

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting  
Agenda Item K-1  
December 13, 2022  
City Commission Chambers  
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL**

**City Commission**

**Mayor Vince Lago  
Vice Mayor Michael Mena  
Commissioner Rhonda Anderson  
Commissioner Kirk Menendez**

**City Staff**

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

**Public Speaker(s)**

**Jessica Keller  
Dr. Gordon Sokoloff  
Sue Kawalerski  
Maria Cruz  
William Silver**

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Agenda Item K-1 [10:18 a.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission electing \_\_\_\_\_, in accordance with Section 1 of the City Charter, to fill the vacancy in Commission Group IV until the next general biennial election.

Mayor Lago: First off, thank you, we'll be taking on item K-1, which is time certain for 10 o'clock, we're 15 minutes late. I want to remind everyone and ask everybody to please when you come up and speak to try to be brief as possible, one to two minutes. We have a process that was clearly delineated on the memo that I provided on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, anybody who would like a copy of that, we made it a public record, make sure everybody has it. I have other copies if you would like here. Mr. Clerk, moving forward.

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City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir. You have a resolution before you, appointing a Commissioner for the remainder of the term by Commissioner Fors that expires in April of 2023.

Mayor Lago: I'd like to hear public comment first. Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: First speaker is Ms. Jessica Keller.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Keller, good morning.

Ms. Keller: Good morning. My comment is just over two minutes. My name is Jessica Keller and my son, and I have been actively involved in this community for over ten years. You each received my e-mail that you do not appoint Maria Cruz as interim Commissioner, as well as a document that I asked to be entered into the record today, regarding an incident that occurred when she was a teacher at Miami Beach High School. I'm not here to talk about that, but I hope you will. This is serious contents of this document require discussion. I'm here to actually talk about leadership. Maria Cruz does not possess the leadership qualities this position requires. As a constituency, we value strength and competent leadership, well intentioned and motivated leadership should be supported. Leaders should be held accountable when their motives are self-serving and not aligned with the needs of the community they serve. Honest and transparent dialogue through the process is the only way to promote this just accountability. Maria Cruz is in favor of transparency and accountability as long as she is appeased. She is connected to the termination or forced resignation of at least eight city employees in as many years. Was it because they were poor performers or was it because these employees were obstacles for her personal interest, rather than what was best for the community. Maria is tenacious in her pursuits, transparency, integrity and the good of the community be damned. The destruction of the livelihoods of people just doing their jobs is of no concern to her. Community meetings have been cancelled because Maria saw the meetings as potentially detrimental to her selfish whims and desires. I know of at least two cancelled because she wanted to cherry-pick invitees at the exclusion of others affected voters and taxpayers. No one should be excluded from a meeting that impacts their community. The cancellation of these meetings cost the taxpayers thousands of dollars and delayed projects all because Maria swayed her influence and received preferential treatment. For years she has insisted that San Amaro traffic circle be rebuilt in her neighborhood even though the data did not justify the investment. When informed that the data proved that other traffic circles safety concerns were in greater need, her exact response was, and I quote, *"frankly, this is very selfish, I don't care about other people."* There are numerous other examples that depict the true nature of Maria, but I wish to be respectful of the time constraints. This isn't about me. This is about accountability. I submit to you that along with this statement, Maria's history with the Board of Education, as outlined in her settlement agreement entered into the record, demonstrates that she is not fit to be a member of this board, interim or permanent. Thank you.

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Mayor Lago: Thank you. Before we proceed, I'd like to put something on the record. I was hoping I wouldn't have to do this. I think we need to remember there is a city code that we need to abide by. There is a code which details decorum. I'll read it into the record, so everybody is clear. City Code Section 2-83 regarding decorum – Resolution 2021-187 regarding civility; Resolution 2016-279 regarding civility; City Code Section 2-79 regarding the rules of public comment during the public comment period. I ask you to advocate on behalf of an individual that you think is appropriate to hold this incredibly important position. This is the public trust. You may have differences of opinion; I understand that, and I accept that. Let's try to keep it as honest, thoughtful and positive as possible. I think that's what sets our city apart from others. Thank you. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Dr. Gordon Sokoloff.

Mayor Lago: Doctor, good morning.

Dr. Sokoloff: Hi, good morning, nice to see you all. Happy Holidays. I'm here to advocate for Maria Cruz, actually. And as someone who served on the boards for about ten years and somebody who has attended many of these meetings, I can attest and I'm sure you all realize that Maria is here not because she's a paid employee, but because she loves Coral Gables. When many of you, Commissioner Menendez, Rhonda, George Fors, have come to my home soliciting my vote, you were representing yourselves as people who were running for the residents to support the residents of Coral Gables. When I think about someone who does that actively and noticeably and visibly its Maria Cruz, more than any other candidate and I know some of those candidates and they are fine people. I see Maria here at every meeting, she goes to – she's been to the Ponce Neighbors Association helping out our cause. She is very much a voice to the residents, and I think it would be a wonderful representation from this Commission who supports the residents ideally, and hopefully to select somebody like Maria who demonstrably is here at almost every Commission meeting. In fact, I know Mayor Lago has referred to her as the "real mayor," I know she's not, but I know that you kid that way. So, thank you very much. I support her.

Mayor Lago: Thank you doctor. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Ms. Sue Kawalerski.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, Sue. Thank you for being with us.

Ms. Kawalerski: Good morning, Mayor and Commissioners. It's a pleasure to be here. I am Sue Kawalerski, 6830 Grecian Street, and I'm here this morning as the President of the Coral Gables Neighbors Association. This should be a very simple vote for you this morning, determining who will be the temporary Commissioner for the vacant Commission seat. Maria Cruz is simply the best candidate for this temporary Commission seat, and why? – because Maria has attended just about every Commission meeting and many board meetings and sits on boards, and probably

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knows more about the city and how it operates than just about anyone that I know, but most importantly, Maria stands up for the residents of the city. She is a fighter and is not afraid to stand up to the powerful who might give her lip service, but who would like nothing better than for her to go away. You know who they are. Now there are those people who would like to demean and defame her, but those are the people who they themselves have been defamed for just cause. The vote is probably the most significant vote you will be making from this dais. It will show the residents, the voters, come April and the election after who is really for the residents and who is for the developers and other special interests who fund many of your campaigns. On behalf of the Coral Gables Neighbors Association, we firmly support Maria Cruz to fill the vacant Commission seat and hope you vote on behalf of the residents. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Ms. Maria Cruz.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Cruz, good morning.

Ms. Cruz: Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road, the home that I have lived in since 1976, not ten years, not eleven, forty-sum years. Please bear with me, this is very difficult. You have received e-mails, letters, phone calls, comments from disgruntled employees who decided to blackmail me in order to silence me, but there is nothing to hide. Several times I have offered to show anyone anywhere the document that shows what happened, but they were not interested to this day. They wanted to continue the false narrative. The Mayor knows because the very first time this came up, he asked me, and sitting around his dining table I showed him the document when he asked me about it, in front of witnesses. For months we have heard that you have already decided who you are going to appoint, that you already have a chosen one. As a matter of fact, it has been said that he himself has told people that.

Vice Mayor Mena: Who said that Ms. Cruz?

Ms. Cruz: I was told that Jim Cason has told people that he'll be sitting here soon.

Vice Mayor Mena: Who did he say that to?

Ms. Cruz: I can't tell you. It's come from many different people, many different people.

Vice Mayor Mena: Can you name any?

Ms. Cruz: You know, like I said many times, people talk to me. The reality is that I never wanted to do this. I agreed to do this and let me tell you how it all went. I called Sue specifically to ask her to support Sam Joseph, because I thought it was time for somebody different than us to be sitting in this Commission, okay, and at that time she turned to me and said, why not you. And I

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said, no way Jose. I've always said I'm not going to do this, and she said, there are two types of candidates: political candidates and people's choice. If the people want you, would you do it, and I say, if people want me, I'm game. I would do it. So, I agreed to do this, because lots of people, even some people that I've never spoken to before asked me to do it. I want you to know that church people have come to me that I didn't even know existed to tell me to do it. The ball is in your court. You can either continue the play to the plan as planned or you can do the right thing and listen to the residents, but before that, I would like one of you to ask me this famous document that I offered to show, to ask me because I want this on the record, its important. I want you to look at it. This is the letter that I've had in my wallet for 15 years waiting to be able to clean my name, okay. My, my, because I wrote it, I didn't want to forget it, my reputation is in jeopardy. There are people here talking that obviously do not know how to read legal documents, because what has been said is not true. I would like somebody to ask me please, I need to get this on the record to put this to rest.

Mayor Lago: I'd like to make a copy of that document...[inaudible]

Ms. Cruz: I think people need to hear it.

Mayor Lago: I understand. I understand and I agree with you, perfectly fine. You can put it on the record and the Commissioners will review it.

Ms. Cruz: Okay.

Mayor Lago: You can go to my office, you can go to Commissioner Menendez', Rhonda's, the Vice Mayor, make a copy of it and you can put it into the record.

Ms. Cruz: I think we have a copy.

Commissioner Anderson: I interviewed Ms. Cruz, and I did ask for an opportunity to read it and I did make a copy and asked for it to be put in the record.

Mayor Lago: Okay. Would you like to read it or...

Commissioner Anderson: We can have it put in the record.

Ms. Cruz: But I would like to read it, for my sake.

Commissioner Anderson: You want to read it?

Ms. Cruz: May I?

Mayor Lago: Go ahead Ms. Cruz.

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Ms. Cruz: October 10, 2007, Mrs. Maria C. Cruz, 1447 Miller Road, Coral Gables, Florida 33146. In reference to Maria C. Cruz versus Jean Friedman, Case No. 0121571 CA32. Dear Mrs. Cruz, in March 2000, as the incoming Principal of Miami Beach High School, I was advised that there was some questionable financial reporting ascribed to the previous administration. In my official capacity as Principal, I reported that information so that a complete investigation and audit could be undertaken. During the pendency of the whole lawsuit, I learned that the information initially reported regarding you, Mrs. Cruz, which I believed to be true at the time, to not to be unsubstantiated and inaccurate, even though I acted in good faith before learning of the unreliable nature of the information, it is clear now that some of the information I called upon was inaccurate. In my official capacity, I may have repeated some of the information before learning of its unreliable nature which was conveyed to you and others, and which formed the basis of this lawsuit. As the former principal of Miami Beach Senior High School and in my official capacity, I apologize for any inconvenience that this information caused you. And its signed Jean Friedman, as former principal of Miami Beach Senior High School. There you have it.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

Ms. Cruz: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

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

Mayor Lago: We don't have anybody on Zoom, we have no other.

City Clerk Urquia: No sir.

Mayor Lago: I want to make sure we give everybody the opportunity. Okay. So, I've given this, like all of you, a lot of thought. I sat down with many people in this community. I know all of you have because they've actually told me that you have. Sat down and had conversations with Commissioner Cabrera, Don Slesnick, Mayor Slesnick, Commissioner Jeannett Slesnick, Vice Mayor Quesada, Mayor Cason, Mayor Raul Valdes-Fauli, along with a litany of other people. I mentioned the elected officials because they are in the public realm. Litany of people who serve on boards, who have given a lot to this community, we discussed multiple candidates to hold the seat until the election that's forthcoming in April. I vetted as many candidates as I possibly can, and I think that this is critically important not having someone next to me is an issue. We need to have someone who can hit the ground running, who understands the ins and outs of our city, understands the budget, understands what we need to address. I'll give you an example, I leave for Tallahassee today, last year we went four times to Tallahassee. We brought back the most money we ever brought back to the city and we're starting in the pre-season, in a special session. Going up with the team to really advocate on behalf of issues that we are going to be needing here that

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are critically important, public safety issues, like the Fire Station, like window replacement in this building. I think that we need to pick somebody who is clearly seasoned and understands and can hit the ground running. Do you want me to give you my opinion on who I would pick, or you want to listen to everybody's.

Vice Mayor Mena: Whatever you want to do. I have some comments, but if you want to say who you.

Mayor Lago: I would, in my opinion, I think the most competent person who could potentially hold the seat for the next six months, who I think has an untarnished and respected view on this issue and on the city is Mayor Jim Cason.

Vice Mayor Mena: I agree with Ms. Kawalerski that this is a simple vote, and I think its simple because Jim Cason is the obvious choice. There are only six meetings, six meetings that this individual would be participating in before the new Commissioner who wins in April and is elected by the residents of Coral Gables who sit in this seat. The only person who has firsthand experience sitting up here and working and knowledge about who these things work is Mayor Cason. The only person who has been elected by the residents of Coral Gables, I think 57 percent of the vote one time and 70 percent of the vote in another election and have resounding double-digit victories during his elections was Jim Cason. So, I think it's a simple choice given that you want somebody who can come in and work right away, and again, its only for six meetings and then we'll see exactly who the residents elect in April. You know, Ms. Cruz, I'm sorry that you got to experience this. Its tough. Its part of sitting up here though. A lot of felt the way you felt today. I think Zeida Sardinias has felt the way you felt. I think Miriam Ramos has felt the way you felt. I think Mayor Lago has felt the way you felt. I think Peter Iglesias has felt the way you felt. I think their spouses and children have felt the way you felt. When ethics complaints are filed against people with no basis. When articles are written that are baseless and based on a lot of misinformation, it tarnishes people's reputations. And so, that's part of the deal, unfortunately, of being an elected official in the City of Coral Gables right now. And a lot of the folks who are supporting you are part of the reason for that, and so, that to me above everything else is disqualifying, but more than anything, I think again, Jim Cason is the obvious choice. I think he's going to sit here for six meetings. I would love to have a count of how many meetings he's presided over, but a lot, hundreds, and then in April the City of Coral Gables will vote again and they'll vote for who they want to fill this Commission. And I would invite everybody because I do think we had a very good pool of candidates. I met with several of them. I think Sam Joseph is more than qualified. I hope he considers running. Ms. Russo, who also is a longtime resident of Coral Gables, who applied, I think is also an excellent candidate. I hope she files and considers running. And rather than decide who the people's choice is, based on internet polls and neighborhood associations, let's decide who the people's choice is the way that Americans do it with an election in April, and we're going

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to see. A lot of what's going on here is a build up to that election. A lot of the slogans being used today are slogans already being implemented in advance of that election. We're going to find out. I think this is a great opportunity. I would have been supportive of a lot of these candidates. I would have been supportive of Don Slesnick, Ralph Cabrera, Bill Kerdyk, Chip Withers, any of our former colleagues who have sat here and have the experience to fill in for six meetings, which they are more than capable of doing in a seamless way. So, that's my position on the issue. I think it is a clear choice and I want to just invite everybody who participated in this process and just witness what we spoke about that. Its hard to be maligned in public. Its especially hard to be maligned in public when you feel that its not based on the truth. When you feel that there is more information that's not being provided to the public. It hurts you, it hurts your family, hurts your loved ones, its embarrassing, its humiliating, but you're not the only one that's had the luxury of that experience, a lot of people who sit up here have, as have many people on our staff over the course of the last four years. I've seen maligned and I've seen their reputations challenged in public in a way that's really, I think, beneath the dignity of the residents of our city. I think we have good people. I think they act with tremendous amount of ethics at all times. I have never once witnessed one of our staff people here act in a way that I found to be unethical. I think they really try very hard to do what's really a very hard job, and it's a hard job because the public eye is on you, because you are subject to tremendous criticism, but that's what you sign up for, but make no mistake, applying for this position and to sit in that chair or any of these other chairs, that's part of the deal; that's part of the deal in the City of Coral Gables now, we all understand that. We are going to have to see what the residents think, and we are going to find out who the people's choice is in April when voters come out and decide who they think should be the next Commissioner.

Mayor Lago: Thank you Vice Mayor.

Commissioner Menendez: I just want to add that though I know most of the candidates and I've spoken with some of the candidates prior to this process, I've read their background, their bios, read their qualifications. I haven't spoken with any of the candidates. I just did my research in the neighborhood and the community, learned about their background. I almost intentionally tried to not have that conversation. And I've spoken to Mayor Cason in the past. We were at the Miracle Theater for a show. They sat us next to each other. I've spoken to Maria Cruz many a-times; Sam, almost on a weekly basis; and like Vice Mayor Mena said, we have a lot of qualified people that aren't on this list, like the Slesnicks, and someone who I actually, I think we all admire greatly here, but is Dorothy Thomson. To me, there is no greater honor would be to have someone like Dorothy Thomson up here, even if it's a short amount of time. So, my decision will come down to not on what is circulating in social media, not what is circulated word-of-mouth. It's based on what I think would be a short learning curve and I think since it is a short learning curve, I'll be gravitating towards someone who I think was mentioned can hit the ground running. But I highly respect everyone, because before this process, we were engaging in communication and

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discussions on issues that are important to the city. And I just want you to know where I'm coming from and how my thought process leading to what would be a decision here for a short amount of time.

Mayor Lago: Thank you Commissioner.

Commissioner Anderson: I encourage every single one of the individuals that put in their name in a hat to run for office, because I do think they are all very highly qualified and I do appreciate the opportunity Ms. Cruz have sat down and talked with you and I understand the pain that you go through, because its something I deal with, have been dealing with clients for 36 years, litigation exactly, and its stressful and it causes a lot of – some people come out of it with PTSD. So, I have great respect for you for having been able to stand up and clear the record going forward. I agree it's a short period of time for someone to be able to hit the ground running. There's not a lot they are going to be able to do in this short period of time, and each one of the candidates I either knew before or talked to before, and there are a finite list of things I know that Mayor Cason wants to accomplish; code enforcement, and water quality issues, and things of that nature that not a lot you can do in that short period of time. The legislation that you saw that was passed here today on first reading was in the pipeline six months ago. By the time it goes through Planning and Zoning and goes through all those processes, the concerns that have been expressed by the community about mega projects getting approved or big zoning changes is not going to happen. When you have a group of sitting Commissioners here that have held the line on those issues and respect the code. Any other comments folks?

Mayor Lago: I think well said. I want to echo the comments of the Vice Mayor, along with my colleagues. This is a very tough job and I want to thank everyone who engaged in this process, who threw their hat into the ring for consideration, that's not easy, and I have a lot of respect for people. The one thing that I want to make sure that we work on and I'm trying to work on it every single day myself on multiple fronts, both in the private and the public sector, I don't want to become like any other city. This idea that you can tarnish someone's reputation through anonymous blogs, make comments and false accusations and lead people in a direction through falsehoods. I think its come to a point where it affects our day-to-day ability, we become angry, we lose trust in the process, people don't want to engage. I've spoken to people, and they said, listen, I don't read that anymore, I don't even listen to that. I think its too much. I think we are much better than that. You know that you can come and speak to any Commissioner here at any moment. Its not about me, its about every single one of them. All the Commissioners here have office hours, are accessible, you can speak to the Manager, you can speak to the City Attorney, the City Clerk, you can come to the Commission meeting, you can have a conversation with us during public comment, you can come to a Town Hall meeting, we had that two weeks ago. The residents wanted to discuss Burger Bob's design, what do we do? – we put together a symposium for

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everyone to have their time in the sun and have a conversation. This city goes above and beyond. We were just talking about Commissioner Anderson’s legislation about notice – goes above and beyond what any other city does to ensure that we are in touch with the residents needs. I think we need to elevate the discourse and the way that we treat each other. I got an e-mail the other day, it says, but this is politics. No, its not politics. We can’t. We can’t just call somebody a racist. You can’t just call somebody an antisemite. You can’t call somebody a liar, a thief, a corrupt person. You can’t do that. People look at you and they smile, and they laugh, they say these things in the background about you and we have families that run into other people in the supermarket. We have staff that come to sit down in my office and shed a tear because of the way they are being treated. We may have a difference of opinion on a matter, but at the end of the day people have self-worth and they have respect. We should treat people like that, even in disagreement. So, I’m just asking for individuals in this community to do their part, to lead by example. I know we are trying to do ours. And if you haven’t watched a city meeting, this Commission, staff goes out of its way to do everything they possibly can to say thank you, to be cordial, to be respectful, even in disagreement, even in the fiercest most bitter battles when we disagree over an issue where I can’t believe, Mike can’t believe that I’m voting a certain way and I can’t believe we are just far and few between, the same thing with Commissioner Anderson. We walk out of here respectfully because we are voting on an issue based on who we are. I’m not giving a dire tribe. Vice Mayor brought up a very good point. I just want to put my two cents on the record that we can do better, we’ve got to do better. We can’t be like any other city, we can’t. If I need to make the motion, if you’d like for me to make the motion, I’ll pass the gavel. I’d like to nominate Jim Cason, Mayor Jim Cason for the position, to fill a position over the next six months that is being voided by Commissioner Fors leaving.

Commissioner Menendez: I’ll respectfully second that.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Commissioner Anderson: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

Vice Mayor Mena: Yes

(Vote: 4-0)

Mayor Lago: Again, thank you for everyone who participated in the process. Our office continues to be open, and we look forward to your engagement. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Moving onto item I-1, planning for events for the centennial.

Vice Mayor Mena: This gentleman.

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Mayor Lago: Sir, would you like to say something? Did you fill out a card? Would you like to fill out a card? Come on up. Come on up. Before we move onto item I-1, this gentleman would like to say something.

William Silver: I hope that you understood that I was a candidate in the group for the position to fill the vacancy, that's all. And to everybody here, I understand the situation, I understand the problem. I, myself have put myself before the public. I was a candidate for the Coral Gables Commission. I wasn't afraid to sit out there and take all the abuse that was thrown at me, and I was also a candidate for the State House of Representatives, so that's nothing new, that's the way it goes here. And you have to learn to accept that, which I did. I didn't win, but I got thousands of votes of people who supported me, and it made me feel good. Now, I'm a 93-year-old man, and I'm married over 70 years now, so I've been through a lot. I have three sons, they all graduated from Coral Gables High School. I have six grandkids and four great-grandkids, so I've been through a lot myself. When you go to the doctor's office and make an appointment, they say, bring in all your lists of medicine that you take. I don't have a list. I don't take any medicines. So relatively, I guess I'm in good shape. I play tennis once a week with all my older friends and that's what makes me go. I'm sure you read my CV.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Mr. Silver: And if you didn't, just some personal things that come up, like I won first prize in ceramics at the Coral Gables Senior Art Show, three times I won the first prize there. I'm a veteran. I was a Captain in the United States Air Force over in Japan.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for your service.

Mr. Silver: I served our country.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

Mr. Silver: I was an orthodontic practice. I was an orthodontist and I was in that practice for 42 years. When I left practice, I went to work at the Medical Examiner Office. I still work at the Medical Examiner Office today. I do dental autopsies. While I was working there and I still work there, I was called, and I went to the New York Medical Examiner where I helped identify people in the World Trade Center disaster. I also went to Mississippi where I did the same work after Katrina. I worked here in Miami at the Value Jet crash, that was my work after I left my orthodontic practice that is still my work today. I would be happy to receive this appointment to fill the position on the Commission. I promise I will not run again. It would be an honor for me to serve my city, if you wish to have me.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

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Mr. Silver: I think that the best medal that I have, really, is this medal I wear on my lapel. This is the Key to the City of Coral Gables. I worked on the Planning and Zoning Board, I was Chairman. I worked on the Blue-Ribbon Committee. I was President of the Citizens League. I was Chairman of the Board of Adjustment. I also was on the two committees of the Florida Bar. I was on the Grievance Committee, and I was on Illegal Practice of Law Committee with the Florida Bar. I have a wide experience. I'll be happy to share that with the citizens of Coral Gables. I thank you for your kind consideration.

Mayor Lago: Thank you doctor.

Vice Mayor Mena: Thank you so much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you so much for your service to this great country.