

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item 2-1
October 10, 2017
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Raul Valdes-Fauli
Vice Mayor Pat Keon
Commissioner Vince Lago
Commissioner Frank Quesada
Commissioner Michael Mena

City Staff

City Manager, Cathy Swanson-Rivenbark
City Attorney, Craig E. Leen
City Clerk, Walter J. Foeman
Deputy City Clerk, Billy Urquia
Public Safety Director, Frank Fernandez

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz, Chair of the Anti-Crime Committee

Agenda Item 2-1 [9:39:36 a.m.]

A Resolution by the Coral Gables Anti-Crime Committee recommending that the City of Coral Gables address the facilities at Phillips Park and requesting that the City Commission direct City staff to make all the necessary repairs.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Item 2-1, Anti-Crime Committee recommending that the City of Coral Gables address the facilities at Phillips Park and requesting the City Commission to direct City staff, I think we did that Madam City Manager.

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: We're happy to comment on the minutes or to provide you an update on what has happened. You all have previously approved the new lighting, it was approximately \$250,000 that would actually tilt and shoot into the area. You have a security guard there that not only works the area, but also the perimeter. We can have the Public Safety Director comment on additional initiatives or what actions have taken place in the park.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: The Public Safety Director you want to comment and then Maria you'll come.

Public Safety Director Fernandez: Good morning Mr. Mayor, Vice Mayor, members of the Commission, the Anti-Crime Committee did present this resolution as a result of one member voicing concern regarding some crime issues at Phillips Park that she observed and also the condition of the park, we re-fielded the lighting and other amenities of the park. Since then, actually prior to that conversation the Parks Department had already put them on the Capital Improvement Project list; a number of improvements, ACM Iglesias can speak to that, but I can also tell you those improvements have taken its course to improve the park. As it relates to crime and disorder at the park, we addressed that about a year ago; we do have a security guard that does patrol the park at night and during certain hours and the adjacent neighborhood. Since then we've heard back from neighbors that it's been one of the safest times they've seen that park and the lighting conditions are good, proficient for the park. That e-mail came through by two different neighbors that live across the street from the park and it did copy, I think, all the Commission members regarding the observation. At this point, I have no concern about the park.

Commissioner Quesada: So, this brings up something that an idea that was brought to me a few years ago in Phillips Park. I don't know how often you guys go to Phillips Park, if you guys are in the area often. I don't know how often it really gets used at night time or really during the day. There is a neighboring school, a neighboring group that uses it, correct during the day?

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: Fred Couceyro can speak on that. The night, NTL Williams and the Zone Officer at Phillips Park, because it was feeling a little creepy, made the suggestion of turn the lights on, and turning the lights on allowed it to feel safer. I know Public Works came out in the middle of the night, I know you attended as well Director, and they deliberately focused it on the park and not in the apartments, and so use at night could have been dawn to dusk are the hours.

Mr. Couceyro: It started as dawn to dusk, but we do have the lights on.

Commissioner Quesada: I didn't mean night time, I meant later in the day.

Mr. Couceyro: But, even at night time we do use that field quite a bit for our soccer program, because we have a lot of teams, we can't have them all at the Youth Center field, so we do use that field quite a bit. There is a lot of activity in the tennis courts and in the basketball courts, because some of those improvements that we discussed we did redo the basketball courts; we did

redo the tennis courts. So, we are getting a lot of activity there. During the day the preparatory academy, which is neighboring the park, they use it throughout the day for P.E.

Commissioner Quesada: What about the baseball field, does that get used?

Mr. Couceyro: The baseball field does not get a lot of use. That's one of the things, as we move forward; we have some capital funding items that we have to look at, what we are going to do with the grass and whether we are going to continue those dugouts.

Commissioner Quesada: So, what I wanted to bring up to the rest of the Commission. A few years ago I was approached by two private entities and Fred, you and I discussed this, it's been a while now, but this brings back that memory, just to make others aware of it; and it's a private entity that comes in, they will completely redo the field, they'll either put turf in or do grass, they'll maintain, they'll do whatever they have to do. They foot all the costs, we can use it when we want, they want it like two or three nights a week for nighttime adult soccer leagues. So again, I had spoken with Fred years ago; I think you didn't like it at the time.

Mr. Couceyro: I didn't. I'm sorry.

Commissioner Quesada: What I liked about it was the fact that they would maintain that park for us and those fields and give us soccer fields during the daytime, which I know we have two much soccer being played at the Youth Center, I thought it would be a nice relief, but obviously I defer to you, but if anything maybe separately you can speak to their elected officials to discuss the pros and cons of it.

Mr. Couceyro: We can look at it. It was really for artificial turf and it was they wanted to take most of the nights, which nighttime is really a stress for us on the field we would want to use it.

Commissioner Lago: Can I ask just a quick question. I also remember having a discussion and I agree with you.

Commissioner Quesada: This is like two-three years ago.

Commissioner Lago: I thought it was a great idea back then. One of the things that I've noticed at one of the night rides that I did with a police officer in the City of Coral Gables was that that field is used or that park is used by a lot of people who are not Coral Gables residents. So, it's used by a lot of the neighboring community outside of 37th Avenue and that's perfectly fine, but there is a lot of debris, there are a lot of people using the basketball courts, there are a lot of people on the field, so I think we also have to take that into consideration who is using the

product, who is using what the taxpayers are paying for. I agree with the fact that we needed more security there, I think we were instrumental in bumping up security in reference to having the NTL's there and making sure that we have a presence. I would entertain what Commissioner Quesada said. I think there is an opportunity, but I'd like to see, I know it's tough to control who uses the park, but I'd like to see a lot more use from residents and the neighbors instead of just having people coming to that park, because there are no parks across the other side of 37th Avenue.

Commissioner Quesada: Again, I just think it's an opportunity, gather the facts again and give us the pros and cons, that's it. I know in your eyes there are more cons and Fred, I think you do a great job in parks; I'm not trying to second guess you.

Mr. Couceyro: No, no, I know.

Commissioner Quesada: Maybe the deals are better and if we can renovate that park at a low to nothing cost, I mean it's worth looking into.

Mr. Couceyro: One of our challenges is, we don't have a lot of fields, so we have the Youth Center field, we have Phillips Park that's about it for turf fields.

Commissioner Quesada: Right now does Phillips Park get used at nighttime?

Mr. Couceyro: It does for soccer.

Commissioner Quesada: Until what time?

Mr. Couceyro: Well we kind of close – 9-10 o'clock is when we close the park and what we've done in order to improve the security is we chain it now; we chain it closed so you can't get in after a certain time, and we have neighbors that will notify the director or myself that people have jumped the fence, so we are able to take care of that, and our challenge is that's the only field outside of the Youth Center where people can go play, so that's where we leave the independent play.

Commissioner Quesada: Got it. I didn't realize it was used till that late at night that changes things.

Commissioner Lago: I want to go back to the points that I made before, maybe I'm wrong, are you getting the same impression that there is a lot of people outside the City using that facility?

Mr. Couceyro: It's a possibility because we are neighboring the other City. We don't necessarily know exactly; there is a lot of use for our programming, so they are there, but we do get that, but we also get the people that attend the school that stay there after school and hang out at the basketball courts and the playground. We get a lot of parents that do that as well, they might not be residents, but they might be attendees of the school.

Public Safety Director Fernandez: It's a high frequency park, there is a lot of activity going on at night, we want to keep the kids off the street on the playfield, so it's a really good activity.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: That's wonderful. Ms. Cruz you want to say something? Welcome Ms. Cruz.

Ms. Cruz: Thank you.

City Attorney Leen: Ms. Cruz, are you speaking as the Chair?

Mrs. Cruz: As the Chair of the Committee, my first Committee meeting, I do not want to go from the premise that this was a one person issue, because it was presented to the Committee, it was discussed at the Committee and it was a unanimous vote to present this resolution to you even after they were informed that that park had been part of the capital improvement and everything was honky-dory, they did not see it that way; and I want you to know that I took the time to research and I found that on May 3rd this Commission or whoever the Commission was at that time was told that everything was wonderful. By July 16th or July 26th when this resolution was written and discussed and unanimously approved by the Committee, everything was not, OK. The complaints were adults drinking and leaving stuff behind, exactly what Commissioner Lago said, so please I know that we want to have a good image, but let me tell you, the security guard was also an issue. There is a security guard in that area, but the security guard has a wide area to patrol. Don't get the idea that there is a security guard at the park, that's not the case. OK. So, I want to make sure that you understand. Oh, and this was passed and approved by the Committee July 26th, it was supposed to have come to you before today...we waited and waited. Last Friday when I asked about the resolution, first I got a phone call, well do you still want the resolution presented, because you know now there was hurricane damage, so maybe – no, no. The Commission, the Committee that you all appointed discussed it, the Committee unanimously approved it, so it was my duty to make sure you got it. OK. That's why I'm here.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you ma'am. Thank you very much.

Vice Mayor Keon: Mrs. Cruz there is not someone that's assigned to the park as security, or is there any personnel or is anybody there all the time?- at the park all the time?

Mrs. Cruz: No. The security guard that drives around, like you have somebody here that rides around the neighborhood, is there somebody who is assigned there?

Vice Mayor Keon: Assigned to the park itself.

Mrs. Cruz: No.

Vice Mayor Keon: OK. Thank you.

Public Safety Director Fernandez: Just for clarification. There is a security guard that's assigned to the park to add value to what the security guard does rather than sitting there the whole time. He has...vehicle, he is assigned to be at the park, but also to patrol a three-block radius around that park, so it adds value to the security strategy we've put forward. But, his assignment is that park and the adjacent three-block area. So go to the park, drive around, come back to the park, rather than being there fulltime. How we validate our strategies is we check with neighbors, and so there are several neighbors around that we talk to and they reported back that everything seems to be better than it has been in the past. They have reported back no issues in terms of crime, we have no crime reported there, otherwise the Chairman of the Anti-Crime Committee mentioned there is a person on the Anti-Crime Committee that lives or owns property nearby that did observe some activity. We did follow up with it, we have not been able to see such activity, it doesn't mean it did not happen, it just means we haven't seen it, but we are very vigilant to make sure that we are following up consistently. On top of that, we have a neighborhood team leader that's also assigned to that area and we have patrol officers, so we have a redundant effort that triple and sometimes even four, to make sure that our crime strategy is in place.

Commissioner Lago: Director have we considered potentially putting a camera there, maybe one already exist, is there like an option for CCTV in the near future as per the strategy that you've implemented, which has been very efficient by the way.

Public Safety Director Fernandez: We do not have cameras in that park. I will definitely meet with the Parks Director, they do have them at the Youth Center and we do monitor those cameras, we will look at Phillips Park to see what the availability is for the infrastructure to accept a camera there.

Vice Mayor Keon: It would be a good idea to have something there, so that it can be monitored pretty regularly.

Public Safety Director Fernandez: Sure it's a good idea.

Commissioner Lago: It's a deterrent, if someone sees a camera and they immediately think twice. And just something what the Vice Mayor stated, maybe we can track over the next year, every quarter we can have a report back through the Anti-Crime Committee saying the current crime stats are as follows, maybe say there has been zero issues over the last few months. Obviously, having the security guard is paying dividends, if we add the camera more redundancy.

Public Safety Director Fernandez: Absolutely. Our focus right now, not to sidetrack, but our focus right now on the cameras is looking at the bordering...streets that you all spoke to us about. We have identified technology that will face away from the City, away from those neighbors that will take photographs and still pictures of anyone entering after a certain time at night, so we are capturing ingress and egress traffic coming out of the north end of the City and also the eastern boundary that all of you have heard concerns about.

Vice Mayor Keon: I'm always concerned that we are really vigilant with regard to our parks where there are kids playing and adults playing at the same time to make sure that children aren't vulnerable to whatever maybe happening in the public park.

Public Safety Director Fernandez: The Parks Department has done a real phenomenal job – I'm sorry.

Vice Mayor Keon: Yes, that's my biggest concern is that we are aware of the activity that's going on there. If people are drinking there should be a sign there that says no alcoholic beverages allowed. Do we have that type of signage?

Public Safety Director Fernandez: We did have complaints I would say about a year and-a-half ago, about drinking, since then I haven't seen any. I'm sure about the signs, maybe...

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: We have park behavior that is posted.

Vice Mayor Keon: Is it posted there Fred? I didn't notice, but I haven't looked, so I don't know.

Mr. Couceyro: We have park signs throughout the park, I'm not sure if it says exactly no alcohol, but it does have some rules, we'll check on, but usually we do. We have all the rules that are written in our parks ordinance.

Vice Mayor Keon: And, we have enough garbage containers and whatever there that people – there is a place that disposes stuff that people do, right?

Mr. Couceyro: Yes, we have enough trash cans, absolutely, that we do.

Public Safety Director Fernandez: Just to put it into perspective. A year and-a-half ago the main complaint of that park was that when those lights were turned off, they would automatically turn off at sunset, and once it was turned off the kids would jump the fence or go play; they play basketball and the tennis courts and tennis on the basketball courts and causing a lot of noise. So the neighborhood team leader, Bill Williams, did a problem-solving strategy there and identified that the lights were a concern. Public Works came out, redirected the lights, all the neighbors came out to the balconies to make sure it wasn't reflected inside. Since then they've kept the light on at night, the neighbors have gotten used to it, we've had zero complaints, and that has deterred that type of activity; and believe me when something goes wrong, as the director mentioned, he gets a phone call and I get a phone call, letting us know that there is a problem at the park. Haven't had a phone call in quite some time and I sure he hasn't either.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you very much. Thank you.

Mrs. Cruz: Mayor may I....

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: You already said it. OK. Come – whatever you are going to say...

Mrs. Cruz: The person that talked here is Officer Flores, I don't know if we are talking about the same event.

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: It's because the NTL's have been shifted and Officer Williams was the NTL at the time with the lighting and Officer Flores is in charge of that district now. We've expanded and included, we have an additional NTL, we are moving forward with the whole program.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you. That's even better. Thank you.

[End: 9:55:38 a.m.]