

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Items F-6 & F-9
June 10, 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)

Agenda Item F-6 and F-9 [12:36 p.m.]

Discussion regarding hybrid work policy. (Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Discussion regarding hybrid work and the consideration of different options.

(Sponsored by Commissioner Castro)

Mayor Lago: We'll move to item F-6, a discussion regarding hybrid work policy. This is an item I sponsored on a previous agenda, but obviously we were running into a 12-hour meeting, so I just wanted to give staff and give everyone a little bit of a break who has been through 12 hours, so I deferred it. This is already, basically taken action. I wanted to give a little bit of background why I think this is a good idea. I've gotten a lot of phone calls from residents and a lot of phone calls and visits from employees to my office, lots, a lot; and the majority of the ones that come in person, 99 percent of them tell me they want hybrid to end, and I'm going to tell you why. This matter impacts not only how we work, but how we serve. The hybrid or work from home policy was formerly implemented in our City in May 2024 by Amos Rojas, here's the email, when he was City Manager. This is one of his first initiatives, without even piloting such a program, or considering the level of service we provide ourselves and we pride ourselves on. Since it has been a little over a year since implementation, now it is time to evaluate how we do things moving forward. While remote work served an important function during the pandemic, we must now return to the fundamentals of public service, accessibility, responsiveness, and accountability. My

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office has received numerous complaints from residents who visited departments and experienced a lack of responsiveness from staff who may have been working remotely. This is unacceptable and does not reflect the standard of service Coral Gables is known for. In government, unlike in the private sector, the people we serve are not customers, they are taxpayers. They deserve to walk into City Hall, speak to someone face-to-face and receive answers and results in real time. Timely and personal service cannot be consistently achieved through a hybrid or remote model. This approach also aligns with a growing trend both locally and nationally. Most local cities ended this practice, including Miami-Dade County, who recently ended its remote work policy. I want to remind you, I want to reiterate, Miami-Dade County also ended this policy. Recognizes the need for in-person service. Major private sector companies are following suit or have already followed suit last year. Amazon now requires employees to be in office, citing the value of in-person collaboration. It's not only about accountability, it's about collaboration. When I go to my office and I sit down with my employees, my colleagues, it's a beautiful thing to sit down and have a conversation with them and get their perspective and their ideas, especially from all different ages, especially people who have worked in different industries, who are more proficient in different areas of construction and engineering. It is all about collaboration, that's how we service our residents and that's how we service our clients to the best of our ability. We are always learning. IBM has ended broad remote work policies, encouraging employees to return to hubs where the work is happening. JPMorgan Chase expects senior leaders and most staff to be fully in office, emphasizing teamwork and productivity. Companies like Disney, Meta, and others have also scaled back remote work, underscoring the importance of face-to-face interaction. While remote work may still fit certain industries or roles, it is not ideal model for municipal government. When personal interaction, collaboration and public trust are paramount, Coral Gables take great pride in delivering the highest level of service to our residents and visitors. We are known across the region and the state for our professionalism, responsiveness and personal touch. Our community expects and deserves a government that is fully accessible, engaged and present. I also want to be very clear; Coral Gables has always supported its employees. We understand that life can present challenges and will remain committed to working with individuals facing hardships. Since I've been elected, I have provided on multiple occasions an opportunity to meet with all employees on site and off, where we have provided breakfast for the employees and have had multiple discussions and I think I have garnered their trust when they come and visit me and tell me their opinions and their ideas on how we can make our city better. Overwhelmingly, the individuals that have come to see me face-to-face have told me it's time to end remote work. However, we cannot compromise the high standards of service our residents rely on and deserve. Ultimately, this is about trust between the government and the people we serve. That trust is built through personal interaction, responsiveness, and a visible commitment to public service, by ensuring our staff are present and accessible. We honor that trust and continue to meet the expectations our community rightfully holds for us. So, if you look across Miami-Dade County and you look across Miami-Dade and you look at the State, we are one of the last few bastions of remote work and I think that our residents and business owners deserve better. So, I'm putting this on the agenda because it's already coming to an end anyway June 9th, came effective yesterday, I apologize. It's already done, but I want to be transparent, as the word of the day, I want to be clear that this is a decision that needs to be made. We must be accountable. We must be present. We must be collaborative, and all the benefits will be reaped by the residents that we represent. So, that's my statement for the record. Anybody else would like to add anything for the record before we move on.

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Commissioner Castro: I have a similar item.

Mayor Lago: You want to take that item up now?

Commissioner Castro: Yes. We could go ahead and just join both items, I guess, right.

Mayor Lago: Perfect. That's a collaborative way of looking at things.

Commissioner Castro: Beautiful. My item is the same. I don't know if maybe the rest of the Commission – I received this inter-office envelope in my office and I spent some time highlighting. Did anybody else on the Commission received this or was it only me? No. You got it.

Mayor Lago: I want to answer you, if I may.

Commissioner Castro: Yes.

Mayor Lago: I just don't want to take up your time. May I answer you.

Commissioner Castro: Yes, but go back to it, please.

Mayor Lago: Okay. Yes, I received it, but I don't really do well with anonymous, especially when I've been doing office hours for 12 years and all my colleagues here do office hours, and everybody here is an individual who you can have a candid conversation with and speak freely about things. We offer Town Halls; we also offer breakfast with employees. At the end of the day, giving an anonymous letter doesn't provide the necessary clarity and collaborative spirit that I think we want to see. Yes ma'am.

Commissioner Castro: So, I think the reason that they are anonymous is because they are scared to lose their job, you know, this is the livelihood of a lot of employees, and they take it very seriously. This is how they survive, and unfortunately, I am dying to change this culture, they are scared of retaliation. One of the strongest things that I have worked on since I got elected was to improve employee morale and I have tried in every single different way, because obviously we are having a problem with employee morale. So, I didn't only do – I pushed for the picnic, I created the morale committee, not only that, but I've also done employee luncheons from my office funds that have been very, very, very well attended. I am listening to what employees want. So, I would be extremely curious to actually see your sign-in log to see what employees have actually gone to you to say that they are not in agreeance with this, because as much as I want to drop this, I am bombarded by employees and I would hope that they would put their name on there, but they think they are going to get fired, honestly, that's what's happening. But I'll go ahead – I'm going to go ahead and – last time I had a whole bunch of letters, which these are not the same, these are new letters. I gave them to the City Clerk, he put them on the record, and I think he returned them to my office, correct.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes ma'am.

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Commissioner Castro: Okay. These are different letters. The employees are very, very passionate about this. I'm going to go ahead and just touch points on some of the things that were stated in some of these letters. One of the letters says we are asking for a thoughtful refinement of this policy, not its removal. I want a more supportive structure approach, if necessary, as long as it retains some degree of flexibility. It's important to emphasize the hybrid work is not time off, nor is it a sign of reduced effort. It is also worth noting that many neighboring municipalities continue to support hybrid work, including City of Miami, City of Ft. Lauderdale, City of Miami Beach and City of Doral. For many of us, hybrids have not just been a convenience, but it has been essential to our mental and emotional wellbeing. The idea of losing this flexibility is genuinely frightening for some of us. We have always shown up whether it's been in person, on Teams, or responding to emergencies after hours. We have proven time again and again that we have been productive, present, and responsive, whether working from home or from office. Other municipalities in Miami-Dade County such as Miami Beach, City of Miami, City of Doral and City of Hialeah have continued to support flexible arrangements with great success. There are so many letters. Let me go ahead and touch base on something here. These statements suggest that employees working under hybrid schedules were somehow not at work. I can assure you and so many of my colleagues that we have been working hard every day, whether it's in office or remotely. We meet deadlines, serve residents, collaborated across departments, and upheld the highest standards expected of us as public servants. Hybrid work was never about working less. It was about working smart, sustainability, and with greater focus. This move feels not only abrupt but out of step with current public sector practices. For employees with long commutes, shared office spaces, shared giving responsibilities or health concerns, the hybrid model helped reduce stress and improve efficiency. For the city it helped retain skilled, committed employees and continuity of service. This is not a resistance to coming into office. It's a call for balance. It's a call to be heard. Oh my God. There are so, so, so many here. When the Mayor went ahead and said that this was an initiative from our prior City Manager Amos Rojas, I was behind that. I was the one who pushed that. Why did I do that? – because we need to retain skilled employees and if we cannot stay competitive with other neighboring municipalities, this is a benefit that we can offer without ditching out more money, and at the end of the day, retaining skilled employees is important to our turnover. We keep on spending money on hiring and training new employees that we cannot keep and that needs to change. This is in particular to that. If you don't want to listen to your people, it's okay, I don't think anything is going to happen here, but I am going to speak on behalf of the employees because you guys are important to me. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: May I respond, please if I may, so a few things. Mr. City Manager, I don't want to cross-examine you, but do you give me and the Commission your word to address any employee that requires hybrid, stay-at-home work and can prove that they have an issue with a family member, a sickness, or something that requires them to work from home.

Mayor Lago: Of course, Mayor. We've done it many times on a case-by-case basis.

Mayor Lago: On a case-by-case, so that's number one, I want to put that on the record. Number two, Commissioner, you heard from all of the employees here, they were just here, the directors, they told you that park is a good idea for the city, it's important, you voted against it. You didn't

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listen to your employees; our employees are here. They all said it is a good idea to have that park, we need it for the expansion of that park, we need it for the future, it's important. Just so you have an idea, the Fire Station that we put on Sunset, the one that we put on Sunset which was done before any of these elected officials was here, I'm the one that worked on that, we paid a million dollars more for that property, because we couldn't find another property on Sunset, a million dollars, we have the record. But guess what, can't put a price on public safety. So, at the end of the day, we have a fourth Fire Station, which again, I think is important for the residents in that area, because when a resident dies, based on our response time, that's not on my conscience. I'll be happy that we have another Fire Station there. So, you talk about employee morale. We've had hybrid for a year, we have the breakfasts, we meet with the employees, we give them what they want. We've had a brand-new agreement in regard to the unions, we've increased salaries. Why is employee morale still down. Employee morale should not be down. Guys, I hate to say this, because I'm going to be looked at as probably a mean person, but when I go to work I don't want to go to work sometimes, but we have to go to work, we have obligations, and it's important to understand that at the end of the day, employee morale should not be down. If you already have a hybrid work schedule, nobody should be upset about that. So, it doesn't make sense if you've been given brand-new union agreements in the last 12 months, which you provided for hybrid work in the last 12 months, but employees are still upset about the issue. I don't understand. That's perplexing. It doesn't make sense. This Commission was controlled, was controlled by three people who made all those decisions and at the end of the day, if those issues – if you still were not able to make the employees happy, which by the way is completely contrary to what the employees that come and talk to me, how ecstatic they are about the change in the city, about the transparency in the city, how we're moving forward with issues, how we are addressing issues, how we are tackling projects, how the politics ended. So, at the end of the day, I think it's important to follow suit and move forward like in the private sector and like other municipalities. You named two municipalities out of 34 in Miami-Dade County, City of Miami and City of Miami Beach, that's what you mentioned.

Commissioner Castro: I mentioned more.

Mayor Lago: No. You mentioned Miami-Dade County, said City of Ft. Lauderdale, City of Miami Beach, and City of Miami.

Commissioner Castro: Right here.

Mayor Lago: City of Doral. I missed three. I missed three.

Commissioner Castro: There's four, but I didn't write this, so I can't even verify it, honestly.

Mayor Lago: You mentioned four cities, three of them are in Miami-Dade County, City of Ft. Lauderdale is not in Miami-Dade County. Okay. So, I was off by one, I apologize, out of 30, almost 40 municipalities. Yes sir.

City Manager Iglesias: Mayor. Thank you, Mayor. I brought everybody back after the pandemic in June of 2021. With all due respect Commissioner Castro, I don't believe we have an employee

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morale problem. We have 1200 employees, and we have different ideas from those 1200 employees. I do believe that the work policy that we now provide for better collaboration, better communication, better access to resources, better visibility, better team building and more structure, and I think that all those issues make us a better city, and better to deal with our residents and better to deal with emergencies. We have 1200 employees. This is a great place to work. Coral Gables is a great place to work. We may have some issues finding certain positions that every city is having, but I think our people are satisfied working here. We have an incredible team. It's a privilege for me to work with such an incredible team and I don't think we have a morale issue. We have 1200 employees. When you have 1200 employees there are going to be people that want different things and we try to accommodate that when there is a true need, but I can tell you that we have a fantastic team. They work incredible. It's my privilege to lead this team. It's my privilege and I think that our work policy is the best policy for a municipality.

Mayor Lago: If I may add something, just two things really quickly. Number one, you are incorrect about Doral. I just got confirmation that Doral does not have a work from home policy, hybrid was ended, as per the City Manager, that's number one. Number two, this idea, we can continue to say, you spoke to some employees, I spoke to some employees, let's do a real survey from all employees.

Commissioner Castro: Anonymously.

Mayor Lago: The idea – I don't have a problem with anonymous, but the idea of anonymous, again, there has to be accountability, the idea that you can make somebody happy – yes, let's pay people not to work, let's pay people not to work. The level of respect that I have for employees, especially not only in the private sector, but in the public sector, I don't walk by one city employee, I don't care who he is, or she is, and I don't say hi to them and look at me in the eyes with respect. So, this idea that you can say that employees fear retaliation, what retaliation are you talking about. What employee here retaliation are you talking about. That's such an easy word to throw out there in an effort to intimidate. Again, at the end of the day, the facts are the facts. Doral is back and I'm going to check to see if the City of Miami how many employees they have in hybrid, I'm going to check the City of Ft. Lauderdale and the City of Miami Beach to see exactly what the facts are. Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I just want to add one important fact here too. During Covid one of the things that residents had asked for is for employees to come back and I think it's important that we listen to the residents. Great things happen when people work together, especially for newer people coming in. You get the mentorship, you get the type of collaborative experience that that person can grow, and they might start out in Parks and Recreation and as we see here, we have somebody that is working in an Assistant City Manager position, that doesn't happen working remotely. There are provisions that protect people that need to work remotely due to health reasons or other reasons like that. Our City Manager's office accommodates that. It is a federal law that someone has to accommodate that. There are provisions for those people that have those concerns. No, I didn't receive any envelopes. I haven't received any complaints. I had a question from one person, do we have to come back? – yes, we do need to come back, and I can tell you that the collaboration was necessary for that person because I think they can grow in that means. Listening to the

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residents is important. We had significant complaints that people were still out during Covid. We had significant complaints even more recently during the hybrid work program that phones were not being picked up. During Covid I had an employee working remotely. It wasn't the greatest employee, but without working with me and next to me, I had to let that person go, because they didn't have the capacity to work on their own. This is something that a manager has to manage and unfortunately in your previous vote you didn't listen to the residents. I've already gotten some comments back – disappointment about the park. We are here to serve residents. We need to do the best we can with the staff that we have, it's taxpayer dollars that go to pay these salaries and it's a service that we need to deliver.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor. Regarding my last vote, it's called fiscal responsibility. It's not called not listening to the residents but protecting their pockets. Moving forward the Mayor said something about retaliation. I think I can answer that with just one name, her name is Jessica Keller, and I'll just leave it like that, about retaliation. And about morale, City Manager, there are suggestion boxes and I'm getting complaints that maybe people are not listening to the suggestion boxes. I know that it's a new thing. If you can please look at the suggestions that are there, because I think you will get more of a clearer picture of what's really happening in the interior. There was also another system that was being used as an anonymous platform, and it's directed to the City Manager, so the City Manager really knows what's happening behind closed doors with our employees. I would bring as a suggestion – I know there is a department here in the City of Coral Gables that is already doing a 4/10 schedule. I would hope that we don't discard that possibility for the departments that might be able to qualify for that option or that model. And besides that, thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: So, two points in response. I don't speak about employees up here, only the directors, I ask them to come and speak. It's just a thing that when you run a business and you understand how things work and you don't speak about somebody which is not here to defend themselves, that's number one. Number two, the amount of residents and the amount of business owners and the amount employees that have come to talk to me about the conduct and work from home and the lack of responsiveness is a lot, is a lot, and its being addressed and we are moving forward, and I hope with these suggestion boxes that they get addressed. But remember, when were those suggestion boxes added?

Commissioner Castro: Like almost a year ago.

Mayor Lago: Okay. So, now we're talking about Mr. Iglesias being here two weeks today and its falling on his lap. Again, let's be honest with ourselves, let's see what those suggestion boxes are, and I want to see who is filling them out and what the issues are at hand and let's address them. And another thing, you talk about fiscal responsibility – raising your salaries is not being fiscally responsible, okay, number one; and number two, giving a \$20 million dollar COLA that has a tail for ten years and it cost us \$2 million dollars a year is being so irresponsible that its reckless. When staff tells you don't approve this COLA and when staff tells you don't approve this union contract for the firefighters in that room and you go ahead and ask for more money that's reckless, that's reckless. That's costing the city so much money and I'm happy that I voted no on that because that's on your legacy not my legacy. So, at the end of the day, paying a hundred and something

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thousand dollars more for a park in regards to the appraisal, that's not reckless, that's saying I want to buy that park and at the end of the day, they started off at \$3.5, we got to \$3.1 (million), that's not being a fiduciary, that's saying we need that park and I'm willing to pay an extra \$100,000, and if you ask the residents in that neighborhood they'll probably say, pay the extra \$100,000, so another house doesn't get built there and we can do something beautiful for the kids in the community.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: But at the end of the day, you know, I think you need a lesson in regard to what it is to be fiscally sound and responsible.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor. Thank you so much for respecting me and talking to me in that manner. I really appreciate it. Talks...on you. And I think this is a clear violation of the meeting that we have in closed doors talking about negotiations and I do want also to put on the record that the HR Department obviously recommended whatever offer we approved from the union, and anybody can correct me if I'm wrong.

Mayor Lago: Madam City Attorney, if I may, once union negotiations are done, that becomes public record, correct.

City Attorney Suarez: The negotiated contract and the negotiations that are done in the public meetings, absolutely are part of the public record.

Commissioner Castro: That wasn't a public meeting.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner, you're interrupting me. At the end of the day, its very simple, staff said very clearly here, not to support that COLA. You can't cherry pick what you want to pick. It's \$2 million dollars a year for the next ten years. We can't stop that, can't roll that back. That's \$20 million dollars, because you wanted to give past employees a raise, a COLA, that's \$20 million dollars. Again, that was the previous Commission. You led the charge. You raised your salary. Thank God this Commission repealed it. So, at the end of the day, please don't lecture me about fiscal responsibility, because I'm the one that's put a 25 percent cap on ensuring that we have the highest reserves in the city. I'm the one who has been working for the last 12 years with my previous colleagues to ensure that we paid down our pensions to protect our employees, because when I walked in here it was 51 percent funded, now we are getting close to almost 80 percent, putting massive amounts of money, additional money to ensure the pension is viable. So please don't lecture me about being fiscally sound, when for 12 years I've been investing in the employee's retirement, when I could have used that money for other things. So, Commissioner.

Commissioner Lara: Through the Mayor. Let's all take a breath, and I'd like to bring it back to F-6, right, we are talking about hybrid work policy. A hybrid work policy has already been implemented as of yesterday, so all I'll like to add to that is that somebody said it before, and it was very well stated, we are not, pardon me.

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City Attorney Suarez: It was implemented; it was concluded. The hybrid work policy was concluded.

Commissioner Lara: Right, but implemented is a return to work, the end of the hybrid work policy. So, after the fact, what we're discussing is what's in place right now and hybrid came into play as a result of a pandemic. The pandemic ended years ago, and I understand that you are going to have a lot of different opinions about whether or not employees prefer to come to work every single day in the office, work in some hybrid mode or remote completely. I would say that as managers, we have to make a decision in the best interest of our bosses, which are the residents. I am unaware of any call or concerted effort from the residents to ensure the residents, that the employees of the city adhere to a hybrid or a remote policy. I think the opposite. I think that the great majority of the people that I've spoken to want to see more presents from the employees of the city, so that when they walk into any one of our offices they see a vibrant and robust and collaborative face to the public, as well as the obvious, what we've discussed within ourselves here, the advantages of having everybody in the office, not only from a retention and improvement of work performance perspective, but also in a recruitment perspective. I also work in the private sector and one of the most difficult things to do is to have individuals who are new to the city feel or believe that they belong to something, at a level at or even higher than being apart of the team, if they are not here on a consistent basis. So, there is a...that's built when you are coming in here every single day and we can debate all the pluses and minuses and all that, but a decision has to be made we are not going to have paralysis to over-analysis. So, from my perspective, I welcome the fact that everybody is going to be coming to work as they are doing as of yesterday, every single day to the office, and I think we are going to see the benefits of that in the long term as well. By the way, one note, I'm one of the newest people to the city working here; I actually came here thinking there might have been a sense of morale issue and yet everybody who I've spoken to has said to me with surprise, genuine surprise. What are you talking about? – I really love working here, right. If I may pause it, that if there was an issue with morale or even something having to do with retaliation, I would say that that all comes from or stems from a tremendous instability at the City Manager position. So, I've said it before, and I'll say it again, I believe that bringing back Mr. Iglesias as we've done establishes stability in the highest ranking manager of this massive employee group that we have here and then from that point forward, I think we'll see a continued adherence or improvement even of the good morale that I think I've come to work to see when I come here.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Commissioner. Anything else for the good of the order on this issue. None. Okay. Moving on. Thank you to staff and in closing, before we move onto F-7, if you are an employee and you have any issues in the city, if you'd like to have a discussion at my offices or you'd like to have a private meeting and have coffee, I welcome the conversation. I look forward to your ideas on how we can do better and make sure that we meet your needs, because you are appreciated and we are beyond grateful for everything that you provide for the City of Coral Gables as a whole. Thank you.