

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting  
Agenda Item G-11  
September 13, 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 (On Zoom)**

**City Staff**

**City Attorney, Miriam Ramos  
City Manager, Peter Iglesias  
City Clerk, Billy Urquia**

**Public Speaker(s)**

**Wayne “Chip” Withers  
Elvis Fuentes  
George Kakouris  
Maria Cruz  
Joann Maher (phonetic)  
Karelia Martinez Carbonell**

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Agenda Item G-11 [4:02 p.m.]  
Discussion regarding Coral Gables Museum and the Merrick Exhibit.

Mayor Lago: Moving on to G-11. Madam City Attorney.

City Attorney Ramos: Mayor, G-11 is a discussion regarding the Coral Gables Museum and Merrick Exhibit.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner Anderson.

Commissioner Anderson: I put this item on because there's been a high level of interest in what's been happening at the museum with regard to the Merrick Exhibit. And there's many very exciting things happening and concerns as well, so I wanted to have a discussion item where we can have the opportunity to appear from the museum and its board and its vision of where the museum is going with itself as an entirety and as well as with the permanent exhibit on display, and also weigh in on that -- you know, what the City's role is and -- as far as the legal requirements and the City Attorney will fill us in on that as well. So, with that, I'd like to invite Commissioner Withers up to assist us with this discussion.

Commissioner Fors: And by the way, before Commissioner Withers -- no, go ahead, I'm sorry. I just want...

(COMMENTS MADE OFF THE RECORD)

Commissioner Fors: Everybody who just joined us to know that Commissioner Menendez is present via Zoom, and we've approved him being present via Zoom today.

Wayne "Chip" Withers: Where is he?

Commissioner Fors: He's somewhere in here.

Commissioner Anderson: Yeah, he's floating. You got to be careful.

City Attorney Ramos: Thank you, Commissioner, for bringing that up.

Mr. Withers: Chip Withers, 1104 Hardee Road, Coral Gables, Florida. I certainly understand you have a 4:30 hearing on special assessments, so we're going to try to push through with as minimal of detail as we possibly can. And I want to say that I'm representing the Board of Directors of the Coral Gables Museum. I'm not here personally, so if I refer to my notes, it's because I want to be absolutely sure that I've covered everybody's concerns. But first, I would like to introduce Elvis, who's going to introduce the board members that are here. Elvis, do you want to --? Elvis is leaving the building.

Elvis Fuentes: Well, thank you so much, and of course, for this opportunity, having this meeting and this discussion. Together with us, we have several board members. Jose Valdes-Fauli, who is the chairman, could not attend because he's currently out of town. He's in New York. But we have June Morris, who joined the board last year, I think, and has been really, really supportive of the -- of many of the programs that we're doing, in particular, the Ukrainian -- our exhibition that we brought in May in attempts to -- her support, we are doing a very robust series of public programs. It's been very well received, and I think has put the museum on the map. And I also want to thank Adriana Meneses, who joined the board in May. And Adriana Meneses is a curator, a museum professional with a very extensive career. She was director of the Jacobo Borges Museum in Caracas for many years and is really someone that brings a wealth of knowledge in terms of -- in museum practices at the highest standards. And then, of course, we also have Carol Damian, a professor of many, many artists, art historians, also someone with the extraordinary trajectory in museum work. And she herself has been the director of the Frost Art Museum for many years. And she's one of the -- I would say of -- my personal mentors in terms of the -- in navigating, of course, the art scene in Miami because of, you know, as you all know, I'm fairly new here, and so, she's been really instrumental in getting me to know many of the most active and important players in the City. And we also have Gonzalo Acevedo, who is a banker and works for Bank of New York Mellon. He's also been very supportive of several of the exhibitions and the programs that we have done recently and has gone the extra mile, again, in helping us carry out several of the programs and exhibitions that we're organizing. And last, but definitely not

lease, George Kakouris, emeritus chairman of the board of directors of the museum, one of the founders of the museum, and someone that even though he is not a, let's say, voting member of the board, has been, since day one, has been helping us, has been instrumental in bringing a lot of support for the museum, including new programs and new partnerships that we're launching, for instance, with Doctors Hospital and many other institutions in the City. So, I really want to thank them. Of course, Chips needs no introduction, so thank you.

Mr. Withers: Thank you, Elvis. And good afternoon, Mr. Mayor, Commissioners, City Manager, City Attorney, City Clerk. I -- two things I want to mention, first of all, is that we are embracing this meeting as it's important to us. We're not looking at it as an attack. The board, in unison, feels that people that are in the community are our partners, but they're also our clients and our customers and we need to make sure that we listen to them if they have concerns. So, this is not an adversarial position that we're taking at all. We're a hundred percent on board with that. That's number one. Secondly, I also want to kind of take us back in history just for a second, so everybody gets a basis of where we're starting. When the museum opened in 10/10/10, it opened on a shoestring budget, and it had literally no money at all to do exhibits. Arva, and with the help of George, who was very instrumental in putting the storyline together, threw this exhibit together with the intention of opening the doors and having people enjoying it. We never knew that it would be over a decade before we took time to refresh it and rework it. And we're finally at the point now to, I guess, bring the museum up to a contemporary standard. Everybody walking around with iPhones and iPads and I'm the kind that likes to touch and feel stuff on the walls, but there's a whole class of individuals out there that look for the 3D experience. They look for the Walt Disney experience when they walk in, and they just don't want to see an artifact. They want to see -- they want to be wowed a little bit. So, we're kind of at that point where we have the team, we have the revenue and the money, and we have the opportunity to really take this to the next level. So, as it pertains to the storyline exhibit, which I know Karelia and folks are concerned that we're going to tear down George Merrick's statue, that is absolutely the last thing in the world that we want to do. We're not canceling George Merrick. We're not canceling George Merrick's legacy and legend. In fact, if anything, we hope we will embellish it some and introduce more of

what this man did. And the way we want to do it is, if you've been to the museum -- I'm sure you have -- and you've seen the linear exhibit in the gallery, it's old. It's yellowing, it's peeling. Most of that are copies and replications of originals. It is not -- it was never intended to be a permanent exhibition. Our goal is to build a permanent collection, and that's what we've done for the past ten years, and we want to continue to build on a permanent collection. Elvis, not today, but can share some of the incredible gifts that we've received from folks in Coral Gables that's literally sitting in my warehouse. Literally, I'm storing it because we have no place to exhibit it in a manner that deserves it to be exhibited. So, the permanent -- and some people call it storyline exhibit -- is coming down. It's coming down so we can clean the walls, so we can get some of the humidity out of the walls so we can rebuild that storyline exhibit. And it's kind of -- I think it's going to kind of be cool. In the corridor that goes from the old building into the Fewell Gallery, we're going to replace some of the artifacts on the wall there, so you'll have the same presentation. And that's one of the most widely traveled corridors in the entire museum. Off of the lobby where the Franklin Gallery is, we're going to put some more of the storyline in there. But the really cool thing about the storyline that we want to do now is we're going to tell stories within the story, and they're going to be exhibits that are going to be rotated in. And to give you an example, several years ago, we were contacted by the Army, and they said they had a trove of photographs of the Biltmore Hotel when it was a VA hospital, with nicely placed models, (INAUDIBLE) perfect condition, with a trowel in their hand helping a GI plant a tomato plant with a story underneath it. You know, that's a story that some people know but a lot of people don't even know in Coral Gables that the Biltmore Hotel was a VA hospital. We're going to tell stories about the landscaper that George Merrick had on his staff. And these are going to be exhibits that are going to be displayed within the timeline exhibit of Coral Gables. So, that long gallery is actually going to have an experience for people and it's going to be 3D. It's going to be digitalized so if someone wants to go online and see it, they can see it. And there's also still going to be the artifacts that we've had in storage for some long displayed at the same time. So, we're not tearing down a storyline. We're not removing the storyline. We're kind of spreading the storyline out, and then we're going to take opportunity after opportunity after opportunity to display a storyline within a storyline. I don't know if that makes sense of if you kind of capture the vision. It's something

that we've been working on for quite some time. Elvis has developed several themes. We're in the process right now of building that. We're in the -- and we're hoping that -- you know, after ten years, a lot of people don't come back to the museum to look at that storyline anymore because you've seen it a hundred times. But we're hoping to get more people in by introducing new concepts within the storyline and vignettes of history of Coral Gables. One of the ones we are collaborating with is with the University of Miami and to actually have an exhibit on the Merrick House, original drawings, original plans, original memos, original photographs, and that would be actually inserted within the storyline in the gallery. So, that's pretty much my report to you. If you have any questions, again, George was very instrumental in developing the storyline and the original -- and he can add to it also.

Commissioner Anderson: Well, I appreciate you coming in here to share that with us.

Mr. Withers: Okay.

Commissioner Anderson: I know I've received a lot of emails, a lot of concern, so I thought the best thing to do is have everybody come in here and let's discuss it. Now, there's also issues regarding, you know, what are -- what is the relationship between the City and the museum, legally speaking. And I've asked the City Attorney to speak on that issue.

Mr. Withers: Okay. One last thing, the cabin is not being torn down. There was concern that we're removing George's cabin house, you know. We do have to remove it because there's a lot of moisture behind the walls, but that cabin, if, you know, we can resurrect it the way it is without, you know, seeing what's behind the walls, that cabin is going to be there. So, sure, I remember that original agreement, and I remember those discussions.

(COMMENTS MADE OFF THE RECORD)

Mr. Withers: You have to ask this gentleman up here.

Mayor Lago: Please, it'd be a privilege.

George Kakouris: I just wanted to -- my name is George Kakouris. I was the founding chairman, started in actually 2005. And when we opened our doors in 2010, there was a lot of work that we had to do just to get it to where we could make our opening. But I just wanted to say one thing. You mentioned permanent exhibit. We never, ever, ever -- and I worked closely with Arva Parks -- use that word "permanent exhibit" because as we were gathering new items, as we came across people who told us new stories, our minds were always open to new things. Arva, I can speak -- well, I can't speak for Arva, but I can say that I was with her hand in hand when we first started that exhibit, along with Chris Rupp (phonetic), who worked very close with us, that we knew changes had to come. It had to come. And so, when we say "permanent," no. A storyline exhibit, yes, but that exhibit that you see on display was never ever discussed as being permanent, just so that the record is clear. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir.

Commissioner Anderson: Right.

Mayor Lago: Good to see you.

City Attorney Ramos: So, Commissioner Anderson just asked us -- me to look up a little bit about the relationship between the museum and the City, which of course, all of you know. And so, I'm reading from the amending and restated agreement of operation from February of 2011, which is the most recent agreement. And it's just to say that that agreement contemplated the independence of the museum in deciding what exhibits would be shown, and in fact, it says, "CGM shall have the full control of the exhibit content." And aside from being in the operations agreement, of course, that is just good policy. Any time the government gets involved in choosing artistic work,

it opens a lot of potential issues, and so we have similar language as well with our cinema that we have a lease with. So, Commissioner Anderson wanted me to put that on the record.

Commissioner Anderson: Okay.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner, would you...

Commissioner Anderson: Well...

Mayor Lago: Like to hear from the residents?

Commissioner Anderson: Yes, I'd like to hear from the residents.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: The first speak is Ms. Maria Cruz.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Cruz, good afternoon. Good to see you again.

Maria Cruz: (INAUDIBLE). Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. I am very conflicted because I have read the letter that was received by Gables Insider. I have heard from both sides.

Vice Mayor Mena: Which letter is that, I'm sorry?

Ms. Cruz: The letter from Elvis -- that's his name, right? -- from (INAUDIBLE) to Gables Insider explaining. And I've heard from people in the museum that, you know, the exhibit is dirty, is dusty, all kinds of excuses. Because if the exhibit were in my house, it wouldn't be dirty and dusty. You know, part of the keeping a museum going is to keep the stuff the right way, so that would not be a good excuse, okay. Number two, I happen to know some people that were very close to



Arva Parks, okay. I'm trying to figure out what the relation was because I think she was married to somebody -- in other words, that relationship there -- and they thought it was going to be a permanent exhibit, okay. I've done my research. You know, I have gone to several museums in my lifetime, and there's always -- I've -- when I go to the Smithsonian, there's always something that's been there from day one, the first time I went. Okay, so this business of having to change stuff doesn't wash very well. I also have a concern. This is not the Met. This is not the Perez. This is the Coral Gables Museum. This is a museum that carries the name of Coral Gables that we expect to reflect something about how Coral Gables began and what Coral Gables is. I have been trying to find out how much rent is paid from the museum to the City, and they haven't given it to me, but I'd like to know. I know that the City is in charge of fixing the building -- correct? - that's part of one of our assets. I know that when I come here to discuss a grant, every year I see \$250,000 for the museum. So, the residents, the people that pay taxes here, whether they're members by paying membership or not, they're members in fact because they pay taxes that go to the museum, okay. I'm really concerned. I know that some -- and some of you sitting in front of me like modern art. But you know what, this is the city that George built, and we owe our kids, our grandkids, our future kids to be able to see. And this business of, now, we're going to take it down, let me tell you, in my lifetime, I've seen many things taken down never put back up. And I'm sorry, but you know what, two years from now, "Oh, you know, we couldn't do it. Something came up." We'll hear a whole bunch of excuses. The bottom line is, we need to be guaranteed somehow because you have the handle, you have the money. You need to have something that says, "Yes, we will have exhibit," and it cannot be 500 years from now. Once they clean up the place, it needs to go up. There's plenty of space. And if they need more space, maybe we need to find more space for them. But this is the Coral Gables Museum, and let me tell you, I'm not the only one talking. You should hear people talking about it. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

City Clerk Urquia: Ms. Joann Maher (phonetic).

Mayor Lago: I don't want anybody to seem that they're rushed, but we have a 4:30 just -- budget hearing that has to start as per state statute, so please, take your time. Please.

Joann Maher: Thank you. Joann Maher. I stand before you in my 1920s style attire as a member of the villagers, hence the hat, a Coral Gables resident who is enamored of her 1925 old Spanish home with George Merrick poem adorning the living room rafters, and most importantly, for today's topic, a docent and member of the Board of Governors of the Coral Gables Merrick House. In October 2021, the Merrick House Board brought to the City a commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the first land sales. Doc Dammers Day took guests on trolley tours to Venetian Pool, the Biltmore Hotel, and the Merrick House. But the entire event began and ended at the Coral Gables Museum, which with its "Creating the Dream" exhibit was entirely appropriate. We arranged to have playing on a loop in the exhibit -- on the exhibit screen a video narrated by Mayor Dorothy Thomson about the popular auctioneer and City's first Mayor, Doc Dammers. And the event was extremely well received. Nearly one thousand people have crossed the Merrick House threshold this year for tours led by volunteer docents. And each -- during each and every tour, I and my fellow docents encourage our patrons to visit the museum for more of the story as we can't possibly cover all in a 50-minute tour, and actually, I am noted for going over on my tours all the time. There's so much to tell. We often discover as well that people find their way to our door by first visiting the museum and we value this partnership. I am very encouraged by what I have heard in today's presentation. And on behalf of the Merrick House Board of Governors, I invite Mr. Fuentes and the museum board to visit the Merrick House and engage with our board and docents to discuss ways in which the refreshed exhibit at the museum can be as robust as possible. We welcome the opportunity to share our perspectives on what in the current exhibit we feel is most compelling. Richard Merrick's life-size rendering of the shack -- I guess that's what you were referring to, Chip -- yes, I'm so glad you mentioned that because we feel that that's really important. And as well as the story of the way-showers come immediately to mind and how these might be reinterpreted and expanded upon. This isn't about telling the museum professionals how to do their jobs. Rather, it is an opportunity for dialogue that will educate and enrich the visitor experience at both the house and the museum. And now, as I put on my hat of green, may I suggest

that careful consideration be given to the exhibit materials as they are being dismantled. I'm speaking of the display boards that adorn the walls currently. Perhaps, they can find homes in other Coral Gables buildings rather than being disposed of. I'm thinking of perhaps the library or at the City Hall corridors, or even the Merrick House as rotating easel displays because some of that information is still, you know, very, very relevant. As we near the City's centennial, the Merrick House is partnering with the City to offer -- we have here -- to offer a story core type experience we're calling "100 Voices: Yesteryear Stories of Coral Gables," the first of which will be told by long-time museum and Merrick House docent Juan Riera (phonetic), who will be talking in October about the Merricks and the postal service. Our November offering will feature residents waxing nostalgic about their days at Coral Gables Elementary, Ponce Middle, and Coral Gables High School, and June Morris is one of those panelists, so we're very excited about this. We anticipate that these monthly gatherings will become very popular and outgrow the Merrick House space, perhaps a gathering at the museum is in the future. We can all appreciate the fact that without careful attention, important stories can be lost. In fact, Arva Moore Parks McCabe, in the preface to her book, "George Merrick, Son of the South Wind," stated that when she moved to the Gables in 1970, "the City had lost much of its historic ambiance and George Merrick was largely forgotten." We have Arva to thank for keeping the story alive, and we trust that the museum will remain true to its core mission and recognize and promote the legacies of both George Merrick and Arva McCabe as remarkable visionary and community treasures.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

Mr. Withers: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Ms. Karelia Martinez Carbonell.

Mayor Lago: Is this the last public comment?

City Clerk Urquia: Yes, sir.

Mayor Lago: We'll close the public comment. Thank you.

Commissioner Anderson: No rush, but we're getting close to 4:30.

Karelia Martinez Carbonell: Well, hello, my name is Karelia Martinez Carbonell. And I thank you, Commissioner Rhonda Anderson, for sponsoring this item, and of course, Mayor, and Vice Mayor, and the rest of the Commissioners for the opportunity to address this Item G-11, the Merrick Exhibit at the Coral Gables Museum, a conversation really that was initiated by the community. First, I'd like to just say my background with the Coral Gables Museum. My husband and I were founding members, and I attended the preview exhibit at the Old Spanish Village, along with many community leaders. Additionally, I served on the Coral Gables museum board for several years, chairing fundraising committee -- chairing a fundraising committee, introducing a giving campaign named the Paist and Steward Society, and giving at leadership levels. I also served on the 80th anniversary of the committee celebrating the 1939 Paist building, the historic landmark. Since its inception, I have followed the mission of the museum, but this is not personal. I stand today representing the Historic Preservation Association of Coral Gables. I also want to address the tone of a letter that was published today in the local media, words used to address the issue at hand, to describe engaged community stakeholders, members of the museum, donors of the museum are negative and divisive, words such as -- maybe God does this, I can't find it. Here it is -- undermining, pandering to a fringe minority of naysayers, misinforming the public, distorted information and fake news, claiming neither members nor regular visitors of the museum, vitriolic attacks, assault, short-sighted vision of current leadership, rogue and vocal group. That was in today's Gables Insider. Third, as I listened to an earlier item regarding a proposed community asset, Vice Mayor Mena observed, something to the effect, "We must listen to our residents and not change what they agreed to." Enter the Coral Gables Museum. As comments and letters show, residents are asking the same. Listen to your stakeholders. Before I read my letter or the letter

from the Historic Preservation Board into the record, I do acknowledge former Commissioner Chip Withers for his vision in really bringing this museum to fruition. So, here's the letter. On behalf of the Historic Preservation Association of Coral Gables, please accept this letter in support of keeping the permanent Merrick Exhibit, "Creating the Dream," in its physical space in the permanent collection gallery as per the original understanding of stakeholders at the time, the Coral Gables Museum was created. The announcement about the physical closing of the Merrick permanent exhibit came as a surprise to the community. We should have been having this conversation way ahead of today. The permanent Merrick Exhibit, a forever exhibit, as it was referred to by the late Arva Moore Parks, who created the exhibit to honor the founding of our city and remained its curator until her death in 2020, was being closed without open public participation. The permanent collection, gallery space, a naming gift in support of the museum's mission as a historic and cultural institution honors Betty and L.D. Pankey. Dr. Pankey was one of the first dentists to establish a practice in Coral Gables circa 1925. From 2010 media clipping announcing the opening of the new museum, the residents were assured that Merrick Exhibit would be permanent as per the statement, "a temporary Coral Gables Museum and a preview exhibit known as "Celebrate," which then became "Creating the Dream," open each Wednesday. This exhibit is moving to its permanent location, the original 1939 WPA Coral Gables Police and Fire Station, a federally designated historic building." Additionally, a statement from the museum's immediate past executive director underscores the genesis of the exhibit. "We have one permanent exhibit that is always on display, the story of the building of Coral Gables, of George Merrick and his family. "Creating the Dream" permanent exhibit was the principal building block when public funds were appropriated for a new museum. Adding a virtual component is appropriate and we commend the museum professionals for introducing the idea, but it should complement the physical Merrick collection, not replace it. On the contrary, as the 100th anniversary of the founding of the City looms, tangible proof of its beginnings should be embraced and enhanced, not eliminated. Although the collection has been on display since 2011 and the condition of some historical artifacts may need to be assessed for conservation work, the assessment should be done in situ before any objects are to be removed. A local expert in managing museum artifacts observes, "If an object is stable, we can keep it on view and typically request conservators to come

and make assessments on site. If conservation works -- if conservation work moves forward, paperwork must be prepared that documents the chain of custody as well as condition reports of the object when it leaves and when it comes back.” End of quote. And I’m almost done, so please bear with me. I’m sorry, but you know, this is important.

Mayor Lago: (INAUDIBLE). Thank you very much.

Ms. Carbonell: The museum is a community gem, an institution promoting historic and environmental preservation, a true public-private partnership between the City of Coral Gables and the Coral Gables Museum Corporation, operating as an educational cultural institution within a City-owned facility. And this is right out of the museum mission statement. The museum is partially funded by the taxpayer at approximately a quarter of a million dollars annually. Any major decision that affects a change to its original purpose and founding cornerstone should warrant public participation. And being here today to discuss the proposed changes satisfies this component. But listen to your stakeholders. The Coral Gables Museum is home to our City’s history and collective cultural patrimony. It serves as the cornerstone of the City’s founding, a repository of memories that foster cultural and educational objectives. “Creating the Dream; George E. Merrick, and his Vision for Coral Gables” should always be on display in its physical state as a testament to our City’s endurance. The Historic Preservation Association of Coral Gables promotes the understanding and the importance of historic resources and the preservation in Coral Gables. We ask the City Commission to stay true to its public private partnership and support keeping the permanent Merrick Exhibit, “Creating the Dream” in situ, as per the museum’s original understanding. Respectfully submitted, Karelia Martinez Carbonell. Thank you for your attention.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. Commissioner Anderson.

Commissioner Anderson: Thank you all for being here and participating in the discussion.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, before you move on, we did receive a comment from Mr. Jose Valdes-Fauli that he wanted read into the record.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

City Clerk Urquia: It said, "Dear City Commissioners, I'm writing in regards to the discussion about the Coral Gables Museum Merrick Exhibit, which is scheduled for the September 13th Commission meeting. Since becoming chairman of the board of directors last October, I've been working very hard to professionalize the museum, make it relevant to the community of Coral Gables and beyond. I recruited a museum professional, Elvis Fuentes, to take over the position of executive director and secure major funding of \$97,500 from the Knight Foundation to bring to our city a major scholarly museum exhibition from Ukrainian art from a research institution, Rutgers University, Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum. This exhibit has put our museum among the top South Florida museums this season due to its timely relevance and academic rigor. Under the guidance of Ms. Fuentes, we began the process of elevate -- of Mr. Fuentes, I apologize -- we began the process of elevating the standards of our museum by preparing the galleries to receive these major museum loans in the Fewell Gallery. We upgraded equipment in the gallery and installed hagio-thermograph to monitor the humidity and temperature inside the galleries. This is what made it possible to host the Ukrainian art exhibition in the Fewell Gallery, while discovering that all other galleries lack minimum requirements for doing so. Thus, we need to renovate our galleries, repairing damages caused by water intrusion, seal windows and install drywalls to control the environment in which objects from our permanent collection and from loans are displayed. The ultimate goal of our work is to obtain the proper accreditation of the Coral Gables Museum by the American Association of Museums. This will mean potential access to major sources of funding at national and federal levels. I am surprised and appalled that the professional -- professionalization and accreditation of the museum has led to the opposition by a few members of the community that despite being very vocal and interested in undermining the work we are doing, have had little or no knowledge of the process and have rejected the museum's offer to provide clarification about our purposes and plans. They are pandering to a fringe minority

of naysayers and misinforming the public with distorted information and fake news. Those responding to their campaign are neither members nor regular visitors to the museum. In fact, their calls to protest the closing of exhibition, “Creating the Dream,” haven’t translated into more visitors to the museum, but rather vitriolic attacks on social media platforms and echoed by some media outlets. What is more surprising is that they do this from the pulpit of an organization that self-proclaims itself as an inheritor of the cultural and historical patrimony of the City of Coral Gables, while ignoring the multifaceted and diverse nature of our culture and history. This assault on the museum by a fellow and collegial institution is unprecedented and unwarranted. It only shows the shortsightedness vision of its current leadership. I sincerely hope that the City Commission does not allow this rogue and vocal group to dominate the conversation and the bright future we are building for the Coral Gables Museum. Respectfully, Jose Valdes-Fauli.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Mr. Clerk. Commissioner Anderson.

Commissioner Anderson: I think this has been a good opportunity for the museum to be able to present a full vision of what the “Creating the Dream” exhibit is and can be in a more robust environment. I’ve been by there a couple of years ago even and noticed that there was water damage to the exhibit itself and it needed attention, which is why, you know, the discussion by many of us were we needed to take care of the roof, we needed to take care of the building, we needed to restore the museum, so not only for this exhibit, but for the purpose of the museum itself that it can host events, you know. It’s going to be a little hard to run out of room when you have paint and stuff peeling off the walls. I’m pleased, you know, with the vision that you all have to not only just take the permanent exhibit and restore it but to add to it and add a dimension to it that we haven’t seen before. And for Merrick House, it also being willing to step up to be part of the conversation and we can have an expansion of what we’re going to be able to do. So, thank you all for participating. I think it is important that we have these discussions, and I won’t belabor the topic anymore.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Vice Mayor, you have something you want to say?



Vice Mayor Mena: Oh, I wasn't sure if there was -- Commissioner Anderson, I know you put the item on the agenda. I wasn't sure if you were just looking to have an open discussion or if you were looking for some sort of...

Commissioner Anderson: No action. I just wanted the community to be able to hear from the museum in a complete fashion, hear the legal issues from our City Attorney, and be able to participate in the process and understand what's going on.

Vice Mayor Mena: You know, I don't -- a couple things that come to mind. I don't think that the City government really should be dictating, you know, how the museum goes about, you know, its decisions in terms of the exhibits that you have ongoing. I think the operating agreement that we have supports that. The goal is for this museum to be -- operate independently in that respect and I think that's appropriate. It's particularly easy in this case because I think we have, frankly, an excellent group of stewards here who I know on different levels and who I know value the history of this city, were involved in the history of this city and the founding of this museum, so I know you all are good, responsible stewards of this effort, and so that gives me a lot of peace of mind from that respect. I, frankly, defer to your judgment as far as how you go about doing this. I appreciated the presentation from Commissioner Withers, and it sounds like you guys have some neat ideas of different ways to go about presenting the City's history. I think it's important to do that in a way that brings visitors, new and old, to the museum. I think that's an important aspect of what you do as well. I think there's different ways to go about doing that. So, I also want to make sure, however this is handled or not handled, you know, I may not always agree with the designation of a building or something historic with the -- with Karelia and her board, but I've always agreed with her -- and I think everybody on this Commission has -- on the importance of George Merrick, the history of this city, and standing by that history at a time when certain things are under attack culturally in this country. And I hope you know that we, you know, stand by this city's history and the founding on this city. And you know, if you go on Twitter, you'll probably find countless comments calling the Mayor and myself racist because we have the audacity to

support George Merrick as the founder of our city, so we take a lot of heat for that. But we do it because it's the right thing to do so we value that. I don't want -- I want everybody to be clear that that's -- this has nothing to do with that, that nobody's trying to like erase any history of the City or anything like that. This, to me, is more about how we go about, you know, presenting that history at the Coral Gables Museum. I'm satisfied with the explanation we received today, but I also, again, I'm of the mindset that we need to give you guys the leeway to operate the museum in a responsible fashion. You know, if we think it strays from the operating agreement in some way, we'd talk to you about it, and I'm sure we'd sort it out, but I don't see that anything that was described today constitutes that. You know, I hope -- and I encourage you guys to talk to all these residents, not necessarily in this forum. I don't -- you know, this is good, but I think it -- I welcome, you know, the offer that was made to dialogue with the Merrick House and with the Historic Preservation Association, and I have no doubt you guys will do that because I know, you know, you're -- I appreciate the tone Commissioner Withers set at the outset of the meeting by saying this is a good exercise and we're happy to hear from people because I do think that's important. So, thank you for bringing it to our attention. Again, I'm not here to sort of have government intervention in how you guys operate the museum from an artistic and aesthetic and otherwise, but I appreciate the explanation.

Mayor Lago: But before we move on, I just want to -- very briefly because we have a special assessment public hearing I'd like to get to. I agree with the sentiments of the Vice Mayor. Again, the last time that I was in the museum visiting one of the exhibits -- I think it was the AIDS exhibit, which was very well done, very tastefully done. It had some exceptional art by (INAUDIBLE). I noticed that the George Merrick exhibit was in need of a refresh, like it had certain areas that were just in poor condition, just wear and tear over the years. What I would like to see is I'd like to see, obviously, there to be a dedicated exhibit about the history of our great city, about George Merrick. How you put that together, you know, maybe you can present it to the Commission, you can present it, working with these residents to do something tasteful. Maybe you don't need that much space. Maybe it's an overabundance of space. Maybe you can pare back and do something that benefits both the museum, and obviously, Merrick's legacy. We're committed to the City's history. There

is no doubt about that. One of the last things that (INAUDIBLE) received was a map that I bought at auction, which is the most intact, most perfect map that I've ever been able to see, and we donated it to the museum on behalf of Arva Moore Parks. If that map is in the way, one way or another, you know, please, we can put it up here in the City. We donated it because it's just a beautiful place for people to be able to witness the map and also a great way to honor her legacy. But I agree with the Vice Mayor, I mean, moving forward, I know what your intentions are. I know all of you personally, every single person in this room here. I've dealt with you. I know everybody comes from the right place. I think moving forward, let's work together collaboratively and find a way to honor the legacy of George Merrick, to honor the legacy of this great city and see how we can do it in a way that, you know, allows us to play with some of the space in the museum while, you know, not taking away from who George Merrick is. So, with that being said, if there's not anything else that needs to be said...

Commissioner Menendez: Mayor.

Commissioner Fors: I won't add any more time to it.

Mayor Lago: We have a...

Commissioner Fors: Excited about the new vision for telling the same story. And I trust especially the folks who are in -- who are at the helm of this that they have all the best intentions for the City and for telling that story. I think somebody in the back, they've indicated...

Mayor Lago: Have you --? Would you like to speak, sir?

Unidentified Speaker: Yes. Before you vote, I would like to say a couple of words.

Mayor Lago: We're not voting today. There's no vote, but you can come up if you'd like.

Unidentified Speaker: No, only if you're going to vote on it.

Mayor Lago: No, we're not voting on anything that I'm aware of.

Commissioner Anderson: No, no, this was just really...

Mayor Lago: This was just a...

Commissioner Anderson: An information...

Mayor Lago: Just a discussion (INAUDIBLE).

Commissioner Menendez: Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Go ahead.

Unidentified Speaker: I would like to point out that historic preservation is really, really important. And a wonderful example of that is this painting of George Merrick. It needs restoration.

Commissioner Anderson: It does. I can see it from here.

Unidentified Speaker: I'm sitting here listening to this and I can't take my eyes off this painting because it's deteriorating before our very eyes, and this is our founder that we're...

Mayor Lago: Well, we'll...

Unidentified Speaker: Trying to protect.

Mayor Lago: We'll get the attention it needs.

Unidentified Speaker: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: We'll get the attention it needs.

(APPLAUSE)

Mayor Lago: We'll get the attention it needs. Alright, Commissioner Menendez, before we adjourn, and we move on to the special assessment public hearing.

Commissioner Menendez: I just want to add that (INAUDIBLE) Commissioner Wither and George Kakouris' presentation, I think the fine stories within the story is the way to bring new people to the museum to get them excited, not only want to bring the same -- you know, the patrons back that have been there, but I want to bring new people. We have so much to offer in our city. You know, we have the Venetian Pool. It's a destination site. I would love to see them to be a true destination site whenever anyone (INAUDIBLE) beautiful. And I want to obviously maintain the integrity and the spirit and the story of George Merrick, but if we can add to it and do it in a way that brings a vibrant, forward-thinking outlook, I think that's the way to go. And I agree with the comment that, you know, we're bound by the agreement, by contract law, but that doesn't stop the community, the patrons of the museum to voice their feelings as to what they would like to see or the direction they'd like to see the museum to go forward. So, I congratulate, or I thank Commissioner Anderson for giving the community the opportunity to express themselves, but also, we had a very civil discourse, and that's what I think is special about the community, and that's why I believe greatly that the future of the museum is in good hands.

Mayor Lago: Alright.

Vice Mayor Mena: One last point, Mayor. I just wanted to say, you know, you guys -- I thought the exhibit that you all did, the Julio Larraz exhibit, was fantastic. I thought it -- I went to several

events. And so, I just want to make clear, because this is a complex discussion. You try to be both civic, City history-minded, but also the artistic component. There's room for both, I think, in what you do, and I think you've done that. And so, you know, don't come away with this with, you know, Mr. Fuentes and board, and you know, with the thought that, well, everything has to be in this direction. I think there's plenty of room at the museum to do all, all of these things, and to also, you know, value and showcase the history of the City. And so, just wanted to say that because, again, I found that particular exhibit -- not because of the type of art, whether it's contemporary, classic, whatever it is. I just thought it was well-received by the community, and I thought it brought members of the community to the museum that maybe didn't previously come to other types of exhibits. So, I think it's good to, again, diversify the exposure of the museum, bring new people in. Maybe those people learn more about the City while they're there.

Commissioner Anderson: Right.

Vice Mayor Mena: And those are all good things.

Commissioner Anderson: You spoke my mind.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yeah.

Commissioner Anderson: They get to see the George Merrick Exhibit because they...

Vice Mayor Mena: Right.

Commissioner Anderson: Were attracted from something new.

Mayor Lago: Alright. Well, with that being said, no further comment. I'll adjourn the Commission meeting for September...

Commissioner Anderson: Thank you all for being here.

Mayor Lago: September 13, 2022.

Commissioner Anderson: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.