

# **City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting**

## **Agenda Item D-1**

**June 3, 2008**

**City Commission Chambers**

**405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL**

### **City Commission**

**Mayor Donald D. Slesnick, II**

**Vice Mayor William H. Kerdyk, Jr.**

**Commissioner Maria Anderson**

**Commissioner Rafael “Ralph” Cabrera, Jr.**

**Commissioner Wayne “Chip” Withers**

### **City Staff**

**City Manager, David Brown**

**City Attorney, Elizabeth Hernandez**

**City Clerk, Walter J. Foeman**

**City Clerk Staff, Billy Urquia**

### **Public Speaker(s)**

**Dr. Andy S. Gomez, Assistant Provost and Senior Fellow, Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, University of Miami**

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D-1 [Start: 9:45:49 a.m.]

Dr. Andy S. Gomez, Assistant Provost and Senior Fellow, Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, University of Miami, to speak on the impact the changes in Cuba could have in South Florida.

Mayor Slesnick: We are going to go to personal appearances, this is item D-1, I'll ask Commissioner Cabrera to introduce it.

Commissioner Cabrera: Thank you. About a week and-a-half ago, I was contacted by Dr. Andy Gomez. He is the Assistant Provost and Senior Fellow at the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami; and Dr. Gomez had an interesting offer to make to us here at the City of Coral Gables, which was to allow us to have him present something he's been doing throughout, not only this area, but throughout the region, a presentation on the impact on the changes that Cuba will have in South Florida, hopefully in the not so distant future. Dr. Gomez and I, want to welcome you on behalf of the entire City Commission. I appreciate your time, I know you are very busy, and I'm delighted you reached out to me, and good morning sir.

Mr. Gomez: Good morning Mr. Mayor, Commissioners, thank you Commissioner Cabrera. Absolutely, just to give you an idea, in the last forty-eight hours we will brief the Southern Command probably for the tenth time, representatives of Homeland Security, and this afternoon we will brief in detail the new Admiral of the U.S. Coast Guard, who all of you might know is responsible for the United States Task Force of South Florida. Let me – and let me tell you the Institute of Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami home in Coral

Gables has begun the premiere “think tank” of Cuba, not just the City, the State, the nation and internationally, just by the number of requests in information and briefings that we give. I think the key here, most of the time when we talk about, we talk about what’s happening in Cuba, particularly what will happen in Cuba without taking into consideration that we have learned from living in this community for a very, very, long time, what’s the impact on South Florida as we told Governor Crist very recently, not only in South Florida, but the State of Florida at the time, when the United States economy is down, our own Legislature had to cut budgets, our School Board is cutting budgets, social services are stretched, we can possibly be looking at a Mariel times three (3), if the consequences flow in the right direction. I guess the best news that I can give you is the hurricane season started two days ago, and therefore it makes it a little bit more difficult to come north to a great extent. Let me give you a snap shot, if you will, so you can understand, and I will go through this very quickly. When you take a look at Cuba’s population today, 11.28 million born into the Cuban revolution, but the key aspect that I want to bring to your attention is that 2.2 million Cubans born after 1992; the fall of the Soviet Union, the start of the special period; these are the youngsters on the island that constantly tell us that the limited reforms that have been introduced by Raul Castro necessarily does not provide them with hope and future, and they want to get out at the first opportunity to a great extent. A key fact here that I’ll bring to your attention also, is the fact that sixty-two percent (62%) on the island is Afro-Cuban. Why is that important? Because eighty-six percent (86%) of the Cuban-American community in South Florida is caucasian, and opting out those that have headed north have had friends and relatives in South Florida, for the first time we’re beginning to see Afro-Cubans coming in this direction looking for hope and a better future; and again these are mostly youngsters. Why is this a problem?- well, what Raul is trying to do is meet their basic needs; more food, shelter, better transportation, not necessarily meeting their higher demands, trying to improve the system, and that’s not going to happen. If that’s the case this is what we are looking at, and this is the map that we have developed for the Department of Defense and Homeland Security, which they currently use, just to give you an idea. In the last year and a half seventy-seven thousand (77,000) Cubans have reached the United States; twenty-four thousand (24,000) have reached the United States via Mexico alone. In other words, they know that the United States Coast Guard is very much in place to try to block the Straits of Florida, there is a point here, as both Admiral \_\_\_ and Admiral Braman mentioned it; the key here is we are also pretty stretched, and it would take 72 hours to put the kind of flotilla that it would be necessary to stop people. Now, the interesting fact here alone, you see a red line covering most of the State of Florida; the key issue here something that they actually put in place after we talked to them, and that is, what are you going to do to prevent Cubans, Cuban-Americans from heading south and picking up relatives like they did during the Mariel boat crisis; and if they are U.S. citizens that presents another problem from the United States if they cross into Cuban waters without particular permission. Smuggling Operations: In the last year alone has quadrupled, and sadly to say many of those involved in the smuggling operations are citizens of South Florida. This afternoon I am due to meet with the Southern Law Enforcement Agencies in South Florida just to go over that issue, and the problem that that is creating; ten to twelve thousand dollars (\$10,000-\$12,000) per person they are charging to bring Cubans out of the island, but that’s not the problem; most of the people, the friends and the relatives cannot pay, so when those individuals arrive to our communities then they have to pay off that debt, and therefore they get involved in prostitution, gambling, crime; the crime-wave that we are beginning to see in some of our communities are related to the smuggling operation, unfortunately I have to say is at a

heightened alert; and Law Enforcement in South Florida is very, very concerned about that particular issue. These are just recent pictures taken by the United States Coast Guard and Navy, let me present to you. Now let me take a look at the Cuban-American community and what impact it has for our citizens on this side to a great extent, and let me just throw another figure at you; for the first time the majority of the Cuban-American community, fifty-one percent (51%), in our community arrived after 1980; Mariel special period up to now. Most of these people are the ones that somehow psychologically are still attached to the island because they have friends and relatives and whatever; and they are the ones that actually would like not only to travel to the island, but the opportunity to possibly getting their relatives out of the island, to a great extent. But what I want to show you in these pictures just to present a scenario for you; and by the way I should bring out to your attention as you recall shortly after Fidel, it was announced in July 2006, that Fidel was gravely ill, the next thing we knew we were going to rent the Orange Bowl and we were going to have, the City of Miami, was going to have this huge, I'll call it a fiesta for lack of a better word, to good sense the Cuban-American community realized there was really nothing to celebrate to a great extent and that was put down very much. I do expect, I do expect that once there is turmoil on the island, once Fidel dies, there will be minimal celebrations in South Florida, maybe a little bit, or a little less than what we had when Elian Gonzalez, what impact that will have in Coral Gables I sincerely don't think it would be a great deal, maybe on the perimeter in Coral Gables particularly as you know 8<sup>th</sup> Street and 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue next to Versailles and whatever, but it would be mostly out of curiosity, but these particular pictures that I want to leave you with, and then I'll open if you have any questions and comments and then invite you to come and join some of the things that we do in the near future. Let's assume, and the Coast Guard, and by the way the Coast Guard between Federal State and Local Agencies, the level of coordination has never been better than what it is today; and that is tremendous news, because during the Mariel boat crisis it was absolutely chaos, and they will admit it to us as well. But the level of coordination today is tremendous, and the Coast Guard and Navy is prepared to put a thirty three (43) ship armada on the Gulf Straits, but the Cubans know that, that's why you see arrows going in every possible direction including Puerto Rico. But let's assume scenario, Coast Guard picks up Cubans as they have and by the way, I mentioned 133 smugglers that they stopped, last year they only stopped thirty-eight (38) small rafts coming north, an indication that they are going around to other directions as well. But let's assume they stop one of these rafts; they put them on the U.S. ship, now what do we do with them?- well, first and foremost to repatriate them, which is the law, to repatriate them we need permission from the Cuban Government to go into their waters and drop then off, Las Cabanas next to Havana; problem two, many of these ships cannot navigate in those shallow waters. Up to now, up to now, the Cubans have gone off the American ships voluntarily, let's assume they refuse to get off these ships for the first time, what do we do?- and that is the key, because if all of a sudden U.S. forces have to force Cubans to get off the ships, the Cuban-American community in South Florida will go from the politics of realistic, realism to the politics of passion, and therefore in the middle of a Presidential year, in the middle of scarce resources we could have a problem, therefore they started to prepare Guantanamo Bay (Gitmo), just in case they have to move Cubans in that direction, which also creates a problem for the United States given the fact that we still have a number of Taliban so-called, close to four hundred (400) in prison on that particular Naval Base. So, I guess if I leave you with a point, what I want to make sure is that you are aware at least that this is an issue; this is an issue that can happen any single moment, the other good thing that we

have is that Raul Castro cannot do what Fidel Castro did, and that is in 1980 say, anybody that wants to leave this island can leave now. Let me stop there.

Commissioner Anderson: I'm fascinated by this topic, I'm one of those Cubans that came before, I was born before 1959 so I give my age up right away, and I fortunate enough to be a part of the first wave. We arrived – we left in 1959 and settled here was in the Gables in 1960. I find your conversation fascinating, and I'm going to share something by way of background. My parents, as is pretty much the norm for the Cuban-American population, is/was Republican, and very conservative, believed the embargo should always stay, this that and the other; I on the other hand was dropped on my head and I believe I was adopted because I always tried to tell them that while we were wrong terribly in many different ways and that we also had problems, the real key to breaking this strangle-hold is economics and education; and I think that's what we failed to do; the Administrations and all the Administrations in the past have failed to address it because of the fear of the repercussions of the Cuban-American community in South Florida, and I speak it at great risk, but its really time to talk about not lifting the embargo but about talking about economics, education in order to break down all that stuff, and that way people can stay in their country. I don't know, that's just my point of view.

Mr. Gomez: Besides, if I may very briefly, besides the work that I do at U of M, I also sit on a panel at a Brookings Institution in Washington D.C. where we've been charged on Cuba to prepare policy options for the next Administration whether Republican or Democrat, and we are working on that. But to address your very good point, this is probably the first Presidential campaign, and as we will see the first Congressional campaign in South Florida, where we will actually have good challenges; I have friends on both sides, it's nice to be in academia, you don't have to take sides to a great extent. But this is the first Presidential campaign where the Presidential candidates as well as Congressional candidates are finding out that Cuba is not the only issue on the agenda, even on the minds of the Cuban-Americans. I can tell you from the generation of my two daughters and their boyfriends, as passionate as they are about Cuba, the first thing they want to know is, how we are going to fix the economy?- what are we going to do with the issue of Iraq?- healthcare crisis, the schools, public school problems in South Florida, Miami-Dade County? So there are a multitude of issues which I think is a very good thing for this community to have.

Commissioner Withers: May I ask you a question? Two questions – question one on the smuggling aspect of it, if a smuggler is caught with a boat full of folks that they picked up, do they repatriate those folks, or are those folks allowed to stay?

Mr. Gomez: That's a very good question; they pick them up, I'm assuming you are talking about the United States Coast Guard?

Commissioner Withers: Yes and the boat...

Mr. Gomez: The smugglers of course are apprehended, and one of the things I've personally have tried to tell a Federal Prosecutor, Alex Acosta, I think a greater example needs to be made of those people and prosecute them to the extent of the law. They are breaking U.S. law and therefore they must pay. In the case of those people that are being brought in, most of them are

repatriated, but the Coast Guard does a tremendous humanitarian job in interviewing each of these individuals, in some cases – there was a woman that was pregnant and she was allowed to come into the United States and give birth. So they are taken one by one.

Commissioner Withers: So what if they had actually landed...

Mr. Gomez: Then its “wet foot-dry foot”.

Commissioner Withers: It is, even though its part of a criminal act in which they participated, they are not considered criminals?

Mr. Gomez: If you are in a smuggling boat, Commissioner, if you are in a smuggling boat you can jump off the boat as we have seen off the Keys and try to swim to shore, if you make it to shore then under the “wet foot-dry foot” policy you are allowed to stay in the United States, which by the way I should say, this is one thing the Cubans on the island very well understand that the “wet foot-dry foot” policy, whether it’s a Republican or a Democrat in the White House next year can very well change, so even though we are in hurricane season, we might see now in the next couple of months a slope in terms of the number of Cubans trying to make it to our shores, but I can dare say that come late September or October, you are going to see that number continue to increase.

Commissioner Withers: So they are not considered criminals by being part of an illegal operation?

Mr. Gomez: No, no, no.

Commissioner Withers: Question two, as far as Honduras, Costa Rica, and some of those other entry points, do they have similar immigration policies, or are they entering those countries illegally also.

Mr. Gomez: No, they do not. If you remember the map that I put up, its fascinating, even the Coast Guard and the Navy told us that it’s very difficult to go into the Yucatan Peninsula because those waters are very treacherous between Pinal del Rio and the Yucatan. Not to point the finger at another government, but most of these people from the other governments are being bought by the smugglers; they are camps Yucatan where actually people are being housed for weeks and then they are moved up the Pan American highway across Mexico into Texas, and then, let me tell you its surreal, then there is a van called “balseros de Cuba”, that for three hundred dollars (\$300) out of Miami will pick them up and bring them to South Florida. So the key here is as I told the Governor and his staff, this is not about as we did in Mariel and we learned a great deal taking them and relocating them in other parts of Florida and other parts of the United States, eventually they will end up in South Florida, and therefore the impact on our infrastructure, social services included could be quite drastic.

Commissioner Cabrera: You know one of the reasons I jumped at the opportunity to have Dr. Gomez join us this morning for his presentation was, I felt that it gave a great information and education opportunity to our citizens to watch this, but as we speak about the subject, one of the

things we did this morning was talk about Emergency Management Division and the meeting they had; I'd like the City administration to seriously considering incorporating this issue into Emergency Management Division, because not only do we have to worry about hurricanes and natural disasters, we've got an impending situation just south of our country that will have a very, very direct impact on Coral Gables, and for that matter the entire region. I can't thank you enough for having taken the time.

Mr. Gomez: Absolutely, let me echo those very good comments and tell the Manager that we've actually briefed Executive Management, Emergency Management now twice and we've had a number of Cities also participate, I don't know when the next one is scheduled, but again we'll be more than happy to make the same presentation to you guys.

City Manager Brown: I think you'll be getting a call from Chief Reed to set that up.

Mr. Gomez: We'll be more than happy, we'll be more than happy.

Commissioner Anderson: Thank you very much.

Mr. Gomez: Commissioner, Mr. Mayor, always a pleasure to see you.

Commissioner Cabrera: It's always great to see you, and I forgot to mention the fact that not only is you doing a phenomenal job at the University of Miami with your program, I love the fact that you live in the City Beautiful.

Mr. Gomez: I've been here for a long time; I'm a neighbor of the Mayor...

Commissioner Cabrera: Well, I'm sorry about that.

Mr. Gomez: Even though he is a "Cavalier", I don't hold it against him.

Commissioner Cabrera: No he's not; he's a "Sting-a-ree".

Mr. Gomez: I don't know about that.

Commissioner Withers: College Cavalier.

Commissioner Cabrera: Oh, College Cavalier, oh that's right, Virginia.

Mr. Gomez: Remember the last score at the Orange Bowl 48-0.

Commissioner Withers: Bea says that all he mentions that all the time.

Mayor Slesnick: See what some of my fellow Commission members have failed to recognize is that I felt badly about not going to Coral Gables High School, so I found a college where I could be a Cavalier.

Commissioner Cabrera: Oh boy politician.

Mayor Slesnick: Andy, Andy, before you go just want to thank you too, David I would like to see if we can't get a briefing and maybe we can send the Emergency Management Committee down to the University so they can visit you in your headquarters there...

City Manager Brown: Be more than happy to host it, you bet.

Mayor Slesnick:...great and interesting building. I would like you to know that there is another tie between all of this discussion with the City of Coral Gables that most people don't know; but in 19 – when was the first Mariel?...

City Manager Brown: 1980.

Mayor Slesnick: 1980 – I was commanding the 478 Civil Affairs Unit at the University of Miami, and we mobilized part of our unit to process Marielitos at Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, and the interesting thing is they mobilized a civil affairs company in Philadelphia to go Key West, and mobilized us to go to Indiantown Gap; and then we later were tasked with going to Arkansas and becoming and sending our Spanish speaking members of our unit to become the mayors of the towns; what happened was they put the refugees that were in prison, except it was a detention camp, but it was a prison facility in Arkansas into their hometown associations, and we actually sent young soldiers out there officers and enlisted to become the acting mayors of those to help orient them to being here and what was going to happen next, of course it became much more complicated than that. So that's another, and that of course occurred from a unit that was stationed right across the street from where you now work; the building is gone and the people are gone, but hope the memory is part...

Mr. Gomez: The memory is still very much alive Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Slesnick: Thank you.

Mr. Gomez: Thank you.

[End: 10:07:37 a.m.]