

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item H-7
March 24, 2009
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

Interim City Manager, Maria Alberro Jimenez
City Attorney, Elizabeth Hernandez
City Clerk, Walter J. Foeman
City Clerk Staff, Billy Urquia
Director of Parks and Recreation, Fred Couceyro

Public Speaker(s)

H-7 [Start: 12:31:00 p.m.]

Status Report on Parks and Open Space Land Acquisition

Mayor Slesnick: I’m sorry Maria I said two, but you actually have H-7, too.

Interim City Manager Jimenez: Yes sir, we have a status report on parks and open space land acquisition – Fred.

Mayor Slesnick: Before we get to that, come on up, but I just want to ask for a report down the road, and it was brought to mind by the bridge item; we voted sometime back to make sure that the County was building a Mediterranean design passover, over U.S.-1, that’s the last we ever heard, they never submitted any other drawings, they never submitted any other comments; and I get questions all the time, what’s the status?- I have no earthly idea what the status is. I have a feeling that they kind of went their way from here kind of mad; and I don’t know what the story is.

Interim City Manager Jimenez: My understanding is that there has been some issue on land acquisition on private property to create the overpass, but I will ask Public Works to check with the State to see where they are with that.

Mayor Slesnick: OK. Well that’s very devastating news, if we really believe if they actually can’t build this, OK. Thank you. Fred.

Mr. Couceyro: Good afternoon. For the record Fred Couceyro, Parks and Recreation Director. This report was borne out of a request from the City Commission to look at the available land that is presently for sale in our City due to the recent conditions and looking at whether a purchase would be feasible of some land for park use. Now the presentation: what I would do is quickly run through all our park definitions and inventory, just so you can get a base of what our Master Plan is and how we look at our park lands in terms of determining which lands we should pursue for purchase; I'll discuss a little bit our service radius standards, which is how we look at how these park lands are meeting our needs; and I will have some maps to be able to show you the gaps in the service, and then I'll run down a little bit of the analysis I did of the available land and what the recommendations are. We really have four park definitions we are going to be concentrating on for this presentation. We have our community facilities; our community facilities are larger facilities that have a diverse amount of activities, some include swimming pools, gymnasiums, performing, community centers, they are some of our larger facilities. In addition to that we also have district and regional parks that are also similar, they are larger, they have...some of them are natural based, but they are large pieces of land, and they are destinations for the public to go to and enjoy those parks and open spaces. Some of those examples are the Youth Center, golf courses, tennis centers; some of the region and district ones that I mentioned are the Matheson Hammock Park, Fairchild Tropical Gardens, the Hardee Matheson Preserve, Chapman Field. The next two definitions I'll tell you are really the two that we concentrate on as we are trying to find land for acquisition, are our neighborhood parks; now these are what we call in our match plan is walk-to facilities; residents may walk or they may bike to the park, there could be a diverse amount of activities as well. Some may include, doesn't necessarily have to include playground apparatus, there could be court games, there is a picnic area, some of them just have a large amount of landscaping, a nice scenic view, benches, doesn't necessarily have to be a playground to be a neighborhood park; we have twenty-nine (29) of those in our City.

Commissioner Cabrera: Fred do you still have the definition, of a passive park?

Mr. Couceyro: No, what we have is the next definition is urban open space, is what that would be the same classification. The neighborhood parks that we have listed here...

Mayor Slesnick: Did you ever get in touch with the Rotary to find out what they are doing?

Mr. Couceyro: The Rotary as we are doing the development, they are going to help us contribute some of the benches; they've actually done some pick ups, they do some...they come talk to me about when we talk about the sign...

Mayor Slesnick: Go back to the original resolution to find out what was pledged.

Mr. Couceyro: There was an original pledge of money, I'm not sure it specified what the amounts would be for the future, but I will go back and look at it again, absolutely.

Mayor Slesnick: Listen I am a Rotarian, I'm not trying to...but I want to make sure though that when we look people in the eye and say why did you name the park, that we can truthfully say because Rotary is working with us on this.

Mr. Couceyro: Absolutely. Strangely enough Rotary is the first one up there on the list; these are all of our neighborhood parks that we have. Our next definition which is the one that you are referring to as a passive space, they are known as urban open spaces, they are usually less than a quarter of an acre, they typically contain landscaped areas, and they are usually limited in the facilities in improvement that they have; examples could be traffic circles, parkway boulevard median, plazas, malls, courthouse squares and promenades. Some of the notable urban open spaces that we have are the Granada entrance, Freedom Plaza, Flagler entrance, Alcazar Plaza, Columbus Plaza, Biltmore Park, De Soto Fountain, as well. In essence our inventory when you include the County land and the Miami-Dade facilities, we have a large inventory, we have twenty-five hundred acres, which is thirty percent of the City of Coral Gables, the challenge when you look at the needs is due to the unique geography of the City. We have looked at service radius standards in terms of meeting the needs of the community, and the service rating standards those provide for the proper distribution of all the parks and facilities. These were the standards that were created in conjunction with the Planning Department in creating the update of the land use and comprehensive plan that will be coming to you soon, the service radius standards area, a large part of parks and recreational open element. The service radius standards, what they provide, they provide a circle so you can see this one that's up before you is the community facilities and parks, and this one says that with our service radius for community facility there should be a five mile radius of service, which is a fifteen minute drive, and for district and regional parks it's a ten minute, ten miles with a thirty minute drive. As the map will show the City meets all the standards for those types of facilities, with all of the stuff that we have in terms of our county facilities and of our large city facilities, we meet the standards for those two currently. In terms of the urban open space, we try to do for service radius a quarter of a mile equal to a five minute walk. In this map though there are some service gaps that come up on certain quadrants up in the north, northwest, midwest, and some of the south region, but we also, we don't look at this map alone, we also combine it with our neighborhood parks map as well; the neighborhood park is a five mile radius, which is a ten minute walk and those gaps are much smaller, we have just a couple; we just have a couple on the western side and of course we still have some on the south side, but what's important to notice since we do have those regional parks on the south side, we do have services being met for park needs.

Mayor Slesnick: Fred, even though we don't own them or pay for them doesn't the old Parrot Jungle and things like that count.

Mr. Couceyro: Yes, I'm glad you mentioned that. On our maps you'll see those yellow areas on the sides, in Parks and Recreation, we try to get our full community inventory, we look at, even though they are not run by us, things that serve the community during that radius, they are in there; the Y.M.C.A. that kind of thing.

Mayor Slesnick: Because it would make little sense especially with budget challenges for us to open up another big park across the street from Parrot Jungle, so we can say we have a park there too, I mean, that doesn't make any sense.

Mr. Couceyro: You are absolutely right, and that's what we look at in our analysis, the gaps would have to make sense in terms of if there is something right across the street from the city limit, we wouldn't pursue that land, it wouldn't be feasible.

Mayor Slesnick: Chapman Field – tell me about Chapman Field the ballpark down by Deering Bay.

Commissioner Withers: A lot of mosquitoes there.

Mayor Slesnick: But that area is in our City, is it not?

Mr. Couceyro: Yes it is.

Mayor Slesnick: Well some people say its not in Coral Gables, but I say its got to be in Coral Gables, its east of Old Cutler...

Mr. Couceyro: It's a County facility, its run by the County, and they I don't know if the correct term is lease or license it out, but there are some youth groups that use it for their baseball, their score leagues, optimist league...

Commissioner Withers: You don't see many neighbors eating lunch there in the afternoon.

Mayor Slesnick: They lease public parks for...

Mr. Couceyro: It's like a....there's a youth group that comes and plays ball there, it's a partnership.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: That's a very good question; the number that you showed up initially where we had thirty percent of our overall acreage that is applicable to parks; I assume that both Matheson Hammock and this Chapman Field make up a good portion of that number.

Mr. Couceyro: Yes they do, and that's part of the challenge, you just can't look at those numbers you have to look at the geography of where it is; and our City which is a long City, north and south. For the analysis...when we combine the two maps which is the urban open space and the neighborhood parks, there really is a small amount of space that is not taken by either one of those designations, so other than the south area, which we discussed already with the county parks, there is just a couple of gaps which I will go into a second.

Mayor Slesnick: But why are there gaps in the south area because there is that gigantic county park there.

Mr. Couceyro: Exactly.

Mayor Slesnick: So you count that you said.

Mr. Couceyro: Well, we count it as community and district parks, but when we are using just the designation as a neighborhood park or urban open space, that park doesn't meet the criteria for that type of park, but that's when we do the analysis. It still serves that need, even though it is not designated as such. For the available land analysis what we were looking at is, we have eight hundred thousand dollars left from the G.O. (General Obligation) Bond that was earmarked for land acquisition. As you may recall we purchased Maggiore Park for close to one point four million, we had two point two million for the total amount. So we have eight hundred thousand left that we can use for land acquisition. What we try to do is we looked at all the available properties that were listed for sale in the City under seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars, that would give us the amount we'd be able to purchase it, if we had no other administrative cost, we could do that within that allotment of money that we have with the G.O. Bond. What we did is we researched the viability toward addressing the need in the plan according to those radiuses that I showed you, and also taking into account certain things such as the regional parks or certain areas that are already serving those, whether there is a circle there or not. As I mentioned, we didn't need to fulfill any of the community and district facility inventories, we covered that. The urban open space inventory showed the deficiency as did Neighborhood Park, but when the both classifications were combined, as I said, very small amounts. The areas of deficiency that we found were on the southern portion, which as I've explained it's kind of off set by the County facilities. The western border of the City north of U.S.-1, and the northern border of the City near Little Gables. This first area that I kind of zoomed in on, this is the western border that you can see....

Mayor Slesnick: It's the first map we can read.

Mr. Couceyro: Sorry, I was going to have her pass it along, I apologize. As you can see you can actually see the circles that do not meet the levels of service. There were quite a few properties there to my surprise; there was six and this is to put it in context to where it is, its just west of the University of Miami and south of Miller Road. The other portion which is next, right just south of Mendoza...

Mayor Slesnick: No wait, wait, wait; do we get to count the University of Miami campus as anything?- it's an open space, its open to the public, its beautiful, it has benches, it has eating facilities?

Mr. Couceyro: We do not, for this designation we don't, its public land use.

Mayor Slesnick: But I appreciate the fact that there may be definitions, but boy let me tell you something, if I lived in that neighborhood I have access within one block to one of the most beautiful walking landscaped areas, but not only do I get to walk in, but I get to sit at a bench or at a table, eat lunch from the food that I buy at a concession at the University; to me there's a practical thing here that says that us thinking that there is a desperate need for an open space small park; listen I'm all for, and I voted for every purchase, and I've actually pushed one purchase, but it just seems to me that we are kidding ourselves that there is a real desperate need here, especially if two or three of the properties you've outlined there sit right on the campus, I mean, sit on the border of the campus.

Mr. Couceyro: Across the street.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: I mean Fred, to answer the Mayor, and I don't know the answer to this so I'm asking the question; for kids and for families can they utilize the campus there and throw a football?

Mr. Couceyro: From my knowledge of it you can't, it's used for their inter-moral use, and I don't know if it's open for the public, I don't know.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: Alright, alright.

Commissioner Withers: But you can still walk around the lake and enjoy the fountain and feed the ducks.

Mr. Couceyro: Yes you can, sure – absolutely. The other area that we looked at which was just south of Mendoza and Little Gables, just south of what is called the Little Gables area, there were two properties there as well that was not within a service radius, but there is a park just north of the line, Mendoza line actually, if you are a baseball fan, you'll know what that means; their Santo Centro Park which serves those properties well in terms of a need, right across the way. So on the first available land, those are the six properties, they ranged from \$450,000 up to \$645,000; and they were ranging in square footage from 65,500 square feet up to 10,500 square feet. The other two that were along the northern area, those were one for three ninety-nine and one for four thirty-nine list price, and between 6,200 square feet and 7,300 square feet.

Commissioner Withers: These are all buildable lots though, right?

Mr. Couceyro: All these have houses on it right now...

Commissioner Withers: That's what I'm saying; they can be redeveloped if you want to. We talked about looking for non-buildable lots.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: That too.

Commissioner Withers: They wouldn't be demanding such high prices for, you know...

Mr. Couceyro: Right – we looked at vacant land properties, but there weren't any that really met our needs.

Mayor Slesnick: Let me suggest something though that just came to my mind; if we went around, if you took someone that has one of these beautiful properties on a street with the great side yards they used to have, which this Commission has prone not to vote to split...

Commissioner Withers: Exactly.

Mayor Slesnick: If those people wanted to dedicate by giving that property, I mean, take it off the tax rolls, and may make it possible that they can continue to have, and they would continue to

have, that same vista of an open space and a home, and yet the people living in the home can then afford it. I guess we can do that totally for free, I mean, the tax break is good, well I'm not sure, but I think that's one thing.

Commissioner Withers: Well they could donate the land to the partnership and get the write-off.

Mayor Slesnick: Yeah.

Commissioner Withers: I mean, that was the whole idea to find lots that weren't developable that might be thirty feet wide and encourage those folks; that was – there's going to be a bunch of those; I know there is some up on Obispo.

Mr. Couceyro: I would have to research that.

Mayor Slesnick: Of course the best place is at the end of streets where you are not between houses.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: Yeah, that's the best thing, because a lot of times people shy away from, not in my backyard, they are not so crazy about having a park right next to them even if its an open space.

Mayor Slesnick: Yeah, you're right, you're right.

Commissioner Withers: Anyway, I didn't mean to interrupt your wish list there of sixty million dollars worth of properties.

Mr. Couceyro: No, not a problem.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: In all fairness to Fred, if you look back at the slide where it shows the first area whether we buy something there or not, those houses are on 10,000 square feet, they are asking \$500,000 plus for those; they used to be eight or \$900,000 plus, I mean its decreased in value that much, and I think that's what essentially is what drove the discussion initially, is how can we capitalize on this market to benefit the City residents?- and I don't know where we go from here, but I know one thing, if we are going to spend \$800,000, we probably can get two properties where we were lucky to get one prior to this economic downturn.

Mayor Slesnick: Well right there if you look at this, forgetting anything else, just look at what you are looking at there, the property on the corner of Red and Miller, that would provide, that is a major entrance to our City, that would provide...we can even put an entrance feature on it, its on a busy road...

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: Believe me those people would be very interested in negotiating, whether that's a short sale I don't know, but I can assure you anybody that has their house for sale.

Mayor Slesnick: I'm not sure, that is right there on the corner; that one somehow doesn't look the same as that, I'm not sure why. I'm saying the one up there on the screen looks a little off of Red Road.

Mr. Couceyro: That's just my computer....to the right.

Mayor Slesnick: But see that would serve several different purposes, a welcome to Coral Gables because Miller is a big exit/entrance to Coral Gables, and it wouldn't be between houses; yeah, I think that's....

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: All I can say is that all of these neighborhood parks are used; I went over to see a friend of mine a couple of Friday's ago, and I'm driving down San Sebastian, remember we did this little neighborhood park there?- I was shocked, there must have been thirty people there Friday afternoon, and they all decided this is where they are all going to hang out with their kids playing in the little 7,500 square foot piece of property there; and they are using as a neighborhood get together, its build a community. Again, I don't know how we should go out, how we pursue things like this, but one thing is for sure, that if we have this \$800,000, we got to come up with a game plan on how to spend it in these economic times, because sooner or later maybe in a couple of years, things will turn around and these houses, these properties you can buy for \$400,000 today will be \$800,000 again at some point.

Commissioner Withers: Is there a way to, and I don't know, we have to get the tax advice on this, but would there be a way for someone like that to donate a portion or sell a portion, if they could benefit from a...

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: I'm sure, I'm sure there is a mechanism in place like that.

Commissioner Anderson: That's a good idea.

Mayor Slesnick: Well, they could donate to an intermediate agency, they could donate to the Community Foundation and take a full tax write off, a donation 501(c)3 foundation, and then the foundation...it's the same way that the....

Commissioner Withers: Well, what I'm saying is if it's a \$600,000 value, we buy it for \$400,000, they are happy with the four hundred, and they take the \$200,000 initial market value and donate it, I don't know if you can do that.

Mayor Slesnick: You can do it if it's with the City directly.

Commissioner Withers: No, no, no, I'm not saying with the City, but what I'm saying is, is there a way to....

Mayor Slesnick: But how do you split up?- I know what you are asking, but I'm not sure how you justify to the IRS that you....

Mr. Couceyro: We actually are doing that with a property ironically that was in that area, that was a two lot property.

Mayor Slesnick: That you can split up.

Commissioner Withers: That you can do.

Mr. Couceyro: Yeah, that's how we split it up; we couldn't purchase it. The price at the time was way beyond what we had in terms of funds.

Mayor Slesnick: And when you say two lots, it may only be one buildable lot, but it may be two platted lots, so that they could split up the platted lots, because we are not going to build on it. Chip, you may have one buildable lot of 100 feet, but it could be two platted lots.

Commissioner Withers: And pay maybe a little more on the one lot and have...

Mayor Slesnick: And have them donate the second 50 foot; I don't know if this area was divided in 50 foot tracks like the north area was, so I have no idea.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: Yeah, they are all 50 foot lots tracks, you can see them right there, they are all 50 foot tracks.

Mayor Slesnick: Even though that one is a 100 foot.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: Well it's two 50 footers, its two 50 footers.

Mayor Slesnick: That's what I meant, so you can donate one 50 foot, and sell the other 50 foot.

Commissioner Withers: Let them take the house down, let them split the lot; you might even vote for that lot split.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: That one I actually might go for.

Mr. Couceyro: In summary, my recommendation is to let us look a little more in depth into these properties and see the feasibility, and to be able to come back to you with one that we target and bring it through the procurement process.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: I guess this is very important; I mean, how is the methodology?- let's just use for fun that corner piece of property, and say oh yeah, this is going to work out perfectly, we can make it work, do they go to the owners and try to negotiate a deal and bring it back here with the City Manager's assistance, how does that work?

Mayor Slesnick: I think we need realtor assistance, and I know that would put you in an awkward position.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: No, I'm not touching that one whatsoever.

Mayor Slesnick: No, but wait, I'm saying that would put you in an awkward position, but there are probably some realtors that would as they have done before, you know, give their time and effort to the City, for instance like a Ron Schofield or something, that would do the intermediary work for us.

Commissioner Withers: You did just a good job on the contract for the Manager, I think you should do it, Don.

Mayor Slesnick: It's like Bill...thank you very much, but its like Bill, I don't know that we should be out there doing that.

Commissioner Anderson: What about the trust public land, is that an option?

Mayor Slesnick: That's certainly an option.

Commissioner Withers: Yeah, that's an option.

Commissioner Anderson: That's a third person and they hold it and negotiate some of those things...

Mayor Slesnick: They obtain it and then transition it.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: Its certainly worth talking to them about that, but I mean, you will have to identify the land and they would come in and help you negotiate the contract, and bring it back to the City Commission for its approval, right?- is that how it would work? They would negotiate a deal; they would negotiate \$400,000 for a piece of property.

Mayor Slesnick: The reason they would have to come back here is because they want to tie it together right up front, in other words, we agree to take the property from them if they...

Mr. Couceyro: There is a process that's in the Procurement Code that would entail me having to get comments from quite a few of departments, go before three Boards.

Commissioner Anderson: Isn't that the same way that we did the sale or lease of land...?

Mr. Couceyro: That's how we did it for Maggiore; Maggiore was a little different because they had taken to the City and they weren't actively trying to sell the property.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: You know the fact is you are going to have to do the following: you are going to have to identify a piece of property, you are going to have to go to the owner and say, hey listen, we have a thirty day process, will you tie it up for this much time?- and then you are going to have to go through the process and get us to approve it; they are going to have to take it off the market for a certain amount of time because logistics is going to be difficult.

Mr. Couceyro: And there is the appraisal.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: But this is a good time to do it because they are sitting there; average life of a piece of property is four months now a days, so

Mayor Slesnick: It's starting to come down.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: Starting to come down, starting to come down a little bit.

Mayor Slesnick: But you're right, this is the time to stretch...

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: This is the time right now to buy it, remember we're here for a long time, the City is going to be here forever, it looks like a deal, and....can I say one more thing, the other thing is that outside of the residential side, if you run across a commercial piece of property from downtown that we may have to float a bond, go through the Sunshine Bond Fund or up in that northeast quadrant...sort of tough for me to do, but anyway...

Commissioner Anderson: I want this on record (laughter).

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: But actually, again, you are not going to find it this low in the commercial areas again, they have dropped; there are a lot of projects that are not going forward, I mean, in Miami as you know, we've talked about Miami has come up with this, why don't you make it a green space until things change around, or maybe we should buy it; again, the City is going to be here a long time, and this is a great opportunity for us to envision how we want to look in the future.

Mr. Couceyro: As we go through this exercise, what I also like to make sure that I can continue doing, if we get new properties or some of these I want to analyze them a little further, if more come on the market, you know, if I come and present something else, I'll give you the rationale for it; it could be another property that we end up liking more.

Commissioner Withers: Talking about downtown, we've been looking for ways to move people from our parking lots to Miracle Mile; what if we did buy a 25 foot wide building there and knocked it down and put a linear park in there and accomplished the park and at the same time create the paseo through there.

Commissioner Anderson: Paseos create pocket parks...

Commissioner Withers: Well, if we have the money we are not looking stuff like that, that will solve two problems.

Commissioner Anderson: Great idea.

Mayor Slesnick: Well I thought that Steve Patel was going to work with us too.

Commissioner Withers: What was that?

Mayor Slesnick: I thought that Steve Patel, Terra Nova was willing to work with us on one of his buildings that was next to John Martins that was recently leased to the political campaign of now President Obama; and he had some ideas about utilizing the space himself after it was knocked down, so I thought that that might be, if we partnered with him.

Commissioner Withers: That would be a deal right there too, wouldn't it?

Mayor Slesnick: Well, it goes right to our garage.

Commissioner Withers: That's what I'm saying.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: He's willing to do that because he's mentioned it to me.

Mayor Slesnick: He'd probably would be willing more, so if we took part in it, but maybe what we should do is like, we take it off the tax rolls. We do something that we pay something for, and he gives us the property, but we give him a long term low cost lease of it to do what he wants to do, which was a little outside market area type of thing.

Commissioner Withers: I think that would be kind of neat.

Mayor Slesnick: But that, I think Fred, specifically that property and that idea you should hone in with the Development Department as your partner on that one.

Mr. Couceyro: Absolutely.

Commissioner Withers: Was this your agenda item too Bill?

Mayor Slesnick: I think Trust for Public Land for something like the Miller Road property might be a good thought to bring them in and take a look at how we can do that, and then something on Miracle Mile you and the Development Department partner. Thank you.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: Fred one last thing....

Mayor Slesnick: You said that three times.

Vice Mayor Kerdyk: I know, but you get me so excited about buying property; but just make sure this doesn't drop and bring us back something in the foreseeable future, alright.

Mr. Couceyro: Absolutely, no problem at all.

Mayor Slesnick: We'll reconvene tomorrow here Fred for a report (laughter).

Mr. Couceyro: I'll be up all night.

Commissioner Anderson: Good job.

Commissioner Withers: Nice job on that Employee of the Month deal.

[End: 1:00:16 p.m.]