

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item D – Mayor’s Comments
July 25, 2022
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago
Vice Mayor Michael Mena
Commissioner Rhonda Anderson
Commissioner Jorge Fors
Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias
City Clerk, Billy Urquia
City Attorney, Miriam Ramos
Green Space Management, Deena Bell
Assistant City Attorney, Naomi Levi-Garcia

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item D [p.m.]
Mayor’s Comments

Mayor Lago: Mayor’s Comments are very brief. I’m just going to run through a bunch of different things that I want to take care of. The first one is, for a long time, at least in my neighborhood on Bird Road and 57th Avenue, we’ve been dealing with the issues of the two homes on that corner which are not up to Coral Gables standards and there will be a great opportunity for an entrance feature on Bird Road. I was having a conversation with the Manager and Zeida about potentially exploring negotiations with those homeowners to be able to buy them, and do a beautiful feature there, kind of like what we did on 37th Avenue. I’m requesting a resolution from members of my Commission just to have them speak to these homeowners and to see if there is even any interest in selling. I think its time; that’s an area which is missing an entrance feature, we don’t have one there, and I think it would be a good opportunity to do something beautiful there. We are not talking about a park, because it’s a little bit heavy traffic there. What we are talking about is a simple entrance feature on the corner.

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Vice Mayor Mena: What side of the street did you say it was on?- the north side?

Mayor Lago: This is on the south side.

City Manager Iglesias: South side.

Vice Mayor Mena: Got you.

Mayor Lago: Where there are constant accidents, you know the home is in disrepair.

City Manager Iglesias: It would be an entrance feature as the cars are coming into the city.

Commissioner Anderson: I think its an excellent idea.

Mayor Lago: Can I get a motion?

Commissioner Anderson: I'll move it.

Mayor Lago: Vice Mayor and second by Commissioner Anderson.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Commissioner Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Fors: Yes

Vice Mayor Mena: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Zeida, good luck. If anybody can do it, I know you can.

D-2: Discussion regarding architectural design concerns.

Mayor Lago: D-2. D-2 is...I just want to bring something to your attention. Were you able to get that photo. Okay. I recommend if you get a chance that you drive to a property that was approved in the city, that should not have been approved administratively, and that property is on 57th Avenue, before you get to Coral Way. It is a super modern shoebox, its across the street from Schenley Park on the Coral Gables side. That does not look like its Coral Gables. Go look at that house and you will see what I'm talking about. I found out about the house, because I had multiple residents that called me and told me go look at this house, and not only is it an eyesore, but it sticks out beyond measure. I'm going to get a picture of it and I will bring it to the next Commission meeting.

D-3: Update regarding contract terms, landscaping, and City parking spaces at the Village of Merrick Park.

Mayor Lago: D-3 is the landscaping conversation. Ms. Bell, how are we doing? Good afternoon.
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Ms. Bell: Good afternoon Mayor. There is a presentation for Merrick Park's landscaping, do you want to bring it up.

Mayor Lago: I love it. By the way, thank you for your hard work. I know you've been cracking the whip and you've been doing a great job and its because of your efforts. So thank you and Hermes and his team and everybody who has been really working hard on the signs, on the right-of-way improvements. I can't reiterate that enough. Thank you, thank you to all your staff. Thank you.

Ms. Bell: Well, we continue to work and Code Enforcement also. Don't forget the work they are doing.

Mayor Lago: Yes. Code Enforcement, yes. Can't forget them.

Ms. Bell: This is a big Code Enforcement-Public Works effort here at Merrick Park. So, on, I believe June 30th, we walked with the Mayor, Public Works and staff from Code Enforcement with the management of Merrick Park, all through the right-of-ways and they have started their landscaping improvements, but we identified areas where they really needed to add more, remove a lot more old shrubs, and enhance it, bringing the flavor that they have on the inside to the outside.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Ms. Bell: So, they've provided us with this PowerPoint with an update. They are working for two more months on this. Timeline estimated 7 to 8 weeks, following the release of funding from their management. Here is the site plan of the areas that we walked – LeJeune and Ponce, specifically.

Mayor Lago: Can we go back, because we walked a lot more than that. We walked the areas that are under construction.

Ms. Bell: This area is what they currently have their landscaping permitting for, all of LeJeune, including the medians, and Ponce including the area around the circle. We did walk towards the east around their parking garage, and we walked towards that triangular area all the way to the east. They are coming back to us with a separate plan for that. We understand its going to be comprehensive to include that whole area around their parking garage.

Mayor Lago: Okay. Can we do something through the Manager, please, because I remember walking that with staff for about two hours there. Can we set a deadline of a month for them to send us the proposal, excuse me, for them to send us the plan of action.

Ms. Bell: Okay.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquja: Yes sir.
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Mayor Lago: I would like through the Manager, for Merrick Park to have at the next agenda their plan, their comprehensive plan for the entire facility, for everything that we saw that's pending.

City Attorney Ramos: Deena, there's a memo that they sent.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

City Attorney Ramos: July 8th, have you looked at that? I don't know if that gives some of what the Mayor is asking.

Mayor Lago: I don't remember it.

City Attorney Ramos: It goes through your site visit and then what the plan is. It says four to six weeks, three to six months, end of July. It gives about two deadlines, maybe they can come in person and present their updates.

Ms. Bell: Right. This is the current permit for LeJeune and Ponce that they had already applied for.

City Attorney Ramos: Okay.

Ms. Bell: Before we walked with the Mayor. Now when we walked with the Mayor, we added that extra area around the parking garage, which they still have to come back to us with. Okay. So this is what they currently have underway. They are adding all of these plant materials to these right-of-way areas. They are adding color and things that are more in character with their interior landscape, which we thought looked very nice in certain areas. They are coming back in filling in a lot of the sparse areas. Here is their detail plant list – goes on and on. And that's basically what they are working on now.

Mayor Lago: Okay. So, what I would like to see is, I would like to see them in a month, that should be enough time to put together a plan of action and I know that they are waiting for the budget cycle, but we've waited 15 years. So, I want Merrick Park spruced up, enough waiting, enough. So, we need to figure this out. I don't know if we need to review their contract or what it is exactly, but they have a bargain of a deal with the city and I expect them to hold up their end of the bargain. They need to fix their signs, which are broken. They need to fix whatever says Merrick Park on it, whatever says parking, street signs. Everything that's their responsibility that is a hazard to the extent that I even cut my head when I was walking with you, as you saw; their irrigation; their lighting; their landscaping, enough, for elevating the quality. They've been on notice. We had this walk-through what, about a month ago.

Ms. Bell: June 30th.

Mayor Lago: June 30th, so we are coming up on a month. They are asking for a few more months. I want it done. I want the plan done by the next Commission meeting and I want to know when
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the implementation date is, please, through the Manager. If they are incapable of doing that or they are not interested in doing that, please make us aware, but this continue stalling tactic and buying of time is not going to work well. Madam City Attorney, can you review their contract in regards to what their responsibilities are in regards to beautification and landscaping?

City Attorney Ramos: There is nothing with regards to the areas outside of it. There is general language with regards to the areas inside, which compares them to other malls of similar caliber.

Mayor Lago: But at the end of the day, we own the property, so we are not going to allow them to not be up to our standards; and the exterior of the property, if you look around the Merrick fountain, and you look around that area, its pretty embarrassing, especially where their signage is rusted which basically you can't even read Merrick Park in certain areas. Its falling apart. I think that's not up to our standards. We wouldn't allow the residents in the city to have that type of signage or the businesses. Why are we allowing Merrick Park which is a lessee of a property that the city owns?

City Attorney Ramos: And I think that was the Code Enforcement route that we went under.

Mayor Lago: I understand.

City Attorney Ramos: Rather than an outside lease.

Mayor Lago: But if they are not willing to comply, then let's time now to start hitting them with Code Enforcement; and hit them with Code Enforcement to the point where they actually pay for it, not a warning, okay. Thank you very much.

Ms. Bell: Okay. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: You're the best. Thank you.

D-5: Discussion and video regarding peacock concern in the City.

Mayor Lago: Moving on. We did D-4. I have a video of D-5 that I wanted to share with you. I don't know if staff has it up. I requested it to be shown. So this is my neighborhood. This is a block, this is not a block, this is two houses from me. This is right in front of my house. So, we're talking about probably two dozen peacocks, and this is no longer an issue. They are not afraid. That's my neighbor. They are not afraid of anybody. They are there. The amount of fecal matter in my driveway and my actual front door, like right in the entrance of the front door is pretty significant. They get on roofs; they scratch roofs; they start making noise at 6 in the morning, 5:30 in the morning. There is my neighbor again. They scratch cars, because they see the reflection and they start hitting the car. So, we've been having these discussions with the county. I know the county has taken a position where they don't want to offend anybody, the peacock-lovers versus the people who want to remove the peacocks, which is an invasive species. But this is our reality right now. This is no longer about whether peacocks are coming to your neighborhood. They are in my neighborhood. So, I'm putting this out there because something needs to be done and I hope

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that in the near future we can really take this problem seriously, because its not only the City of Coral Gables, it has to be a City of Miami issue, has to be a West Miami issue, has to be a Pinecrest issue, because we just can't remove peacocks for the entire community. Some people may not view this as a major issue, but I think its an important issue just like pythons, just like the lizards are. This is a problem in our community.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Hi Mayor, just a quick update. So you guys adopted a resolution establishing a peafowl mitigation policy in June. We sent a copy of that resolution to Commissioner Regalado. She will be sponsoring it at the next BCC meeting. They are going to break for August, they come back in September, so it should be on the first agenda when they get back. In addition, at the Commission's direction, the City Manager sent a letter to all of our neighboring municipalities advising them that we adopted a resolution encouraging them to do the same, and just attempting to address this wholistically. So we haven't heard back from our neighbors yet, but full steam ahead, we are trying to get that policy approved by the BCC.

Mayor Lago: That's the problem. That's why I bring it up today; and thank you, by the way to the Manager and to your office for really fighting on this issue, because its really important. The problem is we're not hearing back. The problem is that nobody wants to do anything about it, and remember, once these animals get to the Everglades there is no turning back. Remember that. And we are talking about sensitive habitats here in South Florida that when you tip one side to the other, before you know it, all the nice birds that you saw that you hear chirping you don't hear that many anymore, why, because the snakes are eating them, or because the lizards are eating the eggs. Go outside here where you park your car, when was the last time that you saw one of those beautiful little lizards with the red necks, you don't see that many, why, because those monitors that are everywhere, as everyone will tell you, they are eating those little lizards. So you have invasive species eating the local lizards. To some, its not a big issue, but to me, I think its important, because again, its why we live here in South Florida, but I'm grateful for you. Thank you for your hard work. Thank you.

Commissioner Menendez: I have a question regarding the whole peacock situation. Because as I mentioned before, I know families that have told me that they've tried to be in the backyard with the family having a bar-b-que and they can be aggressive. At what point does their protection protect them if they are being aggressive or harmful to a kid. Is the law clear as to what point can you defend yourself, or it's a nuisance? You can see they are bigger than a lot of kids.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: So as of right now, the only thing a private property owner can do legally under the county code is kind of shew them off their property. If the city's mitigation policy gets approved, which I anticipate it will, a private property owner could call a critter removal service and have the peafowl removed.

Commissioner Menendez: So if one's aggressive and harmful and attacking someone, can they defend themselves from the attack, or they just have to go through bureaucratic red tape that we seem to have created?

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Commissioner, if a peafowl attacks your dog and you fight it off, you probably going to be okay.

Commissioner Menendez: I'm just concerned. Look at the numbers. You have a little kid out there and I know there are a lot of people that love the peacocks and I'm sure if these were turkeys and they were ugly, perhaps they wouldn't be so loving towards them. But you have little kids out there, I'm sure they can't even play in the front yard.

Commissioner Anderson: This is why you need a dog, not a cat. Dog will take care of those.

Commissioner Menendez: Salvadore seems to have donkeys, so I don't know if that comes into play.

Mayor Lago: But it's a little bit more than just dogs here, because don't forget, these have big talons. They have the ability to hurt somebody. Forget the issue of whether it can hurt somebody, which I think is incredibly important. You came home after a long week work on a Saturday and you just want to sleep in, 7:30, God forbid you want to sleep in till 7 o'clock, and you have a peacock screaming on the top of your roof.

Commissioner Anderson: Well, its like having a rooster, right. Welcome to Key West.

Mayor Lago: Bur we are not allowed to have roosters here in the City of Coral Gables.

Commissioner Anderson: I understand. I understand. So why should be have screaming peacocks.

Mayor Lago: I agree.

Commissioner Anderson: And they can scream a lot.

Mayor Lago: Significant. Thank you. Two last points. I want to recognize our IT team again, as always, and the City Manager's team, along with Martha Pantin. Our new website has been in the public for nearly a month. Thank you to everyone who is providing feedback. It is essential. For example, several users expressed to me that the City Commission, Commission meetings and permits were not easily found. I showed that to our team who has now put those items on the main page, as they are frequently visited sections. Thank you to the resident input. Many services continue to be edited, such as Venetian Pool and permitting info and we are following up with every person that approved to be contacted, that is regardless of whether they are satisfied or unsatisfied. Speaking of currently, of the 325 comments received, 270 of those are either satisfied or very satisfied, which is great news since its 85 percent positive rating. We know there is room for improvement, but we are off to a great start for what is an ongoing process. Keep the comments coming, please. That's the only way we are going to be better, that's why we do open door Fridays, that's why we do Town Halls. I'm asking you to give us your input on the significant investment which the Manager spearheaded and it's a wonderful, wonderful new website and its really groundbreaking. So, I want to commend staff on that. The last point is, I wrote an Op Ed which hopefully will be published either in Miami Today or in the Miami Herald and it addresses human

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trafficking and I think its incredibly important because it really talks about, take a look at it and if you can, share it with your friends. It literally talks about how we are the epicenter here in South Florida in regard to human trafficking; and how I've been on multiple undercover stings with Kathy Fernandez-Rundle's office, the State Attorney, Coral Gables Police, City of Miami Police, and it really gives you an understanding of how serious of a problem this is here in South Florida. I want to commend several people, because this June the State of Florida passed Miah's Law, named after Miah Marcano, the college student that in 2022 was tragically slain by a worker in her Orlando apartment complex. Including in the state's law was stipulations such as requiring background checks for apartment building employees and prohibiting operators of public lodging establishments such as motels, or hourly motels as we call them, from offering hourly rates for accommodation. I am grateful to our state leaders Representative Demi Busatta Cabrera, Governor DeSantis and Lieutenant Governor Nunez, who have supported Bill SB898, which focuses on lodging standards. I'm proud to see that our advocacy, because this is not only my advocacy, it's the leadership of this Commission, over the last few years have paid off and resulted in similar legislation being enacted at the local and state level. As your Mayor and the father of two young girls, it is not only my duty, but most importantly my responsibility to ensure the safety of our residents. While you may not see this in Coral Gables, you see it 30 feet away across the street on 8th Street, 30 feet away; and I promise you, I promise you, and I will not stop until we make sure that that is eradicated. Ending the practice of hourly or fractional motel rentals is a small but significant step in the right direction. We must stand together to fight human trafficking. I welcome you to get involved in multiple different organizations that I'm involved in that deal with human trafficking. The ladies here come to visit me at City Hall. As a matter of fact, one of them is the wife of our City Architect and she is emersed in this effort and she is very outspoken and very vocal. Once you have a chance to meet these women, and once you have a chance to listen to their story, it is something that will resonate with you, and it will change your life. I promise. So, I ask you to get engaged. If you want to learn a little bit more, I made a commitment to build them a half-way house with my company, we are in the process of doing that right now. We are doing the design and we are moving forward through the process of getting ready to commence construction. This is a legacy project for myself and anyone who is interested in getting involved, you want to donate \$5, \$10, \$20, whatever that may be. This is going to really help people in this community. This is going to do something that is spectacular. So, I welcome your assistance in any way, as a lawyer, as a contractor, as an engineer, as an architect, as a realtor, whatever you have to offer we'll take it, all hands-on deck to do something wonderful here in this community. Thank you.

D-1: Discussion regarding property value increases

With that being said, I have one item left and that is D-1, the discussion regarding property value and I think it's a good segway into the budget. As you've seen, we've seen a pretty significant uptick in regard to property values here in the city, across Miami-Dade County. Keith, come on over sir. And the numbers are pretty significant, and I imagine many have gotten calls in regard to what we see as an opportunity to potentially lower the millage rate or what we should do moving forward. After much thought and having conversations with staff, and really understanding the county budget, and I want to thank the ACM who put together an incredible memo that I asked him to prepare with each one of you. I think its important for you to see it, because it really talks about where we stand as a county today and where we stand as a county tomorrow. We need to be very fiscally prudent right now, especially coming out of Covid with such significant public safety

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dollars, public safety projects, like the Vice Mayor will tell you, which is one of his legacy projects which is the Fire Station on Sunset. Right now, I'm not going to move in a direction of lowering the millage rate. I don't think it's the appropriate thing to do, even though I would like to do that, but we are going to leave the millage rate stable. The city after almost a \$20 million-dollar loss coming out of Covid, I think we need to be very careful during these next few months. You're seeing where the economy is, it's a little bit on shaky ground in regard to inflation, in regard to raising interest rates. So, I think that, a few people called me, not a lot called me, a few people called me to speak about this issue. I've told them my points on this issue, and I want Keith to talk a little bit about where he sees the millage rate and where he sees a lot of the monies and stuff like that. We have a full, full plan of projects that need to be done in the city. From infrastructure upgrades, public safety, fire stations, police. There is no room for error and prices for construction are through the roof. So, if we are going to continue to move in a direction of a world-class city, we need to be as careful about every dollar that we spend and we need to be incredibly careful about the promises that we make. So thank you.

City Manager Iglesias: Mayor, I'd like to say we've been very diligent, not using one-time monies for reoccurring costs.

Mayor Lago: And I want you to explain that, if you don't mind, please. I think that's critically important, so people understand so you're not robbing Peter to pay Paul.

City Manager Iglesias: We have money for one year only. We cannot pay costs that come up every year, so we use those for things like CIP, like capital improvement projects where they are one time project. So feel that its bad practice, because what happens you use that money today, what happens how you fund that reoccurring cost the following year, and that's not something that we do, and I believe those are things that allow us to have those Triple A ratings. What we do from a financial perspective allows us to have that Triple A rating. Also, Dade County had over 10 percent, right now its over 10 percent inflation rate. So what we're getting, we are getting a good increase in the taxable property. However, our current rate is 10.6 percent inflation in Dade County today. I just checked with Development Services, our Economic Development Director. So, we have been – and that's also one of the reasons why we faired so well during Covid, because we were financially sound, we continue to use these principles to keep our city on a very strong financial footing. And with that Mayor, I'd like to turn it over to our Budget Director.

Mayor Lago: Before the Budget Director takes over and we proceed, do I have to adjourn the meeting.

City Attorney Ramos: You should adjourn the Commission meeting and then enter the other meeting.

Mayor Lago: I would like for the ACM, please, through the Manager to send a memo that you prepared me, a presentation.

City Manager Iglesias: We will send that presentation to the entire Commission.

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Mayor Lago: I think its important. I think its important because they are going to get, I mean I've only gotten two or three phone calls, but they are going to get those phone calls and I think that they need that additional fire power because what the ACM really put together was an in depth analysis of the current, the future 2023-2024 and it really shows the holes in potentially playing around with one-time monies, which again, they may look good now, but in the future they could really hamper your ability to be sustainable.

City Manger Iglesias: We received \$8.5 million dollars for our part that we are using in Capital Improvement Projects. However, places like the county received an incredible amount of money. We do not have that kind of funding and we still have issues funding our parks and our Fire House. So we have been very diligent in using that money, again, for one-time monies for one-time appropriations such as Capital Improvements and maintaining our long-lasting funding for our reoccurring costs, which is very important.

Budget Director Kleiman: If we could ask for a two or three-minute recess so we can set everything up.

Mayor Lago: Perfect. Does anybody else like to say anything before we adjourn the Commission meeting?

City Attorney Ramos: Technically we will be recessed until we come back at 5.

Mayor Lago: Anything else. We'll recess.