

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item C
February 27, 2024
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

Interim City Manager, Alberto N. Parjus

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Richard Lara

Maria Cruz

Tom Wells

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Public Comment

Mayor Lago: We move unto Public Comment.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, first speaker today is Richard Lara.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir.

Mr. Lara: Good morning. Good morning, Mr. Mayor, good morning, Vice Mayor, good morning, Commissioners, City Attorney, as well as City Clerk and the residents of Coral Gables. My name is Richard Lara and I reside at 1001 Coral Way. If I may be permitted a few minutes to provide a brief background. My family moved to Coral Gables in 1983. My parents Alberto and Sonia fled Cuba in 1961, as exiles escaping a totalitarian regime, and came to this country seeking freedom,

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with little more than the shirts on their backs, like so many of our citizens here in the City Beautiful. My father worked two jobs as a maintenance man for the apartment building that we called home on Valencia Avenue, where I shared a bedroom with my brother throughout my teens. My father knew that his sacrifices for his family were worth it by making Coral Gables our home. As a proud Coral Gables High School graduate and a former Silver Knight, I went on to earn my BA at the University of Michigan and I earned my law degree at Boston College Law School. I've been happily married to Bertha for 26 years and we are proud parents of three daughters, Gabriel, Victoria and Alexandra. We are all so very proud to call Coral Gables our home. I've dedicated over 30 years to the practice of law, owning my law firm for 14 years before becoming Executive Vice President and General Counsel for Spanish Broadcasting System. I've served with honor on Judicial Nominating Commission for the Third District Court of Appeal; served as Chair of the Florida Bar Grievance Committee; proudly serve on the Board of Directors for Easter Seals South Florida, and currently serve on the Anti-Crime Committee for Coral Gables, having been appointed by Commissioner Menendez. As a seasoned problem-solver, I've always counseled individuals and businesses with respect, civility and professionalism throughout my career. These are the very principles that sadly are sorely missing at this Commission. Over the past two years, I've witnessed the steep decline of due process, transparency and professionalism at our Commission. By way of example, the sitting Commissioners voting for themselves a 101 percent compensation increase without public input or consent is unprecedented and reflects the lack of integrity in our current governance. Also, the cruel and arrogant manner employed by these Commissioners in firing the City Manager at the last Commission meeting without regard for the overwhelming public opinion or due process, or a basis in fact, or law. Another example of the chaos running rampant in this Commission. Coral Gables Commissioners were the gold standard, the shining example for all other neighboring communities of how to best govern effectively, with dignity, integrity and professionalism, but not anymore. We simply cannot permit this. Actions have consequences and here the stakes have never been higher. Enough is enough. I would have never imagined standing here before this Commission under these circumstances, which for me, are not more than a call to action. I've been overwhelmed and humbled by the growing encouragement I received from so many of my fellow citizens who approached me to act now for Coral Gables. As a concerned citizen, fueled by civic duty, and an enduring love of our city, I've decided to run for Commissioner of Coral Gables Group III, specifically challenging Mr. Menendez. Today, we enthusiastically begin the race to restore order, civility, professionalism, and integrity back to this Commission. I am excited and eager to help restore these values as a Commissioner and put a laser focus on the growing need for improving the quality of live for our citizens, including a much needed taxpayer relief by lowing the millage rate, while ensuring that we'll always maintain fully resourced and staffed police and fighting forces to ensure a safe environment for our families and for our businesses, as well as the preservation and expansion of our green spaces and the walkability of our great and unique city. I promise to be a true representative of all the citizens of Coral Gables. We must never forget, it's all about the citizens and bettering their lives in the city, for us all to prosper and enjoy all the beauty and wonderment that the city has to offer. I am supremely confident that the best days for the City Beautiful lie ahead when we all work together. I look forward to you all joining me on the campaign trail, to usher in a positive change in Coral Gables. Thank you, Mr. Mayor, Madam Vice Mayor, Commissioners, City Attorney, City Clerk and the Acting City Manager and citizens for your attention today. Thank you.

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Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Maria Cruz.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, Ms. Cruz.

Ms. Cruz: Good morning. Maria Cruz. I don't know if I have to give an address, because I've seen people that do not give addresses here, but I will. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road, where I've been since 1976, and I do have a family and my kids grew up here and I believe I've been involved, but I'm not announcing that I'm running for anything. I didn't think that it was an appropriate place to do it. Many times, I have been asked why employees come to me, and why they call me, why they drop off stuff in front of my door, why I get so many anonymous messages. And I'm going to tell you why. I'm going to tell you that the reason why employees do that is because they do not trust their supervisors, their directors, the people that should come to their rescue, including HR. I can tell you, it was funny when somebody told me that there was a director recently who would go, walk around the department and say, I wonder who's going to get fired today, because that was a permanent threat. So, our employees come to me, because they're afraid of getting fired. Simple as that. But let me tell you, much to some people's chagrin, I guess, I've had time to think about how our city has gotten where it is. And I know the people claim that we never had scandals before, this is something new, we have scandals. Let me tell you, we've had scandals in this city many times. I was trying to remember how many, but I also know how many times things have gone wrong and they've been covered up, and this is what has made me come forth many times to say how bad it is when somebody like me that could be home enjoying soap operas and game shows, has to come here to talk about what has gotten us here. Let me start by giving you, for example, so bear with me. Employee who deposited checks made out to the city into her own account, bank account. Guess what, the superiors knew, but the elected officials didn't. I was the one that exposed that, and then she was prosecuted. I never knew whether she paid back what she was supposed to pay back, because we don't talk about those things. You know, Coral Gables, we don't talk about those ugly things. Finance Department knew, they knew, because once I opened the door, they knew about it. Well, we have an employee recently who wanted to get another job in another municipality and was offered a letter, but it was less than what he wanted, so he fixed the letter, brought it here and was going to get a raise because he had a better offer. When I opened the door, he was fired, okay, but we would have gone along with it. Nobody was checking. As a matter of fact, I was told that they had checked with the other city, which was not true because I checked, okay. Then that takes us to the cash trays that were found recently, cash trays. The city hasn't been accepting cash for some time, but yet there were cash trays found. I believe one of them still had money, but you know what, it's not a big deal. It's not a big deal because it was little money. You know when I grew up, five pennies was a lot of money. It doesn't make a difference how much. How come the people that issued the trays did not know they were not back? How come the trays were not picked up? How come the trays were not returned? You know, we don't worry about little things. Okay. And then, if you remember, not long ago, I spoke about the unsupervised expenditure of money for frills, things we do not need in the Development Services. Guess what. I spoke here on January 23rd. January 24th, we spent \$166.89 on paper hot cups. On January 26th, we bought Cappuccino kit again for \$285. February 4th, we bought K-cups for \$64.98, for Dark Magic, I don't know what that means, and \$69.80 for the original K-cups. Why am I saying this?

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– because you know what, you can bring, what is it, the horse to water, but you cannot make them drink it. Hello. If it's still happening, obviously, the message has not gotten. So, I came up with a solution. I never come that I don't have a solution. A few meetings ago, I saw one business that was here to get permission to open a "Ventanita," nearby. So, I said to myself, the coffee machine is being leased by us, the taxpayers, we paid for it, the supplies for the machine have been paid for by us, the taxpayers. So we, the taxpayers own the building, so could one of us come here, I'll be willing to, get a permit so one of the windows facing Biltmore Way on the 427 Building could become our "Ventanita," and the residents could come and get their free coffee, free tea, because it has tea, coffee, Cappuccino, you name it, anything you want and its free. So can we do that for our residents. If you want me to, if you give me the go-ahead, I'll apply for the permit. I just looked, there's a nice window that we could open and that way it would not be going to 60 employees. Okay. So, guys, seriously, something has to happen. And you know what, the people that are involved with this. You know who they are, and the supervisors know who they are, and we feel very sorry because they've been singled out. You know what, enough is enough. And my last comment is, I have a name for the "Ventanita" already. It's not going to be Maria's. It's going to be Suramy's. Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Tom Wells.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir.

Mr. Wells: Good morning. My name is Tom Wells, I live at 1310 Coral Way. I request the Commission avoid approving severance pay as part of the compensation package for the City Manager. This is a \$105,000 problem. Per Resolution 2018-258, Mr. Iglesias was promoted from Assistant City Manager to City Manager in the following compensation package. \$235,000 in 2018 tied to an annual CPI increase. That's over \$294,000 in 2024. Additional retirement contribution, 25 percent of his current base salary. That's over \$73,500 currently. A monthly car allowance, health insurance for himself and his family and in addition, 20 weeks of severance compensation, if he's terminated for any reason other than misconduct, per Section 443-036. That's over \$105,000. Mr. Iglesias is over...to City Manager. He only gets a severance if he's terminated by the City Commission, that is why he would never resign. Sections 8 and 11, City Charter, provide the City Manager serves at the will or pleasure of the Commission. This severance imposes unnecessary costs on future Commissions exercising rights per the City Charter. It could be argued the city does not owe Mr. Iglesias severance because of potential acts of misconduct, so I'm going to disagree with one of the prior speakers. These are the acts of misconduct. Filings City Code Sections 2-77 and 2-81, as to the rules of decorum and debate by making subjective opinions not related to the motion being considered. Filing City Charter Section 15-5, requiring the City Manager to keep the Commission fully advised as to the condition of the city. At 6.17 of the January 23rd meeting, he said the city had lost \$240,000 on this particular lease referring to Fritz and Franz, causing one Commissioner to falsely state there was a \$240,000 back due rent. Filing Citizens Bill of Rights, A-2, stating that the city employee, that no same employe shall knowingly provide false information or knowingly omits significant facts when giving requested information to members of the public. The City Manager's page currently on the city's website for Fritz and Franz says the...required to replace equipment at end of life per the current lease. That provision doesn't exist per the current lease, that's false. Refusal to follow the direction of the Commission
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the March 8, 2022, meeting, to reopen Burger Bob's. Mayor Lago stated they will reopen on December 22, 2022. Burger Bob's still not open after two years. Mr. Iglesias severance windfall was approved by only one current Commissioner. I am hopeful this mistake will not be repeated. In addition, later today, you are going to talk about replacing him on the search committee for the City Manager. It should be done by an independent committee, not by the staff. Thank you.
Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: That's it, Mr. Mayor.