed by the State, which has jurisdiction over its name. The rest of this strikes me as political pressure. I don't know exactly what's going on because it's really not in our purview to make this decision. There's nothing hanging in the balance, as far as I know. I keep being told that, "Well, we're the only hold out." Hold out from what exactly? The State hasn't even started the process. So, you know, broader picture, I'm, generally speaking, not a fan of erasing history. There's -- history should be discussed and analyzed and is certainly subject to criticism. You know, I mentioned last time I have concerns about where this stops. You know, we could start talking about Columbus Street and Pizarro Street, you know, we could start talking about DeSoto. We could start talking about statue of George Merrick outside this building and other buildings named after him. Is that really what we want to do? That's not to me a priority. To me, I'd rather address the actual underlying issues that people may or may not have concerns about that are present today. I recognize sensitivity out there to this word, I appreciate it. Certainly, I have nothing against Harriet Tubman. I think she's certainly deserving of any accolades that she receives and happy to consider naming things after her, that's not a problem. But again, I don't know what we're doing with this. It's not our purview to rename this highway, and I think that the State should consider it, render a decision and exercise its authority to do so or not. And whatever they do decide, we'll abide by it. You know, when it's -- when things are in the inverse and we want to do things that relate to the County's jurisdiction, you know, the County is very clear about what the limits of our authority are and where their authority begins. But in this instance, it just feels like we're putting the cart before the horse. Let's...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you.

Commissioner Mena: Let's put it in front of the State and see what they decide. That's my position here today.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you, Commissioner. Vice Mayor, your comments.

Vice Mayor Lago: I couldn't have said it any better than Commissioner Mena.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Alright.

Vice Mayor Lago: This is just a pure example of playing politics when what we should be doing here is concentrating on issues that are affecting this community on a day-to-day basis. As a Hispanic American living in this country, you know, I think that many of us have felt pressured in regards to certain issues. And one of my biggest concerns -- and Commissioner Mena touched it -- touched upon it -- was the issue of the fervor that's growing now in regards to George Merrick. And I think we need to be very careful. I think these are conversations that we need to have as a community. We need to reach out to people in this community. We need to talk to people in this community. This is a decision that, again, is not going to be made by this Commission. This Commission is not going to go and install those signs on US-1. It's going to be the State that's going to take that measure. So, I just feel a little bit uncomfortable moving forward. I think that this is, obviously, like I said it before, politics. There's so many more issues that we need to address. At the end of the day, the naming or not the naming, whatever happens is going to be in the hands of the State. We need to start really moving in and addressing and bringing forth issues that are addressed -- that are affecting our community, and not hiding behind just renamings and re-brandings, which at the end of the day, the scars still lie underneath.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you, Vice Mayor.

Commissioner Keon: But I also will tell you...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: I am...

Commissioner Keon: That...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Let me...

Commissioner Keon: They're not asking us to -- oh, I'm sorry. Yes, go ahead.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: I am for this. It's symbolic, I agree. But we are very much for symbolism. As the Vice Mayor said, we should focus and deal with issues that affect the community and this affects the community in terms of symbolism, and we are doing that. Vice Mayor, the next five items are yours and you very rightly are dealing with issues that affect our community. Symbolism, symbols are very, very important, and this is one of them, and I am for passing this. And for passing this as a gesture, like has been done all over the country, of respect for our brothers and sisters that suffered in part of our history, and so I am for it. And if there are no other comments, Vice Mayor -- I mean, Commissioner, you made the motion and it was seconded. Will you call the roll, please?

Commissioner Keon: Thank you. I just want to make the point that we're not renaming. We're supporting the County as they go forward and work on this. So, this is a support for a County effort. Could you call the roll, please, then?

Commissioner Mena: When you say supporting the County, what are we...

Commissioner Keon: It is on the -- it is...

Commissioner Mena: Supporting what?

Commissioner Keon: As...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: It is...

Commissioner Keon: Go ahead, Mayor.

Commissioner Mena: The County can't rename it.

Commissioner Keon: The County can't rename...

Commissioner Mena: So what are we supporting?

Commissioner Keon: The County has made it part of their legislative priorities for the upcoming session. They will go to the State to ask for the...

Commissioner Mena: They're going to do that regardless.

Commissioner Keon: Renaming. They are going to do that and then they are going asking for the support of the cities that this highway goes through; nine of them has supported it. We're only asking that we support it also, so as they go forward, they can say they have the support of the local communities for this item. And as the Mayor said, yes, it is symbolic, and our effort is support. We are not going to the State, we're not doing it ourselves. We are supporting the County and their legislative priorities for the upcoming session, just as we do with other communities and the County does with us too. We do it for the School Board. We support items that are part of their legislative agendas so that they can speak with a stronger voice.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: We asked the Bahamas to ban off-shore drilling, and we do a lot of these things.

Commissioner Keon: We do.

Commissioner Mena: But not...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Will you call the roll?

Commissioner Mena: We -- let's not use the word "we" too broadly. I don't sponsor those type of items.

Commissioner Mena: No.

Commissioner Fors: No.

Commissioner Keon: Yes.

Vice Mayor Lago: No.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Yes.

(Vote: 2-3)