

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item H-5
October 28, 2025
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 Richard D. Lara

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez
City Manager, Peter Iglesias
City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Richard Heisenbottle, President & Historic Architect

Agenda Item H-5 [Start: 1:08 p.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission directing the City Manager to proceed with the restoration plan for City Hall.

Mayor Lago: Time is certain. Item H-5.

City Attorney Suarez: H5 is a resolution of the City Commission directing the City Manager to proceed with the restoration plan for City Hall.

Mayor Lago: How we doing, sir?

City Manager Iglesias: Thank you, Mayor and Commissioners. We are presenting through Architect Heisenbottle some issues concerning City Hall. We are looking at the concept of revitalizing City Hall from an interior and exterior perspective. We are looking at doing work on this room here, and we are looking at maybe some changes as far as the courtyard is concerned.

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So, we would like to get the Commission consensus on how to move forward as far as City Hall is concerned. We have some issues that it's very difficult to—the city has grown so much it's very difficult to get all the offices inside City Hall while maintaining the historical character of the interior. So, we are looking at really removing the Finance Department from City Hall and using all three floors for the Commission, for the City Manager, City Clerk, and City Attorney, and we're looking at probably some issues as far as the courtyard is concerned. So, there were so many issues that I think it was best to present to the Commission and get some guidance on how to move forward.

Mayor Lago: Good afternoon, Mr. Heisenbottle.

Mr. Heisenbottle: And good afternoon.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for being here with us.

Mr. Heisenbottle: Mayor Lago, my pleasure. I think we should have happy faces on here today. You've got two tough items to deal with. You've got something that's a lot easier and a lot more joyful as it relates to historic preservation.

Commissioner Lara: These are happy faces.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Oh. They are. They are. But you're between us and lunch.

Mr. Heisenbottle: I'll work on that then. I'll work on that. Okay. So, there should be a button, a clicker button over here for me.

Commissioner Fernandez: Nope. It's not there.

Mr. Heisenbottle: Good. Well, thank you all, one, for the opportunity to be the Preservation Architects for the restoration of this amazing building. We have really just completed a very comprehensive assessment of just about everything you could ever imagine assessing in the building, and we've come up with some things that are critical for us to move forward, and we want to show you what some of those are today. First of all, I'm going to start out with a little summary, a quick history of City Hall and its physicality. There was, once upon a time, a garden courtyard behind us on this side, and we're also going to talk today about the exterior repairs. They are incredibly extensive, as Peter and I will tell you. The most extensive of those are the columns and the semicircular colonnade that is right behind both of you, and then we're also going to talk about the Commission Chamber and what we've proposed for the Commission Chamber. So, without further ado, take a look at, for the fun of it, some of the historic photographs of City Hall that, in this case, date back to 1931. You'll notice the cars on the right-hand side over there, and the Mayor's balcony. I'm not so sure the Mayor knew that he had a balcony, but there it is, and it's going to be important as we discuss things going further. And then, of course, we all know the

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stairway right next to us and how grand the mural is at the top of the stairway, and also how much it needs work because water intrusion has done such damage to it. We also went back, and we looked at the back-of-house areas, so to speak, not the glamour areas so much, but the back-of-house areas, the area on the ground floor in 1952 where staff worked behind the counter. And we also did historic research on every bit of the building. We know more about the building than we ever thought we could know. So, let's start by talking about the Garden Courtyard for a moment. It doesn't look like a garden courtyard today, does it? Well, historically, it was a civic and ceremonial space that Paste himself designed, and it featured four wide rectangular planters intersecting cast stone walkways. It was aligned with key architectural elements of the building, the Mayor's balcony being one of them, the central stair, the clock tower, the Council Chamber itself is all very symmetrical, and all of that played out in the design of the courtyard. And what happened? Well, what happened is that during—we had some mid-century additions here that disrupted the symmetry and the open space, and the original planting beds were paved over in the 1990s, and an additional building, a non-historic building, a non-contributing building in every way was added. And so, one of the things that has happened because of that, its civic role was quite diminished. This is what you're looking at right now, the Paste plan for that courtyard. The green space, if you will, the four quadrants that originally existed, and the public toilets that are behind it. I think all of you know that today when we have an event, whether it's the market or the car show or any number of dozens of other things that we have right out front on Biltmore Way all the time, we have to bring in toilets for the public. Well, there were public toilets right there in that little building, and Commission meetings were actually held out here. Now, I really want to see Mayor Lago wearing knickers like that outside someday. You know, we—

Vice Mayor Anderson: He might have to get you.

Mr. Heisenbottle: Anyway, we can imagine how hot they really were, because this building was not originally air-conditioned. Anyway, understand that we've had use of that courtyard for public events for a very, very long time, and so we have some recommended interventions here. We want to remove the mid-century additions, that auxiliary building that you see there to restore the bilateral symmetry of the open space. We want to reinstate the planters as a green area to temper the bright sunlight and support rainwater infiltration. We want to remove the abandoned septic tank that is sitting out there. It is how old? A hundred— Yeah.

Mayor Lago: Close to.

Mr. Heisenbottle: Close to. Very close to a hundred-year-old septic tank sitting in the middle of that courtyard. We want to repave the walkways in keeping with the historic design. We're going to show you that in a second. We want to plant flowering trees at the perimeter to further cool the space and enhance its vitality. And of course, all of that leads to its future potential to reinstate the courtyard as an urban garden space. So, this is the space. If we did not remove the auxiliary

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building that I keep talking about, we could certainly take out some of the concrete that has been poured in there and make it a lot better. That space would look something like this rendering that we've done of it. But I see, personally, no redeeming qualities to keeping this space when you consider what the potential is for what this can be. Let me show you what that potential is, and I thank my partner here, Rick Lopez, for actually doing this sketch himself to illustrate this. Now we have the four quadrants returned to exactly what they were when Phineas Paste designed this, and this is what it looks like when you enter the space from the parking lot on an axis with the Mayor's balcony, what will be the main entrance to the building, and of course, the tower up above. So, our recommendation to you all is that we proceed with a little different direction than we had before. It is simply to remove that space that really does very little for us, and to return this to its historic character, which is what you see on the right-hand side. Pardon?

Mayor Lago: Very nice. Incredible.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yeah. You actually get to see the building more.

Mr. Heisenbottle: Yes. You actually get to see the building, and it's in its full breadth.

Commissioner Lara: A quick question, Mayor. So, in the option B on the left-hand side, it looks like there's a structure there. Is that the structure?

Mr. Heisenbottle: That's the structure that we're talking about tearing down.

Commissioner Lara: No. In A, you...

Mr. Heisenbottle: That's A.

Commissioner Lara: Right. But I'm saying B. It looks like to the left, there's like...

Mr. Heisenbottle: B is...

Commissioner Lara: What is the little building then, like there, to the left?

Mr. Heisenbottle: That little building... Let's go back. That little building is not so little. That is where the two public toilets were back in the day. If we go back to the Paste plan, we see those public toilets. Now, the room behind it is an electrical room, frankly. But we might also think about putting those two public toilets back there so that they are used when we have activities out on Biltmore Way, and then we don't have to keep going back and forth and bringing in portable toilets that nobody ever liked anyway.

Commissioner Lara: But you have that included in option B?

Mr. Heisenbottle: That is in option B. We consider that part of option B.

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Mayor Lago: So let me ask you a question, Mr. Heisenbottle. When did they make that transition from a public toilet to a more...

Mr. Heisenbottle: To office space?

Mayor Lago: To office space, yes, and extend the building?

Mr. Heisenbottle: That's sometime in the 1960s. We're guessing as close as we can figure it, 1963. It was a sad time for architecture. But somebody needed space, it was expedient, and that happened.

Commissioner Castro: I really like that option where we put the bathrooms back, but I think we're utilizing that space for a State Rep, right, right now? I think we would have to reconsider the placement of...

Mr. Heisenbottle: We've actually, in the plans, and we've done schematic plans for the entire building, and we've been working over those with the Manager for pretty much the last month. We have relocated CIP, CIP's offices are in there now, and now they would have offices in this building on one of the upper floors. So, we didn't forget, rest assured, we didn't forget anyone.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, through the Mayor. I mean, I had an opportunity to speak to you a little bit about this, and yes, we talked about the spaces for the representatives on the third floor. I also had the benefit of attending the Mediterranean design presentations that were done, and Rafael Portuondo did an amazing analysis and showed just how important the garden spaces are to the buildings themselves and what it adds to the building. Together with what we plan on doing, and I think, City Manager, you could give us an update sometime when the trees will be added to the front on Biltmore Way. I think this will be quite an amazing space, both for people in the building as well as people that are attending the farmer's market and other events on the Mile to be able to have public bathrooms readily available in an area that is shaded, plus the trees in the front. Deena, maybe you can give us an update, maybe the next meeting, because I have a lot of questions from a lot of people when we're going to move forward on Biltmore Way.

City Manager Iglesias: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Yes, sir.

City Manager Iglesias: Yes, our plan, Vice Mayor, is to move out of this building for exploratory demolition either in late January or early February. We are finishing the space for the Commission now, the Minorca Garage, and we'll be moving to another space right near the Minorca Garage, and at that time incorporate all this work together into one project that I think will be, we certainly want to integrate whatever we do with our historical architect to make sure that everything we do is done holistically.

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Vice Mayor Anderson: I'm sorry, I kind of went a little off topic because I've been getting questions about when we're going to break ground on putting the trees on Biltmore Way.

City Manager Iglesias: We have not forgotten about the trees.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Okay, so maybe next meeting you can have an update on that.

City Manager Iglesias: Yes, Vice Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

Mr. Heisenbottle: And if I may just interject one more thing, one more thought here. Just be aware that this also allows us to resolve handicapped accessibility issues that the building faces right now. I'm not going to get into that in detail, but we'll have accessibility from both sides of the building, Biltmore Way, as well as the parking lot in the back, that will be much more enhanced. As it is right now, the spaces near your parking space and near your assigned parking space is not even remotely accessible. If a handicapped person parked there, they'd be very hard pressed to find their way into the building. That won't be the case when we're done. So, let's go ahead and move on. The exterior repairs. This is the biggest challenge of the entire project because they are very, very significant. Just to give you an idea of the architectural significance here. This is constructed, the building is constructed out of a Florida Keys limestone, no longer available in the Florida Keys, but generally available in the Dominican Republic. It's made out of cast stone also, so not everything is real stone, some of it is cast stone. And then it's also made out of stucco. So, as you go further up the building, you see it changing from real stone to stucco. And all of this defines City Hall's character and shields it from the environment and exposure to the environment. But there are Herculean documented failures that we have uncovered in the limestone, in the stucco, and in the cast stone. And so, there's cracking, spalling, binders have been lost, a corroded reinforcement. The list actually goes on for a week, so I'm not going to bore you with it, but I am going to show you some of the photographs so that you understand the magnitude of the repairs that we're going to have to do, the masonry repairs that we're going to have to do to the facade. That cornice in the middle over here is particularly scary because it could fall off. We actually documented every one of these very meticulously on the elevations, noting the kind of repair, noting the seriousness of the repair, noting how we intend to correct the repair, both in our keynotes and other notes all over the drawings so that the building has been thoroughly understood. And this is just a number of areas that need to be repaired. Some of these are simple, they're easy to patch, and other ones are not so simple. Why is this cracking? How are we going to stop it from cracking? How are we going to stop it from leaking water into the building, causing more damage, which is what we've had. Particularly serious areas include the area towards the top of the building. You'll see some red on here if you look closely enough. Those areas are serious enough that they are causing serious leaks into the building at every rainstorm. Some of the cracks you see next to

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the windows over here. In the middle, this wonderful balustrade that is on the third floor. You see the big, heavy crack across the balustrade, and the other balustrades, by the way. Every one of them is cracked like that, all the way across. So, we have serious challenges to repair these, and we've documented how to go about doing those sorts of repairs. And we've done that virtually on every elevation. Sometimes it'll be patching, like what we have on the left. Sometimes it will be complete replacement. And so, each one is assessed individually. We also have roofing issues over here, especially on the top of the dome over there, where we had some roofing done before, but it still leaks, and that is a major challenge for us as well. So, cracks like this one, I'm not going to get into the details of each kind of repair but just know that these are virtually all over the place. We've documented every darn one of them, we think, although I'm sure we'll find more as we go forward. And our restoration goal here is to preserve and define the defining architectural features and prevent further water infiltration and material loss as we repair all of these. Now, the bigger question, the bigger challenge than those little cracks we were just looking at or reinforcing steel cracks, are the columns that stand behind us. Every one of you, and on this dais, you've had discussions about these columns before. We've researched everything there is to potentially research relative to those columns. We went back and we looked for the original structural drawings and we went through those with the Manager. And what we've decided that we have to do here is to actually remove four of these columns. You can, you'll see, I think that's the 47, 49, 52, 54. They are so severely cracked that they're not really capable of holding the loads that they're holding. We're going to shore the entire arcade and then we're going to go after repairing those columns, which will require here, each one will require the installation of a steel column inside the stone. And that is going to be a very big challenge, especially as we try to do that and save the coral rock at the same time. You'll see why in just a moment. So, we're going to correct all the cracks and the spalling and remove the embedded steel hardware. We've hired a specialty firm to assist our structural engineers with that, a firm that Atkinson and Nolan, that truly have a specialty in dealing with historic stone. And they've been out here on the site with us writing all of the reports. But as you can see from looking at this photograph, especially the one on the right, there's a degree of urgency here. We've ordered the installation of crack monitors. So, we know if this is moving, that they should go in within the next week. And if you just get close to each one of these, you'll see major fissure cracks that are downright scary. We intend to, if we cannot save something, we're in advance going to have it scanned and a 3D model made of it so that we can CNC machine fabricate it to exactly what it was. So, all that scanning process will go on in the not-too-distant future also here. And the idea on the column capitals themselves, we see one crack on the one on the upper right. But the idea on the capitals themselves is to also salvage those. We believe they're going to come apart, God bless, they're going to come apart in four pieces and hopefully we won't lose any of those. But I'm not betting highly on our ability to save the other columns because of the sheer magnitude of the cracking. So, we're going to do our best. Let's shift over to this room. We've all sat at this dais for a long time. I sat at it as Chairman of your Preservation Board for a

while. But as we re-looked at this room, Rick and I came up with the notion that this has to change. And we want to show you that what we think we should do going forward with this restoration because there's nothing remotely original about what we have in front of us outside of the cornice moldings at the top. Everything else has been either covered over, plastered over, even the floor is not the same floor, and there's nothing worthy of this city in the design of the existing building. So again, what did we do? We went back and we took a look at what this Chamber was like back in the day. What did Paste and Merrick and the rest of our early leaders and forefathers, what did they view this as? And we note that the desk that is in Peter's office, the conference table, excuse me for calling you Peter, Peter, but he's too close to me not too. But it's usually that is the same one that is in this photograph. And of course, we'll be trying to keep as much of the existing furniture and original furniture as we can. But we also noticed what was on the wall behind us over there. What was the wainscoting was like, what the lighting was like back in the day. And it was truly magnificent that there was actually a stone floor underneath what we're seeing right now. So, we propose to remove everything that we see in the current configuration and reconfigure the space. In reconfiguring the space, we get additional seating, significant additional seating, good handicapped seating, and we reorient the room back to the way the room was originally oriented. It was oriented so that everyone in the room looked this way and that the mission was there. Take a look at what that is, of course, where we are today. This is how we view the Commission Chamber going forward. We would replicate and or restore the wainscoting all around the room. We've done a little exposure window. It's hiding behind the flags over there to see what that would look like. We propose the millwork that would match the oak, the dark oak millwork that we have everywhere else in the building. And we propose what I think is a very distinguished dais with daises on each side. Left and right, you can see them over there for the City Attorney, the City Clerk, the City Manager. And so, what, and in fact, we're even putting back, we're proposing to put back the original light fixture that was in, on the drawings that were prepared by Fink. So, what do we do with the windows? We think we should open the windows up, we should drape the windows, and we should make this room look elegant again. And I, and there's a couple things that stay the same. Merrick's portrait behind the Mayor and our city, our city emblem, our city, what's the proper term?

Vice Mayor Anderson: Seal.

Mr. Heisenbottle: Seal, thank you very much. All would be part and parcel of this virtually new interior. We'd have new seating, I assure you it will be comfortable. We've done this seating before. We did it at the, we did City of Miami Commission Chamber seating. You can sit there for a few hours, and you won't feel bad. But the good news here is that we're increasing the capacity of the room as well as bringing back its historic character. So, this is, this is another major change that we feel that we need to get your buy-in on. So, so with that said, we'll, I'll open this up to any questions you might have and, and we can discuss the whole thing.

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Mayor Lago: All I can say, I've had the privilege of working with you on multiple projects. You've outdone yourself. This is amazing. And I don't see any need to change anything because you're bringing back the original glory and splendor of this building and it's a privilege to work with you. This is an amazing presentation.

Mr. Heisenbottle: It's a thank you for the trust that all of you have placed in me.

Mayor Lago: I don't have the luxury of calling him Peter, I call him Mr. Manager. So, by the way, he wants me to call him Peter, but I always call him Mr. Manager out of respect for what I have for him. And I have gone over this presentation, not in this magnitude, but just kind of very quickly just certain things that you were working on. And I know that you and the Manager along with your team have been working on this for a long time. And along with Anna, ACM, the DCM, all of the staff. So, I want to congratulate everybody who played a role in this. This is very well done. I know it's been a labor of love, and you've really dug in, peeled all the layers to find our true history. So, congratulations. Thank you for this.

Mr. Heisenbottle: Thank you. I'm honored.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor. I was a little scared and skeptical and I have to say I'm amazed and I'm very happy with what I saw.

Mr. Heisenbottle: Good. So that's good. Thank you, Commissioner.

Commissioner Castro: That's good.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'll repeat those remarks. And I did leave you with a challenge. I know you don't have an answer to it yet.

Mr. Heisenbottle: Oh, no, no, no. We've solved it already.

Vice Mayor Anderson: You have?

Mr. Heisenbottle: Yeah.

Vice Mayor Anderson: You want to share?

Mr. Heisenbottle: We've got the handicapped accessibility worked out for the dais. Okay.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yeah.

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Mr. Heisenbottle: We went back to the office and the two of us looked at each other and we said, you know, if we just do this and this, we can't. And it's not, I'll have to show it to you individually. We don't have a drawing of it here to kind of illustrate. But the good news is that it's really a very simple thing without having to store anything in a closet, without any lifts, without plugging something in, you know, it's you'll, you'll see.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Okay. I will. I'll look forward to it. Creativity.

Mr. Heisenbottle: We had looked at this before. And the discussion was, well, now that we raised the dais, how do we get handicap accessibility to it? Because if you had a ramp, it would take, you know, six feet or 12 feet. We don't have six feet or 12 feet here. So, anyway, we've resolved that minor architectural challenge.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Okay. All right.

Mayor Lago: Anything else for the good of the order on this item before we vote?

Commissioner Fernandez: I'm impressed by what I see. It's hard to envision this room as anything else. And if you start looking at pictures, you see how much this room has changed over the years from the wood panels that they had blocking off the entire thing back in the 1970s and 80s to the pictures of Merrick and companies sitting around a table here in the middle of the room. But I'm impressed by what I see. I'll be honest. When I first heard about the courtyard and changing the courtyard, I was a little questioning, but the design is incredible. And I think it will really elevate the exterior look of City Hall, which we have a great garden out front. This would bring it to the front door of the building, which is incredible. Great work. Great work.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner.

Commissioner Lara: Right. So, through the Mayor, thanks. To you and to Rick and to your team, bravo. Bravo. Because this is something that is inspirational. I had no idea what to expect. I read the materials, I've been looking at it as closely as I can, and it's inspirational what I see. I have the great honor and privilege of living in a Phineas Paste designed home. So, I'm even more excited at the concept that we're going to try and hew as closely as possible to his original vision. So, with respect to the courtyard in particular, the exterior, the meticulous care that you have on that, and all of this really has to go to how special do we feel is the City of Coral Gables, the city that we live in, that we all strive to live up to its ideals, refer to it as the City Beautiful that it is. So, the seat of the government where the elections are done, the people's house is what this is, right, should reflect that. It should reflect the work that's done here and the special privilege that it is for us to be elected for a finite time and for those who work here every day and labor on behalf of the residents. So, you too have done, and the rest of your team, something truly unique and spectacular in this design. So, thank you both and your team very much.

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Mr. Heisenbottle: Our privilege. Thank you.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor. I wanted to note that I really prefer option B. I really do. The second one is the fact that the natural light's coming in and you would put the dais over there. It just gives me a vision. We're going to look better. All of us are going to look way better with natural light coming in.

Mr. Heisenbottle: You're looking at the blank wall over there.

Commissioner Castro: Yes. I love that idea. My question is how long do you think this whole process would take?

Mr. Heisenbottle: We've actually done a preliminary schedule that has us looking at a two-year construction period. We're going to do everything we can to shorten that construction period. The Manager has us working on an accelerated fast track schedule to get this out and under construction hopefully in late June. That is a huge challenge. It's a challenge for all of us, both administratively at the city, but here. The good news is that you're in the process of choosing the Construction Manager at this point. Well along in that process. As soon as the Construction Manager really comes on board and really understands the product, the next schedule will be done by the Construction Manager with oversight by the City Manager and myself, of course. Then we'll be able to give you perhaps a better date. Right now, figure out a two-year construction period with hopefully a start depending on permitting also.

City Manager Iglesias: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

City Manager Iglesias: We have dramatically accelerated the schedule. We're looking at starting next year, probably the third quarter of next year. and we item actually H-3, selection of the Construction Manager at Risk for this project and so the architect has done an excellent job we've accelerated everything and try to make sure that we start this project in the third quarter of next year.

Mayor Lago: All right. So, let's take the next step. Mr. Clerk, do we have any public comment?

City Clerk Urquia: No Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: All right we'll close the public comment. May I have a motion?

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'll move it for option B.

Mayor Lago: Option B.

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Commissioner Fernandez: I'll second.

Commissioner Castro: Yes.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes.

Commissioner Lara: Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Congratulations once again.

Mr. Heisenbottle: Thank you very much.