

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-1
March 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)

Maria Cruz
Jackson Rip Holmes
Samuel Joseph
Karelia Carbonell

Agenda Item F-1

A Resolution of the City Commission directing the City Manager to explore potential acquisition of the property located at 110 Phoenetia Avenue (aka “The Garden of Our Lord”) located at the corner of Phoenetia Avenue and East Ponce de Leon Boulevard. (Sponsored by Commissioner Menendez)

Mayor Lago: Moving onto F-1.

City Attorney Suarez: F-1 is a Resolution of the City Commission directing the City Manager to explore potential acquisition of the property located at 110 Phoenetia Avenue (aka “The Garden of Our Lord”) located at the corner of Phoenetia Avenue and East Ponce de Leon Boulevard.

Commissioner Menendez: As we all know, we’ve all become very familiar with the property at 110 Phoenetia, The Garden of Our Lord property. It has an important history in our community.

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It's had a very interesting history in the last couple of years. You have what was a church, you have across the street, you have the Women's Club, and you have Crystal Academy and you have plenty of green space. I think it's around 1.5 acres and it was brought to my attention that the property is available and I think it behooves the city to, especially in that part of Coral Gables to explore, inquire, into the availability of such a large piece of property in an area that I think is still growing and I think if we are able to capture and use to the benefit of our community and the city that property, I think it would be a great acquisition. I think it's something that I'm pretty sure based on the reaction of the emails that we've received; a lot of folks have encouraged the city to explore the opportunity of perhaps acquiring it. I think it's something that the community would be very happy with, and I think it's a prime piece of real estate that the city could do a lot with.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Just a couple of questions. Did anybody approach you about this?

Commissioner Menendez: Yes. It wasn't the property owners, but somebody associated with, in contact with the owners. They let me know that it was available, and I immediately reached out to the administration and gave them a heads-up. So that's why we're going to explore.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I know, but I mean actually expressing an interest in having a discussion with the city as opposed to the general well-known knowledge that the property was going to be going through some transitions.

Commissioner Menendez: Well, it has an interesting past, so as we know the prior owner, unfortunately, is no longer with us and my understanding is, the current owners are open to moving on from the property. So, such a large piece of property with such an amazing history in our community, it's something definitely worth exploring. If it happens, it happens, if it doesn't it doesn't, but I trust the administration to do its due diligence and look into that property, just like every other property that comes on our radar and it's something worth pursuing, at least exploring.

Vice Mayor Anderson: No doubt about that. This has been a question that has been posed by residents for some time and at that time the question is, do you have a willing seller and number two, is it a reasonable or doable price for the property. So, I have no objection to exploring and hopefully we have those two elements, willing and reasonable.

Commissioner Menendez: We have one heck of a team here and I know they'll do right by the city and our community, and they'll come to us with guidance, but I'm glad that we're all in agreement that it's something we should pursue.

Commissioner Castro: If you move it, I'll go ahead and I'll second.

Commissioner Menendez: Sure, I'll move it.

Mayor Lago: I'm in favor of pursuing anything that deals with purchasing land for parks. I think to me, I've done it over a dozen times, and I just brought two properties that are nowhere near as pricy as this, but I think they are good assets. My question to you is a very simple one, two. Number one, I know the actual owner of the property was not the gentleman who passed away. I know the person who was the financier behind him and the property is currently under LOI by two different companies that are purchasing the property, that are interested in purchasing the property. If we were purchasing and compete with these two other LOI's, which they'll sit down with – I gave you the name of the individual, correct, who's the actual owner of the property. I have the information for you, if you'd like. You can contact them. My question is, would we keep Crystal Academy there as a tenant or would we give them the space for free, because I'm a big fan of Crystal Academy above everything and I want to make sure that if we're going to engage in purchasing that property, what would be the extent of their stay in that facility. And by the way, just so you know, the cost of that property is north of \$24 million dollars. So, I wrote the legislation, and I confirmed with our staff a few moments ago, in the Park's Trust right now we have about \$5 million dollars which is again, a lot of money we've been collecting, and you told me we're going to get another \$400,000 pretty soon, that's what the budget team just told me. Again, it's a great piece of property. Are we making it into a park or are we leaving Crystal Academy there in perpetuity as a renter on the property.

Commissioner Castro: I think we all share the same, I think the whole Commission shares the whole sentiment about Crystal Academy, we love them. I think we need to go step by step. That is way, way too advanced. We are just exploring the possibility of obtaining the property and then we can go ahead and talk about the next step. That's my suggestion.

Commissioner Menendez: I agree.

Commissioner Castro: I think we all feel the same way about Crystal Academy.

Commissioner Menendez: Absolutely. They were here today, and the city and every member of the Commission have been extremely supportive and what they do is priceless, and they are a true pillar of our community for the service that they provide families and children. So, by all means, we would always, in my opinion, do what's right by Crystal Academy, but this is just the first step. I can assure you that all our hearts are in the right place when it comes to Crystal Academy, but let's explore.

Mayor Lago: No doubt. Let's explore, but I mean the first property that we brought to the table that was on the agenda was under a million dollars. The one that we're talking about is in the range of two and change. It's a big jump when you go to a \$24 million dollar property that you've got to be able to buy. You're going to finance it, are you going to buy with debt, those are things that, I always think about when you are bringing up a property of this magnitude to the city and also

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when you have the issue of just putting it out there on the radar, then you've got to deal with the tenant, which is a very important tenant for us here in the city, are you going to charge them rent, are you not going to charge them rent, are they going to be the only users of that facility, because they pretty much encompass the entire facility right now. Those are just questions to ask, as you explore and you see things, just like I mentioned before about the piece of property that we talked about right now. What do you do with that property? Do you do pickleball? Do you do parking? Do you do a dog park? Do you do more tennis courts? Do you do another children's playground? Those are all things that we will explore, but the difference between that property and this property is that that property is vacant. No one depends on that property and Crystal Academy depends on that property and my understanding is that the people who are vying to buy that property have made the same commitment to keep Crystal Academy there at no cost, in regard to the rent and building their facility. Again, if it gets approved, if it gets approved, but just putting it out there. We are having a conversation about the property. I'm always willing to explore any opportunity. It's a cost and a lift and then you have the complexities of obviously having the school there, which is critically important to us.

Commissioner Castro: Those are great questions, but I don't think we are in the business to compete with developers at this point. The first step here is to see if we can even afford it and then we'll continue conversations, obviously by keeping Crystal Academy at the top of our mind.

Commissioner Fernandez: Anytime that we can preserve a historic asset like the Garden of our Lord from the hands of developers who are just trying to make money off of our city, we probably should, and we should probably try to find a way to do it. I think that they are all valid questions. The same questions that I have on the property that was brought up earlier. We have a park right there, so how does this property compensate for the park. It's got residents adjacent to it, so you can't do pickleball there, but I think it's a commitment that I made to the residents two years to work on preserving the Garden of our Lord, where we're able to purchase this property and the city would be able to do it. Having Crystal Academy there, I think it's an added bonus to us as a municipality, because they are an integral part of this community. So, I commend Commissioner Menendez for putting this on the agenda and for trying to work towards a resolution on this issue.

Mayor Lago: Let's take a vote.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, I have members of the public requesting to speak on this item. First speaker is Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Commissioner Fernandez: And while Ms. Cruz comes up...

Mrs. Cruz: Its misses.

Commissioner Fernandez: Mrs. Cruz comes up, we were trying to purchase the property for Lisbon Park, the developer wanted almost three times as much of the final price that we were able to secure for the city, but we were able to make that work, you actually were able to make that work, Mr. Mayor, you, Commissioner Keon and Commissioner Quesada led the efforts on that issue. So, I think if we work together as a city, there is nothing that can stop us.

Mayor Lago: So, if I may, I want to just respond to you. Again, most of these lots that we bring for purchase are residential lots. They don't have the high density and intensity and the zoning that these lots have; and number two, we've done it in the downtown, it's always been a developer giving us a property for free, like you've seen happen about six times already in our downtown. So, I'm all for exploring everything. I'm just telling you, no one's going to give us property, the \$24 million dollar property when there are already multiple offers over \$20 million dollars. Being realistic and this is what happens, and I know you want to put things out there, but the facts are the facts. This is a business transaction. I would love for them to say, you know what, I feel great, I want to give the property for \$5 million dollars, that's what we have in the bank account. Perfect. I'll take it in a heartbeat, give it to me. I'll take the property for \$5 million bucks, but I haven't seen that happen yet and Lisbon Park was nowhere in comparison to the price of this park.

Commissioner Fernandez: It was not but you know, you can also say that there is no height on that property. That property is zoned special use. They would need to get a Commission that's not going to uphold the zoning code in favor of over development to change that property, so the value is just not there.

Mayor Lago: There are development rights on that property. You can build something. They may interpret something else that they want to do on that property, that's their right to do, and at the end of the day, this is a free market, you can sell property for whatever you'd like. Just like the property that we're talking about here next to Salvadore Park. It may not work out. They may say they want too much money, something that it's not worth. At the end of the day when you do an appraisal, and you see it. I'm just saying, it's not only the money, it's also the issue of the tenant, because if you are going to build a green space or you are going to do something, you have a tenant that's there that we want to, obviously, all the Commission wants to make sure that we take care of. Again, apples and oranges. Madam. Ms. Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: Its Mrs. Cruz. Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. As I stand here it's hard to understand how we can discuss a property that we may not be able to acquire, but we are interested but we don't want the people to know till the Commissioners find out separately because it's a Sunshine issue, but then this, and nobody argued the point, let's examine this. Let's see how it could be done. Nobody asked questions. Everybody went along with. Let's see what happens. Let's see if we can afford it. Maybe we'll be able to do it, maybe not. No problem. But of course, now we get to one that people are clamoring for, that oh, but you know what, they are developers

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they may want it, and they have rights, and forget about our code, you know. Our code, you know, is limited to what they can do there, but no, no, no, we always have to put a, what's the word, a negative aspect to anything that somebody else would like to do. Let me tell you, I believe in miracles. I know that whatever we want to do we can do, and you know what, there's plenty of people in this city that you may be surprised that will put forth whatever we need to buy that property, because that property means a lot to a lot of people. So, let's start with the positive thing. Yes, let's figure out whether we can do it and then let's put out something to the people that can very well afford to help us do it and you know what, the rent or no rent, we'll decide later, because you know what, we're not deciding anything specific about the other property so why should we decide about this one. You know what, you have a lot of people that would be very happy that this is being discussed and that there's a possibility that we may be able to do it, and let's stop the negativity, because you know what, if we want to do it, we can do it, I'm sure that we'll be able to do it. Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker, I'm not sure if she's here, but Kelly Child, Jackson Holmes.

Mayor Lago: Good afternoon.

Mr. Holmes: Greetings. Thank you. Unfortunately, I need to bring something up as a preliminary matter. I've just been threatened with arrest by Chief Hudak. I have it on tape. He's threatening to prospectively, not past tense, he's saying he may arrest me in the future for disorderly conduct. I got it on tape. I was thinking about it. First of all, I called for an investigation, okay, if I'm guilty of something let's find out or is he guilty of trying to suppress First Amendment Rights, so let's investigate both parties, and I'm thinking what could be a remedy. First of all, one of the things he brought up to me is that when the Aix-en-Provence Delegation was here, I speak French. I was welcoming them in French. The lobby here, I was talking with them in French, because I think I'm the only one in the city that speaks French...[speaking French]...and if you remember, the Mayor here did not speak English, he was speaking in French. I was in the lobby and Belkys Perez said, "you're not allowed to talk to them out here in the lobby." We are going to handle them from here on out, but she doesn't speak French, but this was apparently, according to Chief Hudak, disorderly conduct that I wanted to welcome them to our city in French and I thought to myself, what if you find that he's just suppressing my First Amendment Rights, what would be the appropriate remedy and I think I should bring up to you, he has refused on two different occasions, I don't think he'll deny this. He invited me at some point to tell you all. On two different occasions I've tried to bring what I consider important city business relevant to the police to him. He said listen, you and I, Mr. Holmes will never meet again in our entire lives. So, let's have an investigation. He's my proposed remedy. Since he has refused and he won't deny it now, to ever meet with me, I ask that we consider, first of all, let's investigate this. I'm not guilty of anything. He's guilty and the remedy could be that he has to recuse himself from any further investigation of me, since he refuses to ever

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meet me for any reason, like city recruitment of police officers, then assign any investigation of me to the Assistant Chief or whatnot. But let's have an investigation as to who's guilty of wrongdoing here, me or Chief Hudak. I'll move on now to this very important subject that affects a friend of mine, Bonny Bolton. What she's really hoping for, and I think it's a good suggestion, is a swap of city properties. I was thinking out loud about Bill Kerdyk, don't we all miss him, is there any better public servant the city's had in my lifetime. I'm biased, he's the best, and one of the things he's a master at, if we remember, even this building was a part of a trade or swap, the city turned over the old police station, maybe to Mr. Codina and Mr. Codina helped us get this location, and this was a swap, and what Bonny Bolton has in mind and I think Bill Kerdyk is a master, he's a genius with this particular type of thing is a swap. So, the city maybe has 90 properties, and it would go to a developer. The same way this very building was acquired with a swap and say look, if you will give up the Garden of our Lord which we'd like to preserve as a historic site, we'll give you this property. It's a swap. Do you follow me? There is no \$24 million dollar acquisition, Mayor Lago, it's a swap of property. You being in the business, you can appreciate this. Bill Kerdyk is a master. I urge you all, City Manager, to consider talking with Bill Kerdyk, because I think he can come up with a proposed swap. Thanks for listening.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, we are going to go to Zoom. The next speaker is Samuel Joseph.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Joseph.

Mr. Joseph: Good evening. Good afternoon. I want to say, Sam Joseph by the way, 1248 Mariana Avenue. I just wanted to get on and to thank the Mayor and the Commission for looking at these land acquisitions, specifically the one across the street from Salvadore Park and I know there are other properties around the city that are right now for sale and available near our schools that would really take the pressure off of some of the deals that we've made in terms of sharing space with our schools and our parks. We hope that this goes through. I've spoken with the Mayor and also with our former Asset Manager Zeida about other open properties that are actually on the market right now across from our schools and how and adjacent parks, that we could use as overflow. So, thank you very much and good luck. I hope we can make this happen, whether it's through a land swap or purchasing them outright.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is Karelia Carbonell.

Ms. Carbonell: Hi there everyone, can you all hear me. Hello

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes, we can hear you.

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Mayor Lago: Karelia?

City Clerk Urquia: She muted herself.

Ms. Carbonell: Hello everyone, can you hear me?

Mayor Lago: We can hear you.

Commissioner Menendez: Hi Karelia.

Ms. Carbonell: Okay. Hi everyone. You know this is a great day for the Garden of our Lord, I have to say, because this is a project that our organization has been advocating for, along with many people and along with Bonny Bolton, who has really been the champion of this area over three years, and I just want to say that the Commission is taking a wonderful step forward, it's a small step, but it's a great step. I do want to say that back in 2015, so obviously you are all aligned with this particular purchase, because back in 2015 in the Charrette, one of the recommendations under the public spaces for purchase was D, the Garden, and so the Garden of our Lord, the garden area or the garden lot. So, seven years ago, this was an option that the city could have taken. As far as the money goes, there is always room for negotiation. Initially, the whole block was about \$10 million dollars, nothing really has happened there. The zoning issue is an issue to build. So, I think overall there's room to negotiate, but I do want to thank you in advance for taking that step everyone and this would be a wonderful acquisition. So, thank you again. Bye.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

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

Commissioner Menendez: I'd like to, before we vote, read into the record an email. I forwarded it earlier to the City Clerk and I think it's an important email regarding this property. It says, "*Dear Commissioner Menendez, thank you for taking the time to discuss the possibility of the city acquiring the property where Crystal Academy is located. Your consideration of this initiative means so much to our students and families as it would allow our children to continue thriving in the city they love and need to reach their full potential. If the city can afford to move forward or engage the necessary collaborators to make this possible, it would be a tremendous investment in our children's future and our community's inclusive values. We appreciate your support. Best regards, Maria Mary Palacio, Founder, President, Crystal Academy Coral Gables.*" I just wanted to include that into the record.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Make the motion.

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Commissioner Menendez: I make the motion.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Second. You answered my questions.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Commissioner Castro: In the beginning of this, he had already moved it, and I had seconded.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 5-0)