

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item E-2
February 25, 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 Manager, Alberto N. Parjus

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

City Planner, Jessica Garcia

Assistant Police Chief, Pat Hanlon

Public Speaker(s)

Suzanne Dockerty

Maria Cruz

Agenda Item E-2 [12:07 p.m.]

An Ordinance of the City Commission amending Ordinance No. 2997 to add a new multipurpose building, and increase the Maximum Student Enrollment from 881 to 945 students for St Theresa Catholic School located at 2701 Indian Mound Trail, Coral Gables, Florida; all other provisions and conditions of approval contained in Ordinance No. 2997 shall remain in effect; and providing an effective date.

Mayor Lago: Moving on to Item E-2.

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Agenda Item E-2 - Ordinance of the City Commission amending Ordinance No. 2997 to add a new multi-purpose building, and increase the Maximum Student Enrollment from 881 to 945 students for St. Theresa Catholic School located at 2701 Indian Mound Trail, Coral Gables, Florida; all other provisions and conditions of approval contained in Ordinance No. 2997 shall remain in effect.

City Attorney Suárez: E-2 is an ordinance of the City Commission amending Ordinance Number 2997 to add a new multipurpose building and increase the maximum student enrollment from 881 to 945 students for St. Theresa Catholic School, located at 2701 Indian Mound Trail, Coral Gables, Florida. All other provisions and conditions of approval contained in Ordinance Number 2997 shall remain in effect and providing for an effective date. This is a quasi-judicial item and all individuals testifying today should be sworn in by the City Clerk.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Those who will be appearing on this item please stand and raise your right hand. Do you swear or affirm that the testimony you will provide today will be the truth and nothing but the truth?

(COMMENTS MADE OFF THE RECORD)

City Clerk Urquia: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. Please. Good morning -- well, good afternoon.

Suzanne Dockerty: Good afternoon. Thank you for hearing us on the second reading. The City staff has worked with us on language in the ordinance to try to clarify some of the comments that were made at the first Commission meeting. We are generally in agreement with the language. We do want to point out that in Item 14, it says that a wall shall be installed. I spoke with City staff and we -- it's -- wall is defined by the Code, which defines wall as a structure or device forming a physical barrier made of materials permitted by this Code that closes, makes, or borders a lot, yard, or field. So, with that definition, if everyone's in agreement that the word wall is in accordance with the City definition, we believe it provides flexibility between the school, City staff, landscape. I know Commissioner Anderson has taken, you know, an interest in our tree preservation, and we want to work very closely with you on that. If we're all in agreement that wall is as defined in the Code, then we're in agreement with how that rewrite of the ordinance is done and we're ready to move forward.

Mayor Lago: Jennifer?

Planning and Zoning Director Garcia: Good afternoon. Jennifer Garcia, Planning and Zoning Director. So, yeah, just to clarify, we've made three changes since the first reading. To clarify who can use the -- the -- the...

Unidentified Speaker: The field.

Planning and Zoning Director Garcia: The field during -- on Sunday use, has to be only organized use. And also clarified as we talked about the wall and the long -- they're working with staff to make sure it fits the character of the landscape that's already there and also serves as a barrier from sound. That's it.

Mayor Lago: Do you have any public comment? I have one request that I'm going to make from the school if possible.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: But do you have any public comment?

City Clerk Urquia: Ms. Maria Cruz.

Maria Cruz: Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. Once again, this is not my area. This is not the church that I attend, but I feel -- I saw the presentation last time. It is beautiful, very well done, one of the best projects I've seen in a long time that will really benefit the neighborhood. And I think that we need to stop dilly-dallying and push it through. And please, you know, they've waited long enough.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

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

Mayor Lago: Okay. If I may, I'll make a simple request. After your first -- after your first appearance here, which again, I support the project, I think it's great, I walked that neighborhood the last two weeks and I got a few phone calls from residents who supported the project, but they asked me to make a simple request. In the afternoons, there's a major queuing issue that's happening in the school. I drive through there a lot. It backs up all the way beyond the stop sign and goes across the street into the residential neighborhood. I'd like to see if we can -- we can -- and I went to check it out for two days to see at what time it commences. Some people are queuing there an hour and a half before -- before school ends. And I know people want to get in and out, and it's a difficult situation. We're dealing with it at all schools. You're not the only school. Is there a way that we could potentially -- I know you have police officers, you have multiple police officers there, so again, every school has this issue. Just happen to have the pleasure of being in front of you right now. Is there any way that we could, hopefully, instead of allowing people to queue there for an hour and a half -- because I know my grandparents used to do the same thing when they used to come pick me up. They wanted to be the first ones out, they wanted to get out, they had all day to wait there. It would be something that I think the residents in the neighborhood would really, really benefit and there'd be a lot of gratitude. If we can just tell people when they queue to say, listen, you know, you break the habit immediately when you say something like, you can't queue here anymore, you know. Please drive around for the next hour, an hour and a half,

eventually they'll stop coming. But we have these -- we have this queuing which goes all the way back into the neighborhood, you know, past a stop sign into the actual residential neighborhood. So, I think it's something that would really benefit the neighborhood and it would be good for your partners, for everybody.

Ms. Dockerty: Yes, and I'm assured that we'll work with the City on that. I'll have Father Manny address this specifically.

Father Manny Alvarez: Thank you, and thank you, Mr. Mayor. When I go on sick calls, it's a problem for me getting out of the neighborhood. I've already started conversations with the chief of police and with our school resource officer, who is your president, to be able to address that concern because we want to be good neighbors to our -- to our fellow homeowners in the area.

Mayor Lago: Yeah, the problem that you're having is a problem that you can't fix except for one way.

Father Alvarez: Yeah.

Mayor Lago: Well, two ways. You either do internal queuing. You've got to have a long internal queuing snake...

Father Alvarez: Right.

Mayor Lago: Which is what, for example, some of the schools have, but a lot of them don't. You know, I'll give you an example. Sunset on Sunset has a major issue. They have people that back up, and they're trying to figure out a way to see if they can queue internally, looking at future projects. I've been working with them on that. But I think that the only way this works is if you just, you know, disband the queuing, which goes in two directions, into the neighborhood.

Father Alvarez: Yeah.

Mayor Lago: And just basically tell people, look, you can't -- you're not going to be able to -- you're not going to be able to sit here for an hour and a half because the lines are getting pretty long.

Father Alvarez: Yeah. I was in a school once where they played dominoes before, two hours before.

Mayor Lago: Yes, so...

Father Alvarez: Thankfully, it doesn't happen in our school.

Mayor Lago: By the way, and everyone I spoke to, they all support the project. I told them how much I supported it, but they just said, listen, we understand.

Father Alvarez: No, but it is -- that is important. Absolutely.

Mayor Lago: If they could work with us, and I said, listen, I don't think Father Manny would have any issue at all with making it a priority and the finding a solution for that.

Father Alvarez: All right.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

Commissioner Castro: Have we -- have we ever explored different dismissal times?

Father Alvarez: We do, Commissioner Castro. We have dismissal -- we have staggered times; 2 o'clock for a Pre-K, 2:30 for a kindergarten, and 2:45 for the rest of the school. So, we do have staggered dismissal times, yeah.

Commissioner Castro: Do you feel that alleviated it a little bit?

Father Alvarez: It does, because what we do is we get the Pre-K out, and then sometimes they have to go, if they have older students -- older siblings, they have to come back into the queue to be able to go at 2:30 or 2:45.

Commissioner Castro: Is there more space to separate the 2:45?

Father Alvarez: That's something that we -- I mean, the traffic issue is something that's always been an issue for the school after six years ago, we looked at. But it's -- right now, we've sat with the City police. Right now, it's the best one that we have at our disposal because dismissing 900 children -- that's why with the advent of this building, we hope to have more -- and this is something that our lawyer spoke about in the last meeting. With the advent of this building, we hope to have more children staying on campus, so that afternoon dismissal decreases by at least 30percent .

Commissioner Castro: Thank you.

Commissioner Fernandez: I think the only way, and I've been there throughout the different dismissal times, people are queuing there not an hour and a half before because you have the staggered dismissals. The only way you'd be able to alleviate it is you have the four lanes in front of the school...

Father Alvarez: Right.

Commissioner Fernandez: Mimicking four lanes in front of the church at that dismissal time. So, you'll stack the cars in the four lanes first. And Sergeant, you know more than me about this, but maybe you'd be able to stack four lanes there and then four lanes in front of the church.

Father Alvarez: Right, the only thing (INAUDIBLE)...

Commissioner Fernandez: And that will move them. But the problem is you have people that are using the church.

Father Alvarez: Using the church and also...

Commissioner Fernandez: Correct.

Father Alvarez: The road in front of the church is a little weird because of the island that comes in and Anastasia...

Commissioner Fernandez: Correct.

Father Alvarez: Cuts in diagonally.

Commissioner Fernandez: And it's not really a full -- a full (INAUDIBLE) in that area.

Father Alvarez: I know, but it's something that...

Mayor Lago: Can I give you another --?

Father Alvarez: The Mayor's advice we'll look at, yeah.

Mayor Lago: I'll just give you another idea.

Father Alvarez: Sure.

Mayor Lago: I mean, don't take my word for it, just call Patrick at Carrollton, my daughter's school. They do what's called siblings. So, they have the siblings, you cannot pick up siblings twice. You can only pick up siblings once. So, if you have a daughter that leaves later, the daughter has to stay later.

Father Alvarez: We do that.

Mayor Lago: So, I'm just giving you examples. I don't have my kids in your school, so I'm just telling you. I know -- but I've talked to a lot of residents.

Father Alvarez: No, but that's something we do.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yeah.

Mayor Lago: Okay, so my point is that there is ways, but I think at the end of the day -- at the end of the day, the answer can't be stacking all the way into...

Father Alvarez: Oh, no, no, for sure.

Mayor Lago: Into the neighborhood. And if you go there, I -- if you want I can do it with you tomorrow, I'd be more than willing to go tomorrow or the following day, whatever fits your convenience. It's getting pretty long. It's getting pretty long to the point that it's going past the church, where the four-way stop sign is, you make a right to the Biltmore. It's literally just going beyond the neighborhood to the left and all the way into the residence...

Father Alvarez: Absolutely.

Mayor Lago: Into the residential areas. And again, everybody loves a school. We need more schools. Everybody's clamoring for more schools, especially if it was up to me, you'd have more faith-based education...

Father Alvarez: Tell Father (INAUDIBLE).

Mayor Lago: Like what you offer. We all make a sacrifice to send our kids to these schools. I'm -- that's why I'm approving -- I had one resident that told me, I am in complete disapproval of any additional students in the neighborhood. It's already at capacity. Look at the -- look at what's happening with the queuing. They use the queuing as an example. They can't fit any more people in there. And my response was, I apologize. I agree with the school having more students. We have to all make sacrifices. I gave an example of where I live. St. Augustine, Riviera Country Club, University of Miami, Lennar, Doctors Hospital. I'm surrounded; 57th Avenue, US-1.

Father Alvarez: Absolutely.

Mayor Lago: Within blocks, I have probably one of the most congested areas in the city of Coral Gables. I said, we all have to make sacrifices. The lady wasn't too happy to hear that. And I get it, I understand. But I have to be candid, I can't tell her, yeah, I agree with you, you know, we're not going to -- we're going to change it. The only thing that I think is going to work is that we just do not allow queuing...

Father Alvarez: Right.

Mayor Lago: Unless somebody is like literally saying, my daughter or my son leaves at 2:30...

Father Alvarez: Right.

Mayor Lago: Here's proof that I have a document, and they can wait there while they're in line.

Father Alvarez: Right.

Mayor Lago: But if you're in line and your daughter or son doesn't leave till 3 o'clock, you shouldn't be in line.

Father Alvarez: Right.

Mayor Lago: And I think that's when you break the habit and that's what they've done in certain other private schools and public schools to try to try to achieve...

Father Alvarez: And that's some...

Mayor Lago: Some sort of relief, something.

Father Alvarez: And that's something (INAUDIBLE) were talking about this morning, be more proactive in communicating to our parents and abuelos to...

Mayor Lago: Yeah, it's abuelos.

Father Alvarez: Not get there at 1 o'clock.

Mayor Lago: It's abuelos, it's abuelos. I mean, that's what picked us all up.

Commissioner Fernandez: But from experience, I don't think the early stackers are affecting anything. Most of the traffic passing the church isn't until about 2:30, 2:35, right before dismissal. Because I've been there early. When we have a doctor's appointment or something that we need to pick my son up early, the stacking beyond the church, I guess, rear parking lot, which is where it starts affecting the residential...

Father Alvarez: Right.

Commissioner Fernandez: Probably does not begin until about 2:30, 2:35, right before the dismissal. So, that's maybe the time that we can start the additional lane in front of the church and move those cars. I think I've only been in line in front of residences for first or second day of school when people are still getting used to.

Father Alvarez: The first two weeks is always crazy.

Commissioner Fernandez: Other than that, I don't think I have ever been past the church parking lot when I've been stacking out there, even when I've gotten there late. So, I don't -- the early stackers don't create the problem, on the contrary, because then you're going to have people showing up at the last minute, you have the same number of cars.

Father Alvarez: Right.

Commissioner Fernandez: Stacking early, stacking late, there's still the same number of cars.

Father Alvarez: That's why...

Commissioner Fernandez: That's not going to change.

Father Alvarez: Which is why we need to study this.

Commissioner Fernandez: Correct.

Father Alvarez: We want to study this with you.

Commissioner Menendez: And I agree, it's the last-minute surge, you know.

Commissioner Fernandez: Right.

Commissioner Menendez: Sometimes they go to the church and when I arrive, 30 minutes before the bell and it's still manageable. I don't think it's the road where Comber Hall is. I think it's where the cafeteria is. That's the one that backs.

Father Alvarez: It's Sevilla where...

Commissioner Menendez: Sevilla.

Father Alvarez: We talked to the City police...

Commissioner Menendez: Yeah.

Father Alvarez: Where we have double stacking, and it's a danger because they do go against traffic when they're trying to get around the early stackers.

Commissioner Menendez: Yeah. And the one where you have Comber Hall...

Father Alvarez: That's (INAUDIBLE).

Commissioner Menendez: That one has, you have more roadway...

Father Alvarez: Yeah.

Commissioner Menendez: To fill the cars. The other one, you have less roadway. And you do it by last name, right?

Father Alvarez: We do it with an app called Pick My Kid that the kids are queued up and they are told...

Commissioner Menendez: I'm just thinking if that other road has more capacity, you may want to shift where the kids go to get picked up. Because if you put more kids to the front of the school where you have the four lanes, it may lessen the congestion with the cafeteria. It just shifts some of that to that other side. Just a thought. Either that or ban dominoes completely.

Father Alvarez: No, we're (INAUDIBLE).

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, through the Mayor, just a couple last comments because I understand that the number of students in reality hasn't increased. It's an update that recognized the fact that this is the number of students we have. Now, I've lived on Sevilla for now close to four decades, and I have seen long, long lines for students. So, I have seen an improvement. I also learned to not use Sevilla to cut through at that time and to take other routes to avoid it, so I didn't get caught in that mess. I got caught once and I learned my lesson...

Father Alvarez: Never again.

Vice Mayor Anderson: The first time around. So, I applaud your efforts, and I appreciate your willingness to work. We'll see what we can do on landscaping together. As the environmental board person on the -- on the Coral Gables Garden Club, I'd be happy to share thoughts and ideas, okay?

Father Alvarez: We look forward to it, Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Thank you.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor, I actually -- I actually -- my voice.

Unidentified Speaker: It's okay.

Commissioner Castro: I actually make that line every single day and I am not one that gets early to any place so...

Vice Mayor Anderson: Is that a confession?

Commissioner Castro: That is a confession.

Father Alvarez: I can't absolve you in public, Commissioner.

Commissioner Castro: So, by the time, I would say -- I think something to keep in mind and to really evaluate is the amount of time that line is actually long for, right? And when it's long, I'm talking past the Little Flower, past the church.

Father Alvarez: Right.

Commissioner Castro: It's not really a significant amount of time because I think it gets past the church, as Commissioner Fernandez was saying, probably to 2:35-ish, 38-ish. And I know, because I never even get there at that time, okay. So, I think the time that it's really intruding into the houses is probably 20 minutes. And I have to commend you for what a wonderful job you do at getting kids in and out of the cars safely every single day. So, there's a little bit of room for improvement, but I do...

Father Alvarez: Absolutely.

Commissioner Castro: Have to say you guys do an exceptional job.

Father Alvarez: Thank you.

Commissioner Fernandez: And Pick My Kid is not the only way that the school is notified because you have Ms. Capper or Ms. Gonzalez who go out there and take the actual numbers...

Father Alvarez: Yeah.

Commissioner Fernandez: Of the cars and put them in order so that the children are lined up and ready to go out. You have what, about 10 teachers every day. They alternate.

Father Alvarez: (INAUDIBLE), yeah.

Commissioner Fernandez: Making sure that they're opening the doors. Your, I guess, honor guard, is it?

Father Alvarez: Yeah.

Commissioner Fernandez: Who's also out there opening the doors, making sure the children are moving quickly and the cars are moving through there quickly. So, it's -- there's -- it's an operation.

Father Alvarez: Operation, yeah.

Commissioner Fernandez: It's like getting people out of Dolphin Stadium, but you know...

Father Alvarez: (INAUDIBLE) faster.

Commissioner Fernandez: But faster, so we appreciate it.

Mayor Lago: Chief?

Assistant Police Chief Hanlon: Assistant Chief Pat Hanlon. We've discussed this before and we continue. We have a coordinator, which is Sergeant Zaccheo, who coordinates all the traffic and the off-duty at that school. So, we continue to look at it and look at ways to do it better. We did talk about the queuing and if they do start lining up that far in advance, we'll have that discussion. But again, it's an ongoing process, and obviously, we're cognizant of the neighborhoods as long as -- and also the school itself to get the kids in and out safely. That's a big, huge thing. So, we will continue to look at it and evaluate it, but we have worked with the school and also our coordinators who are there every day.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir.

Assistant Police Chief Hanlon: Making sure to do that, sir.

Commissioner Castro: Send my appreciation to all the officers that work in that school. They do an absolute exceptional job and, you know, sometimes it's raining, sometimes it's very sunny, sometimes it's very hot or cold or windy, and no matter what the conditions are, they keep our children safe. So, thank you.

Commissioner Fernandez: I'll move it.

Commissioner Menendez: Second.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes.

Commissioner Castro: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Thank you.