

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting**  
**Agenda Item A-8**  
**February 11, 2025**  
**Police and Fire Headquarters**  
**2151 Salzedo Street, 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**  
**City Manager, Alberto Parjus**  
**City Clerk, Billy Urquia**

**Public Speaker(s)**

**Former Commissioner Wayne “Chip” Withers**  
**Elvis Fuentes, Museum Executive Director**  
**Maria Cruz**

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Agenda Item A-8 [10:05 a.m.]

Presentation by the Coral Gables Museum

Mayor Lago: Welcome back. We have a time certain, 10 am for agenda item A-8, presentation by the Coral Gables Museum. Commissioner Withers, it’s always a pleasure to have you here, along with Elvis, our Director of the Museum. Thank you, sir. Welcome back.

Commissioner Withers: Thank you very much. I think we have a real quick one-minute montage queued up. Let’s roll it and then we’ll start a very brief, brief presentation.

City Clerk Urquia: If Cable TV can play the video.

[Video Presentation]

Commissioner Withers: Are there any questions. Again, good morning, Mayor, Vice Mayor, City Manager, City Clerk, City Attorney, on behalf of the entire Board of Directors and the staff, we very much appreciate this opportunity to present to you kind of a state of the union where we are  
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with the museum. I have a very quick presentation and then Elvis will follow up with something, but I just want to let you know the museum is in very good shape. We're trending extremely well. We've got a couple of new hires that I think are really going to be sensational for the city. After all, this is your museum, this is the resident's museum, and we are really excited. We have some great things. The city has been an incredible partner in the past couple of years. They've helped us co-sign and acquire some very significant capital improvement grants, which I think close to \$750,000 to a million dollars that we are going to be able to get that building into pristine shape. The programming is going to be off the charts. We've kind of refocused and shifted a little bit towards a lot more of a family application. You're going to see an increased involvement in family days and on getting the neighborhoods involved in the museum. Our Gallery Night – I don't know if you've been recently, but it's been off the charts. We've had 800 to 1,000 people attend, and most recently, we had probably one of the best galas. I know some of you were there. Some of you couldn't make it, but I think it was absolutely sensational. Mother nature dropped a bomb on us with a very low temperature on a Friday night, but then raised the temperature about ten degrees the next night, so it ended up being very, very comfortable. A little aside on the gala, we had bought 100 – 150 blankets for all the patrons while they were sitting in the plaza. It was warm enough where they didn't need the blankets, so they were all donated to downtown missions and whatever for folks on the street that needed to keep warm. So, the City of Coral Gables did have an impact outside its boundaries with folks downtown. So again, I'd like to present to you Elvis Fuentes and from the bottom of my heart this has been a journey for me and if it wasn't for the City of Coral Gables as a partner, that video you just saw that lasted 59 seconds wouldn't tell the story of what's going on. So, I present to you Elvis, our Executive Director, and thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Commissioner.

Mr. Fuentes: Thank you, Commissioner Withers. But very briefly, I just want to thank you for the opportunity and all the support that we received from the city. I'm really, really very grateful for all the collaboration that the city has continued with the museum throughout the years, but especially this year with the centennial coming up. It's been really great. We are actually very thankful also for the clean-up that we have in preparation for the gala. Now we are seeing the renovation of the Sister Cities room, and so, I want to thank all of you and also, of course, the City Manager and the people from Public Works that are doing an amazing job, and also the Communications Marketing Department that's doing a phenomenal job. A lot of people are coming because they learned from what we are doing through the city, and so we are very grateful for that. Coming up, we are preparing for the centennial, a very special exhibition. Actually, it's a series of exhibitions; one, focused on a recent donation that we received from the Fire Department, so we are going to be telling the story about the 100 years of the Coral Gables Fire Department, a really extraordinary donation of archival materials, artifacts, really sensational. The main exhibition that we are going to have in 100 places, highlighting 100 years of city history that will also in collaboration with the Department of Communication, we are presenting the 100 videos,

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the 100 interviews that they have done as part of that exhibition. We call it Coral Gables Centennial, the story of a city through 100 places and faces. Also, I want to thank the Economic Development Department. We have been collaborating and highlighting the Sister Cities of Coral Gables. We are presenting on February 25<sup>th</sup> a very important lecture by the President of the Sound and Society at the museum, and we are also collaborating with the...de Sevilla and we are presenting an exhibition of the restoration of La Giralda, that's such an important structure that has influenced the Coral Gables architecture throughout the history. I want to thank you again for this opportunity and I hope that you come by. I have distributed a little bit of information about what we have right now, and I hope that you visit soon. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

Commissioner Withers: Thank you, Elvis. Are there any questions that I can respond to.

Mayor Lago: I don't have questions, but first off, as a board member, I want to make witness of the hard work and the dedication, not only of yourself and the board, but Elvis and his wonderful team. The programming has been great. The amount of families that are enjoying the facility. The facility has never looked better, in the sense of the upkeep and the maintenance that is being done there. I've had the opportunity of going to multiple events over the last month from Bike Walk Coral Gables to the Gala, to going to exhibitions that have happened at the museum. The museum is alive, so I want to commend you on that, and the city goes as the museum goes, in my opinion. The better the museum looks, the cleaner it looks, the more inviting it is, the more welcoming it is, at the end of the day it only benefits the city. So, I want to commend you. Chip, I know you have your hands full across the board, on many different fronts and to give of the time that you give, I commend you for that. I know that you have a lot of stuff on your plate and you give an immense amount of time to this museum, to the city, and you do it out of the love that you have, not only because of the years of service, but also the simple fact that you believe that this museum is an anchor of the City of Coral Gables. So, I want to thank you for that.

Commissioner Withers: Well, listen, Vince, thank you, those are refreshing and kind words. It's been a labor of love, but I have to do a shoutout to this board that I'm a member of. I've been involved, like many of you in a lot of organizations and if you have five or ten percent board members that are really active, you feel comfortable that you can get stuff done. This board is all-in. I've never been a part of a group of individuals that I knew one of them when I took on the role as Chairman, other than by name and face, and the past six or seven months have been a herculean effort by the board and the results are this institution is strong and I'm excited about what we can present to the city in the next three to four months, starting with the time capsule. Real quick, we've kind of, just a quick shoutout on that as well. We've decided to invite kids to write letters to the future, so the time capsule is going to be an effort with hopefully all the local schools and we are encouraging each of the kids to write a letter and its not going to be one of these 100-year

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time capsules, its probably going to be a little shorter lifespan, so that in 25, 30, 40 years, these kids can open and their kids can open and see what their parents wrote in letters today on the 100<sup>th</sup> centennial. So, we are excited about that.

Mayor Lago: Great work. Great work.

Commissioner Castro: Would this be from a certain high school, all the kids that go into the museum.

Commissioner Withers: I'm sorry.

Commissioner Castro: The letters – are they going...

Commissioner Withers: We are going to go across the board. We are going to go with elementary. Obviously, which is going to be a totally different type of, maybe a poem, then we are going to go to high school, which hopefully will be a little more challenging, as to where they are at this point in their lives and what the world is like for them today. So, we are just developing that. We've got this great hire coming in in two weeks from a fellow museum. She is absolutely phenomenal and already hitting the ground running with some really cool ideas. So, we'll engage you all and it would be cool to get the school kids. Instead of just putting a MAGA hat or an iPhone into the ground, we want to put something that hopefully has some long-term lasting effects that will impact people when they read it in the future.

Commissioner Castro: So, its not 100 years, but have you decided how many years they are going to open it in.

Commissioner Withers: What do you think?

Commissioner Castro: I think 25 years is sufficient. I mean 25 years, really there is so much difference that can go on in your life.

Commissioner Withers: We were in that time range because the kids that would be writing the letters are like 10 to 15 to 18 now, so they'll be young adults at that time, and it would be a lot more impactful, I think, to show to their kids or whatever at that time. So, we were looking at the 25-to-30-year range as well.

Commissioner Castro: Amazing.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'll tell you that I had saved some of my writings from when I was in school and showed them to my children at some point in time and it was really interesting position for them to look at their age what I wrote at the same age back then, and they could see different thought patterns and so forth, but also the writing style, there were similarities, at least the way

that I had taught them, but they thought it was interesting. They thought it was very interesting to see what their mother wrote.

Commissioner Withers: When I look back when I was in high school, I don't know, the world just didn't seem to be important to me in the big scope, my immediate world was what I was doing that day and that weekend, and I think today, kids have a little broader outlook on what's actually taking place around them, as opposed to just what's happening at the moment. So, its going to be – I won't be alive, but it will be exciting to see what some of the comments, hopefully be able to read some of the letters before they are put in the time capsule, just to kind of see the thought process, but we are pretty excited about. It's going to be, I think, something pretty cool for the city to embrace as well.

Vice Mayor Anderson: You are absolutely correct, because the world is different. They have these devices, and you get news 24/7.

Commissioner Withers: Right.

Vice Mayor Anderson: In a much more constant way than we did from the black and white TVs that we had when we were growing up.

Commissioner Withers: No air conditioning.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes, no air conditioning and lots of critters around too, but the amount of work that you have been able to accomplish and the wide variety of people that you pull in for various different things, whether its children, and activity groups and young associates coming in there and so forth, has enriched this museum far more than the original vision, I think was, for just to be a history museum. By pulling in the younger folks, young adults and so forth, you get to experience the history more than if it had only remained a history museum. So, thank you for the vision of doing that. Thank you.

Commissioner Withers: And if anyone has any educators that they know personally, or anybody listening, we are open to help and suggestions and we are just putting the logistics of it together now. We really haven't gone into creating the documents, but we would love to have anybody that wants to be engaged in this to participate as part of the 100-year centennial.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Thank you.

Commissioner Castro: How is the museum doing financially compared to the past two years?

Commissioner Withers: Compared to last year.

Commissioner Castro: To the past two years.

Commissioner Withers: So, that's an excellent question. The summer is always very tough for the museum, and you hope you build up enough reserves going into the summer that you can carry yourself at least until the fall. This summer we had the perfect storm. We had to termite the building, so it was closed a month. We had to redo the community halls, so we couldn't lease the space and that was closed for several months. We had some funding from the State of Florida redirected. So, we missed out on kind of some of the monies we expected during the summer. I can tell you that since that time, we have signed an exclusive catering agreement with a high-end caterer that's projecting to be very well on the building rental side. We did well with the gala. We netted and this is a public record, probably somewhere around \$60,000, which is about what it cost us to run the museum for a month. We've got several grants out there. We've got a couple of big exhibitions where we have not sponsors of \$5 and \$10,000, but sponsors of \$25 and \$30,000, which is a big difference. So far, projecting through the 2025 fiscal year through next October, we seem like we are going to be hitting all of our numbers, unless something really drastic happens, we should do well this year. So, we are excited about that.

Commissioner Castro: That's amazing. That's amazing. Thank you for that update.

Commissioner Withers: And thanks to the city, because I know that you all were very helpful with us last September, October, which really helped us get over, I guess it was a difficult time in the month of August and September and the city stepped up and helped us out with the grant, so we are very appreciative of that as well.

Commissioner Fernandez: So just chiming in. The 25 years, I think is a good point. 25 years ago, I think you were sitting on the dais, I was in high school at the time, so a lot has changed. Commissioner Menendez talked about cell phones. I don't think we had cell phones at the time. So, definitely there has been a major change. This past week actually, my mother was going through old boxes, and she found a letter I wrote to Santa when I was a kid, and I was asking for a computer. Back then that was something that was hard to come by.

Commissioner Withers: Right.

Commissioner Fernandez: But it's interesting just going and looking at it and saying, this is what my mindset was when I was seven years old. So, I think that's a phenomenal idea. In the next few weeks, I welcome the opportunity to sit down as we did when I first got elected, come out to the museum and go over things and just get a little more immersed in what's been going on since. As I've always said and I've told Elvis numerous times, I've always thought the museum should have more of a historic feel. I'm glad to see that that is being observed this year for the centennial, but I'd like to see a plan where it continues going forward as well and not such a large component for art, but more of a component for the history of our city, which is really what we are trying to highlight, and if there is anything that the city can do to help promote. I recently met with the Chamber and one of the things we were talking about was, the Greater Miami Convention and

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Visitors Bureau really doesn't do a lot to promote Coral Gables and attract folks to come to our city. We are working on scheduling a meeting with them and the Chamber and myself to try to see how we can get some of those taxpayer dollars that they are using to promote South Florida, but to start attracting people to our city and I think the museum is a place that we can attract them to and bring folks who are visiting our area, who are looking for history. I've been at City Hall a couple of times and tourists had just walked in because they saw the nice building and I've given them a tour of City Hall. They didn't even know what City Hall was, and I know Martha Pantin has worked on the new map, which highlights a lot of our historic locations, and I think we just need to do a little bit more of that, just continue to promote and work together to ensure that the museum is successful. We do have a large investment as a city in the museum every year, and if the museum is not successful then we're not successful. So, it's important for all of us to make sure that the museum is as successful as it can be. I'm here to help and I'd welcome the opportunity to come out and meet with the two of you and kind of go over things and see if there is anything. You said that the Sister Cities room is being renovated, that's one of the ideas that I had given potentially incorporating the consulates of those Sister City nations and having them sponsor a month or two every year promoting their country, that's a way that maybe we can attract a different crowd to the museum. That's something that shouldn't take a whole large investment from them, but it also gives them pride and promote within their country for people to come to the Coral Gables Museum. I think there are things that can be done, maybe to highlight some of those smaller spaces that we have, but I look forward to working with all of you.

Commissioner Withers: And you're right, we were art-heavy for a while, they are very expensive to curate. Sometimes you don't cover your cost unless you have a major sponsor and we had a couple of strikes that didn't quite make it out of the infield, but one thing we have done is we, really focused on our community partners like the Miami Garden Club, David Fairchild, and we are hopefully going to be able to start establishing some pretty consistent educational series with those folks, so its not just going to be an exhibit, it will be followed up with a series of lectures and educational opportunities. So, we've got some momentum now which is kind of exciting.

Commissioner Fernandez: And by the way, you do have a school principal here in the room from an elementary school.

Commissioner Withers: There you go. We are ready for that.

Commissioner Menendez: I just want to add since 30 years is going by. Not that long ago, I found a VHS tape of Coral Gables TV, it was a Commission meeting, and the discussion was about renovations to the Youth Center back in the 90s, 30 years ago.

Commissioner Withers: Right.

Commissioner Menendez: The interesting thing is, I was at the podium, and you were sitting here, and I was a blonder, leaner me, but I was in support of the Youth Center changes and you were a Commissioner then. That goes to show how 30 years how things change.

Commissioner Withers: Wow.

Commissioner Menendez: We're still serving, you're still serving, I'm still serving, but different perspective, but we are working together, but that was exactly 30 years ago.

Commissioner Withers: Has it been that long. I remember the three issues were street closing between the Youth Center and the library, that was an issue, the height of the lights was an issue, and then whether to put artificial turf in was an issue.

Commissioner Menendez: And the lights, everybody protested, we don't want tall lights because it will spill into the neighborhood. As soon as they turned on the lights everybody goes, wow, it really works.

Commissioner Withers: Yes. That was 30 years ago.

Commissioner Fernandez: Tall lights issue.

Commissioner Withers: That was 30 years ago.

Commissioner Menendez: 30 years ago, exactly.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Commissioner.

Commissioner Withers: Thank you, guys. Thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Elvis, good to see you.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, before you move forward, I have a member of the public who requested to speak on this item, Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. I am impressed that for this 100<sup>th</sup> year we are doing so much for our history, but I must urge the people, the board that's involved with the museum to remember that the vision for this museum was not to be a modern art museum, but to be a historical museum and I do think that we are on the right track, but I hope that what we are doing today and for this 100 years is not going to be just for this year, that we continue putting the emphasis on the history of Coral Gables, because that's what it was meant to be. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

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

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Mayor Lago: Okay. Perfect. We'll move onto time certain item G-1, 10:30 a.m.