

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item 2-2
September 28, 2021
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Michael Mena

Commissioner Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Jorge Fors

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Attorney, Miriam Ramos

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Intergovernmental Affairs Manager, Naomi Levi-Garcia

Fire Chief, Marcos De La Rosa

Public Works Director, Hermes Diaz

Public Speaker(s)

Ariel Fernandez

Sue Kawalerski

Agenda Item 2-2 [9:49 a.m.]

A Resolution of the School Community Relations Committee urging the City Commission to require a traffic study for Fire Station 4 that includes Sunset Elementary School, if one has not yet been performed.

Mayor Lago: I'd like to take -- moving on to 2-2. 2-1 is time certain. You want to move on to 2-2, Clerk?

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Agenda Item 2-2 - Resolution of the School Community Relations Committee urging the City Commission to require a traffic study for Fire Station 4 that includes Sunset Elementary School, if one has not yet been performed.

City Clerk Urquia: Sure.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Intergovernmental Affairs Manager Levi-Garcia: Good morning, Mayor and Commissioners. Naomi Levi-Garcia, Intergovernmental Affairs Manager and Assistant City Attorney. I'm not sure if one of our SCRC members might be on to talk about this resolution. But just so you're aware, the fire station went to the SCRC as part of the expanded notice requirements in August, and they urged the Commission to require a traffic study associated with the fire station due to the proximity to Sunset Elementary School. And that's the resolution you have before you.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Vice Mayor Mena: Look, the only -- here's my only issue. Like I appreciate what the sort of sentiment is behind this. We've already acquired the land. We're already proceeding with building the fire station. You know, I'm open to looking -- I know that the Chief is already going to be looking at traffic in terms of his logistical and operational plans relative to this firehouse. The firehouse is replacing a surface parking lot with -- I don't know the exact numbers of cars that that parking lot has available to it, but it should be less ingress and egress associated with the property with the firehouse than there would be with a parking lot. I -- trust me, I used to live right near there. My daughter went to Sunset Elementary for Pre-K-3. No one disputes that there's a very real and significant traffic associated with Sunset Elementary, and that it impacts the neighborhood. You have people parking in the neighborhood. You know, it backs up on Sunset. There's no denying that. That's just the reality of having a school that size in that location. I will (BREAK IN AUDIO 44:25 - 44:54) you know, we see developers come in with them for a potential project. This isn't a potential project at this point. We're proceeding with building this firehouse already. That decision was made. We've acquired and paid for the property already, so that's my only reluctance is the expense associated with a full-fledged traffic study when we're going to

proceed regardless. And the last thing I would say is for me, having the ingress and egress of the firehouse go anywhere but Sunset -- and the only other option would be to go -- I forget what the street on the back is now -- but to the residential street would be a non-starter because we promised the residents in this neighborhood that the way this was going to be set up is that it would go out onto Sunset, that there would be a small buffer in the back with the park that will be there. And so, the last thing I want now is to try to go any other direction in that. So, again, happy to look at traffic in terms of operational, but if what's intended by this is your sort of traditional traffic study that you do when there's a development project, I'm not really sure what the final objective of that would be because we're proceeding.

Mayor Lago: Yeah.

City Manager Iglesias: Vice Mayor, if I may say that the current facility is displacing approximately 35 spaces.

Vice Mayor Mena: Right.

City Manager Iglesias: That are currently being used. In addition to that, Chief De La Rosa has been looking at this facility for some time. He proposed a temporary facility there, so he's -- and he did simulations at that time. Again, he did further simulations once the facility was available. We were able to use -- buy three quarters of it through state funds, and so he's very aware. This - - our fire department works with residential in the residential areas, in school areas all the time. They're very good at doing that, and so this is nothing new for them.

Commissioner Anderson: Mayor, just one quick comment. I spoke with one of the members of the School Community Relations Committee, and it appeared that the concern was maybe we need lights in there. And I'm sure that the Fire Chief would be asking for signalization if -- you know, where necessary. So, I think that's the core of the issue.

Intergovernmental Affairs Manager Levi-Garcia: And the Clerk just informed me that the chair of the committee is on Zoom if we want to hear from him directly.

Vice Mayor Mena: Sure. I don't know if the Chief wants to address that point.

Fire Chief De La Rosa: So, just to go back, as you stated, Vice Mayor, this is a site that the Fire Department's been very familiar with. We evaluated this site as a possible temporary site when we were looking at having to relocate our firefighters during the construction of Fire Station 2 on Riviera and US-1. Since then, we've done simulation studies, as the Manager stated. There's no question that school zones and drop off and pickup impact traffic in the similar way as they impact traffic on Ponce during -- you know, with Gables Elementary or down south with Gulliver, and we're able to mitigate that. This particular area, when we did our simulations, the uniqueness of a major thoroughfare east-west with Sunset is that it has soft swales that are large, so traffic was able to merge when we were doing our studies, or when we use it every day as a thoroughfare to go east-west. That's not a street that by virtue of that fire station being there is the first time that we're going to use that area for response time. The make-up of the school allows for quite a bit of stacking of traffic either along the south side of Sunset in front of the school or into the campus itself. As I stated earlier, traffic is able to merge effectively on that street as opposed to, for instance, Old Cutler that has the curb to protect pedestrians and the bike paths. So, overall, this is an area that allows us access to our north-south traffic going east-west, south of US-1 in the Gables waterway. It has a great impact on us minimizing the instances in which we have to use neighborhood streets to cut through, like we use Riviera, for instance, right now, coming from Station 2 to access Le Jeune and Old Cutler at the circle. So, yes, there's a school zone there. As you stated earlier, there is traffic during specific hours of the day, but we're able to mitigate around that.

City Manager Iglesias: And in addition to that, and may I say that we have a fire station -- our Fire Station 2 is on US-1, and we're able to deal -- and the Chief is able to deal with the US-1 traffic conditions. This is certainly no worse than US-1.

Mayor Lago: So, if I may just add something to the conversation. What I'd like to understand, what would the cost be to do a traffic study? Obviously, we're trying to minimize as much cost right now as a result of the shortfall that we had in the budget.

City Manager Iglesias: Mayor, I just feel it's unnecessary.

Mayor Lago: Listen, I agree with the issue that potentially it could be unnecessary, but what would the cost be? What do you think?

City Manager Iglesias: I would ask the Public Works Director. I would say \$20,000 to \$30,000, somewhere in there.

Public Works Director Diaz: I was going to say, yes, in that vicinity. I won't tell you exactly, but 20, 25, maybe.

City Manager Iglesias: Twenty to thirty thousand.

Mayor Lago: What I think -- and this is something that we've discussed in the past. What I think we really need to focus on moving forward is addressing the issue with Sunset. Everybody's proud to have that school in our own backyard. I mean, people fight -- I know that my colleagues on the Commission get many phone calls, "Help me get my kids in there." "I don't have much power," you know, is my response. But I'm going to be meeting with the school superintendent in the first week of October, and one of the issues that I'm going to bring up is if you're noticing a lot of the schools when they do new construction projects or when they're built, a lot of the new schools both public, private and charter, they're starting to do queuing lanes inside the facilities, using them adjacent to their football field, soccer field, track fields. They're doing that to relieve some of the pressure. And if you look at Sunset, Sunset has a pretty significantly large campus. I haven't looked at it, you know, in detail, but I think that's something that we need to start discussing as a

Commission, and we need to make it a priority because if we could potentially stack a lot of that traffic inside the facility and loop it back out on Sunset -- it's already on Sunset, so we could bring it in and then maybe loop it back out, coming outside on Sunset again as people pick up their children. I think it could be something that could alleviate a lot of the pressure that the neighborhood feels and the congestion that you feel on Sunset and the neighboring community. So, that's a conversation -- I know it's a little bit off the topic, but I think it's something that we need to tackle, and I would like to see this Commission -- I'm going to bring it up to the superintendent. I'd like to see the Manager make it a priority to speak with School Board Member Mari Tere Rojas to ensure that we can at least have a discussion to see what it is.

Commissioner Menendez: I have two questions and a request. So, what's the timeline for completion of the fire station and how long will it take for it to come online?

City Manager Iglesias: Commissioner, we're designing the fire station now. We're -- plans are about 45 percent to 50 percent complete. We're looking at starting construction sometime in the second -- towards the end of the second quarter of next year.

Commissioner Menendez: Between -- and I still have a request after this next question. I think there's time to come back with a detailed plan. You mentioned the synchronization of the lights. If you can come back to the Commission at some point with a detailed plan as to how we're going to address any concerns that there are to mitigate whatever impact there could be on traffic on residents and the school, I think there's plenty of time to come back with that before it goes online.

City Manager Iglesias: If I may say something, Commissioner. Their current parking lot has 35 cars, which is impacting that right now. In addition to that, we're not looking at an actuated light at this moment because the Chief feels it's not necessary. We are currently working on US-1 without -- very, very effectively. And so, I would be the first to say when an engineering study is actually required in this case. In this case, we don't -- we've looked at properties all over the area, and this is a facility that even the Chief was planning to use as a temporary facility during the

reconstruction of a Fire Station 2, so I think we're very versed in this particular site, and I truly feel that we have -- we work with schools, we work with traffic, we have to do that. We have -- we work within residential areas, and the Fire Department does a fantastic job in doing that.

Commissioner Menendez: Well, my request will be -- you know, and I think my colleagues agree that I'd like to hear if he's still available, the chairperson from the School Community Relations Committee, but before he -- if he's still around. What I would like to do, and the reason why I said to come back with, you know, some details, further details at some point, is not to shut down the construction, not to derail this project, but so that our community is comfortable knowing, understanding the details because it's one thing for us to discuss it here and having our meetings, but it's another to just let it out there so the community knows. So, if the chair -- I don't know, Mr. City Clerk, is the chairperson still available? I'd like to hear what the committee -- what the board was thinking when they made that, the passed that resolution.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Fernandez, go ahead.

Ariel Fernandez: Thank you very much. Mayor, Commissioners, just wanted to kind of give you an idea of what the mindset was when we were discussing this item. When we saw the traffic studies that had been conducted in this -- regarding this property, we realized that the school wasn't mentioned at all. The school does play a large role in the traffic that affects this property. And our -- I guess the underlying question that the committee had at the time was when these projects are taking place near a school, why is it that the traffic study does not include drop-off and pick up at the school? Since COVID started, as the Mayor was saying, there's new plans in place to try to bring the parents' vehicles into the school property, but parents are no longer able to get off and pick up their kids. They're no longer able to park, so they're having to drive and stay in their cars, causing more traffic on the street. So, the concern that we had was whether the fire trucks and the rescue trucks are going to be able to get in and out of that property when they have an emergency. So, I think more than anything this project is one example, but in future projects that are around a school, it might be recommended that we move forward with traffic studies that include the drop

off and pickup at schools so that the Commission can make a better determination going forward on future projects. I think in this case, as Commissioner Anderson mentioned, a traffic signal was something that was discussed at the SCRC, and I think if I heard correctly the Chief said that that would be taking place, so that may help alleviate some of those concerns. But that's the reason that we made this resolution and we brought it to your attention.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Vice Mayor Mena: Chief, I don't know if you want to...

City Manager Iglesias: Let me just say that the...

Vice Mayor Mena: Correct that last point just a bit clearer.

Fire Chief De La Rosa: Yeah, there's -- as we stated, when we looked and evaluated the site, we know the school's there. That's a reality that we have to deal with, and that happens in every one of our response zones. In this particular school, as the Mayor had mentioned earlier, they are queuing vehicles almost in two lanes with the School Board police in front of the school in the south side of Sunset and onto the campus as well. The make-up of Sunset allows for traffic to merge during an emergency. I'd like to add the rotation of personnel at that fire station, we -- our roll call occurs at 7 o'clock in the morning, so well before any school traffic, our shift changes have occurred. When we open that station, there's going to be four people at that station. That vehicle is not -- and Chief Hudak can explain -- a business or even the parking as the Manager had alluded to prior, where there's a lot of going and coming of traffic. It's four folks with a fire truck that only goes out on emergencies on a roadway that is currently used by both police and fire to navigate towards emergencies. So, yes, the presence of the station is going to be there, but...

Mr. Fernandez: Chief, the concern was not about the fire trucks or the personnel's traffic into the building. The concern was more about the traffic impact on you guys and your ability to respond to the calls.

City Manager Iglesias: One of the big issues...

Fire Chief De La Rosa: Understood.

City Manager Iglesias: That the Chief and I discussed numerous times was the impact of the school on fire operations. That was a major concern. And the Chief has looked at that numerous times, done simulations, and he's determined that it's -- this is a good location.

Mayor Lago: But Mr...

City Manager Iglesias: So, we have done -- that was a major issue that the Chief and I discussed on numerous occasions.

Mayor Lago: But I know that -- again, I know that we're late to the party. I know that we're the ones coming at the last minute to join the block party that is Sunset, and the residents and you have some commercial down the street. But Mr. Fernandez does make a very good point. What I'm going to try to do is with my help of my colleagues on the Commission and the City Manager, is to try to speak to the School Board member along with the superintendent about thinking about considering about taking a lot of these cars off the street and queuing them inside their facility. They have the room. It's got to be designed a certain way and it's going to cost money. How can we --? You know, I'm going to use the point about life safety. I'm going to use the point about the fact that we are going to be building a beautiful facility that's going to service this area, which is in need of better response times, and that's the point where we're making this significant investment. And I would like for the school to consider being a partner on this issue and finding a way to partner with us. So, how can I show them that the school is impacting -- potentially

impacting -- let me be very careful what I say -- potentially impacting our response times to residents? That's my -- that's the only reason why I would move forward with doing a traffic study because it would give me something to show that there are issues on Sunset, even though -- by the way, anybody that drives on Sunset -- and it would be an insult to Vice Mayor Mena who lives in that neighborhood for 10 years -- it's obvious that there's a major problem. I've been stuck and I've had to drive through the neighborhoods to get out of that. When schools -- when there's drop-off or pickup, it's a nightmare, and you see parents dropping off kids in the neighborhoods, blocking driveways to walk their kids to school. So, if they were able to queue and have a drop-off deep into the school, you would have a lot of these problems resolved, which right now is a major issue.

Mr. Fernandez: Right, and...

City Manager Iglesias: Mayor, that's an excellent idea. I will speak to our School Board representative about seeing if we can queue inside and minimize -- as you know, Sunset's a County road; it's not a City road, so we've got to work with Dade County and the School Board on that. We will certainly contact the County and our School Board representative to see if we can alleviate the impact on Sunset. However, please be assured that we've looked at that and that was a huge consideration before we elected to...

Vice Mayor Mena: We met with them...

City Manager Iglesias: Purchase the site.

Vice Mayor Mena: On site...

City Manager Iglesias: Yeah.

Vice Mayor Mena: About that...

Mayor Lago: Years ago.

Vice Mayor Mena: Maybe two years ago or so. I'm not exact, but I know they have some challenges because their faculty parking, the way it's structured, and so the Mayor's right that that would be an A plus answer regardless of the existence of this firehouse -- right? -- to just alleviate...

Mr. Fernandez: Oh, yeah, right.

Mayor Lago: It would resolve...

Vice Mayor Mena: The traffic, but I think there would need to be significant financial investment for them to sort of reconfigure a little bit, and I don't know if they'll do that or not, but we should absolutely talk to the School Board member about that. I just -- again, I appreciate what the concern is, and I think it's a fair question and concern.

Mr. Fernandez: Correct.

Vice Mayor Mena: But to me more -- it's more of an operational question than a traffic study, if you will. In other words, we know the traffic situation. We're not looking to see what the impact of this structure will have on traffic, as you would typically do in a traffic study. If anything, this structure should reduce a very minute amount of traffic just based on the amount of parking spaces that are there. The real question is operationally what's your plan going to be. And you know, I know you're going to get that to us and you're going to work that out. I would note my impression is the worst time for traffic there is in the morning at drop off. And our facility actually faces the eastbound lane, fronts the eastbound lane as opposed to the westbound lane, which is where the traffic -- excuse me. I have that backwards. Our facility fronts the west bound lane, as opposed to the eastbound lane, which is where the cars stack for drop-off in the mornings. So, even at that time of day, worst case scenario during that limited window, you'll have the option of, you know,

coming out and going west or whatever it is you need to do operationally. But the bottom line is, to me it's not -- it's less -- it's more of what's your operational plan going to be and less of a traditional traffic study. So...

Fire Chief De La Rosa: Correct. And to the Mayor's...

City Manager Iglesias: Vice Mayor, if I may say, the Chief is not looking at this just as one fire station. We have...

Vice Mayor Mena: All of them.

City Manager Iglesias: Fire Station 2...

Vice Mayor Mena: Right.

City Manager Iglesias: Fire Station 3, and now Firehouse 4, and so he's looking at what is -- we have to deal with traffic. We have a traffic issue, and what is the best response time from which station. So, the Chief will not deal with it just as one fire station. He's got three fire stations triangulating that area that he's going to be dealing with and looking at what is the most favorable response time based on the hour and the traffic conditions.

Commissioner Anderson: Alright. Just one last point for the queuing inside of Sunset Elementary, the folks that I spoke to in that area complained about the traffic, the parking on the north side of Sunset.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yeah.

Commissioner Anderson: So, in addition to eliminating a traffic issue, you have an enhanced safety issue, if we can get the queuing inside the school, because the kids won't be crossing the street to get to those parked cars on residential swales, okay?

Vice Mayor Mena: So, I was -- even though, again, I'll just say they do a really great job.

Fire Chief De La Rosa: They do, but to the Mayor's point...

Vice Mayor Mena: And given the circumstances -- yeah.

Fire Chief De La Rosa: And to the Commissioner's point...

Vice Mayor Mena: Right. I mean with pedestrians.

Fire Chief De La Rosa: A conversation about queuing is probably a very good one to have.

Vice Mayor Mena: No doubt, no doubt. No, I'm talking about with pedestrians in the area.

Fire Chief De La Rosa: Yes.

Vice Mayor Mena: They always have crossing guards there. We've made some changes to the parking on the swales, again, I think about two years ago, which improves...

Intergovernmental Affairs Manager Levi-Garcia: Yeah, we have the swale planting program there.

Vice Mayor Mena: The swale planting program.

Intergovernmental Affairs Manager Levi-Garcia: You had...

Vice Mayor Mena: It improved the...

Intergovernmental Affairs Manager Levi-Garcia: You made exceptions for signage.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yeah, there was a little more enforcement, which at first, you know, obviously there was some pushback on that from parents. But I think people have adjusted to it, so there was some improvement of the spillover in terms of parking and the pedestrian sort of safety. But listen, of course, if we can get stacking, there's no doubt that would -- on the property would be the best solution.

Mayor Lago: That'd be the home run.

Vice Mayor Mena: Right, that's what Epiphany does, you know, and they do a very nice job of that nearby, and a lot of the schools that have the space for it are -- especially with COVID, where they're not letting parents get down into school as often. You're seeing more of queuing inside the property, and if they can achieve that, it would be great. I just don't know if they're going to invest the capital required to do it or not.

Mayor Lago: I'm just saying we need to make it a priority. We need to collaborate with the school.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yeah.

Mayor Lago: And we need to explain -- I mean, again, South Florida is only getting more dense with the amount of people that are moving here, and Sunset is a two-lane street, so we really need to make an effort to work with the school. And I have a meeting with the superintendent the first week in October, and this is one of the handful of issues that I'll be speaking with him about, along with our School Board Member Mari Tere Rojas, who is always available to discuss these issues. If you could, Naomi, through the Manager, can you help me schedule a meeting with School Board Member Mari Tere Rojas?

Intergovernmental Affairs Manager Levi-Garcia: Yes, of course.

Mayor Lago: And this is one of the issues that we can discuss.

Intergovernmental Affairs Manager Levi-Garcia: She even has her office hours here in City Hall, so...

Mayor Lago: Yeah.

Intergovernmental Affairs Manager Levi-Garcia: It should be very easy.

City Manager Iglesias: And Mayor, we'll also discuss...

Mayor Lago: And do me a favor also. Please include School and Community Relations Committee and the chair because I want to make sure that they understand what we're working on and what we're doing to address this issue, okay?

Intergovernmental Affairs Manager Levi-Garcia: Sure.

City Manager Iglesias: I would also -- Mayor, we'll also contact the School Board and Dade County also traffic, which is a County road, which -- so we will work together with both.

Mayor Lago: Okay, anything else further to discuss?

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, before you move forward, Ms. Sue Kawalerski has requested to speak on this item.

Mayor Lago: Yes, ma'am. The floor is yours.

Sue Kawalerski: Good morning, Mayor, Vice Mayor, Commissioners. My name is Sue Kawalerski. I live at 6830 Gratian Street, and I live right in this affected area. I'm all for the fire station location. I think the traffic mitigation is very necessary there, but I have to add that it's not only traffic in the morning, but it is in the afternoon. It takes me sometimes 45 minutes to traverse Sunset from the other side of the US-1 -- okay? -- back and forth from my house. And I'm sorry I'm a little late here. I understand that you're going to be asking the School Board to possibly queue inside the school parking grounds. That is an excellent idea. There's plenty of parking that -- I should say, there's plenty of space in front of the new building that they built, where they can divert the traffic past that fence and into the school property. Right now, they're setting up cones actually on Sunset Drive and historic Sunset Drive in order to queue up school traffic. It's a shame it looks like that. It's a mess, but the traffic is an absolute nightmare. So, anything you can do to ask the School Board to use that front space in front of their new building to queue up cars would be greatly appreciated. I can tell you all my neighbors are just very upset about this situation. I can tell you also though that law enforcement is doing a great job on keeping cars from parking on the Coral Gables side of Sunset where I live. People used to park in my driveway, in my circular driveway to drop their kids off to school before signs were posted and law enforcement was evident in the area, so thank you very much, Chief Hudak, for law enforcement, but thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for being here.

Vice Mayor Mena: Ms. Kawalerski, I would -- the only thing I would request -- if you can -- is, you know, I know that we have so many active residents, you're certainly one of them. You certainly represent an organization that's very vocal and active on issues here in the City. We're going to do what we can...

Mayor Lago: We're going to need help. We're going to need help.

Vice Mayor Mena: No, I would encourage you all to, you know, reach out to the School Board member as well and express these concerns so that there's more pressure applied to see if they'll adjust the way they do that. Because, you know, in the past, they've been reluctant to do the queuing. We've tried and...

Mayor Lago: Vice Mayor Mena and myself, we met, and we walked probably two or three years ago...

Vice Mayor Mena: Yeah.

Mayor Lago: And we tried to bring this to fruition. But I would really appreciate -- just to dovetail on the Vice Mayor's comments, can you put together a formal letter asking from your organization asking -- send me a copy, send the Commission a copy, send the School Board member. Naomi's going to schedule a meeting. It just gives -- like I said, I'm going to invite the School Community Relations Committee to be there, and explain that this is, again, this is a two-fold effort. We're going to help the students. You know, it's a lot safer to queue inside the building, number one. And number two, you're also alleviating the major congestion that we have in that area throughout the day. It's only going to get worse. I mean, there's hundreds of people moving into the state every single day, and we need to try to do everything in our power to, again, just be as effective and as efficient as possible.

Vice Mayor Mena: It's more -- listen, it's more effective for them to hear from their voters and their residents then, you know, we'll do what we can, but the volume is louder when it comes from their residents, and they have to respond to you and explain to you why or why not. They'll give us an explanation about the logistical challenges, but the more people they hear from, I think just the more likely we can get a better outcome.

Ms. Kawalerski: I'll be happy to write a letter on behalf of the CGNA and get my neighbors also to come on board. If you need any kind of petition, we'd be happy to do that as well.

Mayor Lago: That'd be great.

Ms. Kawalerski: And we'd be happy to meet along with -- alongside you with any school officials that you're meeting with so...

Mayor Lago: We'll make sure you're invited to that meeting.

Ms. Kawalerski: Much appreciated. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: I just want to -- before we close on this item, I want to thank the SCRC for bringing this to our attention, and I think it's going to hopefully bear fruit in the future and really effectuate change.