

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-1
February 14, 2023
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Michael Mena

Commissioner Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner James Cason

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Assistant City Attorney, Stephanie Throckmorton

Parks and Recreation Director, Fred Couceyro

Public Speaker(s)

Veronica de Zayas

Agenda Item G-1 [12:22 p.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission providing direction to the City Manager regarding improvements to Majorca Park to allow for a dedicated off-leash dog play area and authorizing an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2022-2023 amended budget to appropriate funds for said improvements.

(Sponsored by Commissioner Anderson)

(Sponsored by Commissioner Menendez)

Mayor Lago: Alright. Moving on to G-1 now, right?

City Attorney Suárez: G-1 is a resolution of the City Commission providing direction to the City Manager regarding improvements to Majorca Park to allow for a dedicated off-leash dog play area and authorizing an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2022-2023 amended budget to appropriate funds for said improvements.

Assistant City Attorney Throckmorton: Mayor, Commissioners, this item is sponsored by Commissioner Anderson and Commissioner Menendez. It requests that a segregate -- I don't want to say segregated -- a dedicated off-leash dog play area be created at Majorca Park, I believe, towards a -- there's a rock structure is where the Commissioners were thinking that would be with similar fencing to that temporary dog park that's currently located in Catalonia Park.

Commissioner Anderson: We were copied on an email from a resident. There's a rock wall that continues along the playground area. It's not a safe structure for some smaller children to be encountering, and plus, it would be nice to use it as a separation piece between the dog play area versus the children's play area and keep the dogs out of the children's play area is the intent here, and keep the other side as a no-dog area so that we don't have deposits there for the children to be encountering.

Commissioner Menendez: Or the dogs just carry the children away. Also, there was a petition attached to the legislation, this item, over 100 signatures, so there's overwhelming support for the City to move forward in this direction.

Mayor Lago: Perfect. Are there any -- is there any public comment?

City Clerk Urquia: No, sir.

Mayor Lago: Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Mena: Despite, respectfully, what you just said, I think we should have community input. We had it on -- when we discussed the other park in spades, like three or four times. I'm not saying we should do that, but we haven't done that at all here. I know there's a letter, but I don't know who's out there that disagrees or doesn't disagree, or what the neighborhood here wants or doesn't want, so I'm conceptually okay with it. We did it elsewhere, but I think we should have some sort of community input involved here. Maybe, you know, this is directing the City Manager, I mean, I don't know, to maybe come back and notice the neighborhood. I don't know, but like, I just...

Commissioner Cason: How big is the neighbor -- how big would the neighborhood be around it?

Vice Mayor Mena: I mean, it's a -- and I'd also like to see -- I don't know if you have like a -- you know, when we talked about the other one, we kind of had a schematic of the park. We really were thoughtful about it. And I'm not saying the sponsors haven't been. I'm sure they have been, but I haven't been able to really look at the logistics here. I don't want to just go around splitting every dog -- every park up, you know, into dog and kids. So, maybe this one's great for it, maybe it's not. I just -- do we have any sort of like presentation that shows us what it would look like, or is that something we're asking the City Manager to kind of come back and propose something?

City Attorney Suárez: So, as drafted, it does not require the City Manager to come back with a proposal, and it doesn't require the Manager currently to engage in any community, you know, feedback or engagement.

Commissioner Anderson: Well, I have a objection for that to occur. My understanding is they already had gotten everybody around the park to sign for approval, but having a...

Vice Mayor Mena: No, we...

Commissioner Anderson: Schematic and...

Commissioner Menendez: And I asked them to submit it to the City as...

Vice Mayor Mena: We...

Commissioner Menendez: Official part of the record, the petition.

Vice Mayor Mena: We've lived through...

Commissioner Anderson: Right.

Vice Mayor Mena: A lot of experiences in the City where people purport to represent a lot of people that they don't necessarily. So, I don't know these people. I haven't -- I don't know them from Adam. By them -- you know, I'm not judging them in any way whatsoever, but I think if you're going to get public input, you have to have notice, and you have to have everybody an opportunity to speak, not just whoever is the self-appointed person is to be speaking on behalf of this neighborhood. Like I don't -- like our -- is there -- was there a radius? Are all these people who signed this within a certain radius of the park, or are they just...?

Commissioner Anderson: Adjacent. But is that a motion, Vice Mayor?

Vice Mayor Mena: What's that?

Commissioner Anderson: Was that a motion?

Vice Mayor Mena: No, I'm asking the question. Yeah, I would make a motion to basically, you know, have this, A, have the City Manager come back with an actual, you know, somewhat detailed proposal; and B, to have -- definitely to provide notice and have community input before we officially move forward with doing this.

Commissioner Anderson: I'll second the motion.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Commissioner Menendez: Can we defer this a little bit later? I'm going to have the person that had the petition started, have her call in and perhaps give her information. I know, you know...

Vice Mayor Mena: But either way, I want to have community input, so I don't want to...

Commissioner Menendez: No, no, I agree, but I'd like to hear from her.

Commissioner Anderson: No, that...

Vice Mayor Mena: Sure.

Mayor Lago: Okay, that's fine.

Vice Mayor Mena: I don't know if it's necessary today, but...

City Manager Iglesias: You know, we -- if this is a permanent facility, then we cannot go with chain link.

Commissioner Anderson: Correct.

City Manager Iglesias: We have to go with aluminum fencing, which would be more expensive so...

Commissioner Anderson: So, you'd still need to come in with a schematic either way, correct?

City Manager Iglesias: It would be -- what we did on Catalina [sic] Park is a temporary park. We used black chain link fence because we were going to remove it. But if we're going to do something permanent, then we'd have to go with the Code -- the Zoning Code requires, which is aluminum.

Vice Mayor Mena: Right.

Assistant City Attorney Throckmorton: So, just -- I understood the motion to direct the City Manager to come back with a proposal for a location at this area given the guidance from the Commission and to have a community meeting or solicit community input prior to bringing that proposal to the Commission.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

City Manager Iglesias: And costs.

Assistant City Attorney Throckmorton: And costs.

City Manager Iglesias: Yeah.

Commissioner Menendez: And nonetheless, I would like the person who reached out to us initially to be able to talk. I think she was confused in terms of when this was coming up so...

Mayor Lago: Is she available right now?

City Clerk Urquia: She is available on Zoom right now.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Assistant City Attorney Throckmorton: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Mr. Clerk. Hello.

Veronica de Zayas: Hi.

Mayor Lago: Hi. Can you please identify yourself? Thank you.

Ms. de Zayas: This is Veronica de Zayas. Let me start my video. Sorry. Okay, here I am. Hi.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Commissioner Menendez: So, Veronica, the discussion was that the Commission is talking about having this get further community input...

Ms. de Zayas: Okay.

Commissioner Menendez: Which is the steps they took with Catalonia. And I just want to introduce you because I know you reached out, and you reached out to a lot of residents and folks that use the park. And if you don't mind sharing your experience and why you feel that this is important, needed, and who else is involved in terms of from the community supporting. I just want you to be on the record.

Ms. de Zayas: Sure. So, the -- it's a big problem that there's not a fence because not only can the dogs access the children, but there is a dangerous ledge, so kids can fall over. I mentioned this, there's a whole bunch of moms on my street, Majorca, and the park is Majorca Park. And they all agreed with me this is -- you know, it's outrageous that there's not a fence in the park. So, what happened was, you know, we don't take our kids to this park hardly ever because we're scared, or

we see is there a dog in the park. If there is, I'm not going to enter. And if there's not, then we'll take the kids. And so, some of the moms were saying that they won't even take their dogs there because they're afraid their dog is a puppy, it's untrained, it's going to bite a kid, and then they're going to be sued or something. So, dog owners don't want to take their dogs. Parents don't want to take their kids. I started a petition. It got 140 signatures. I think more than 70 are from Coral Gables residents. And everybody -- if you look at -- I posted it on our Nextdoor. If you look at the comments on Nextdoor, everybody says, "We have to protect the children." And if you look at the comments on the petition itself, everybody is saying, "I can't believe that this fence wasn't erected when the park was built." It's a liability issue for the City. It's a liability issue for the dog owners. And it's a safety issue for the children. So, it just seems like an obvious thing to do. And everybody that I've spoken to has supported it and spread the word and signed the petition. And so, I mean, it's more than 70 Coral Gables residents that really were putting themselves out there for this, so I -- yeah.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. We appreciate that. I'm just going to weigh in very briefly. I'm in agreeance. I think there should be some sort of public comment. We should notice the residents. It'll just take us maybe two more weeks to get this done, and we can close the chapter and move in a direction where we just, you know, dot our i's and cross our t's to ensure that public comment and the neighborhood has been accounted for.

Vice Mayor Mena: Is it the suggestion also that there's a issue with the perimeter fence of some sort? Like what -- I don't understand this ledge issue.

Commissioner Anderson: It's the way the park was designed, that you have this rock wall, so to speak, with a higher level and a lower level in the...

Vice Mayor Mena: Right.

Commissioner Anderson: In the park. That's my understanding.

Vice Mayor Mena: But what does the ledge have to do with the...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: So, initially...

Vice Mayor Mena: Dogs and the kids?

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Initially, when the park was designed, it wasn't designed to be a park that was split for child use and for dog use.

Vice Mayor Mena: Right.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: It was just supposed to be a park for people to use. So, what we looked at is making sure to have the perimeter fencing around the perimeter of the park, and that's what the community wanted at the time. There is a dividing -- a rock, small rock ledge wall that the initial use was for it to be an additional seating for parents to sit around as they watched their children...

Vice Mayor Mena: It was not meant to be...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: On the west side.

Vice Mayor Mena: A divider.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: It was not meant to be a divider because...

Vice Mayor Mena: (INAUDIBLE).

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: The perimeter fencing, that's what we worked with the community to begin with. That's how the park was originally constructed.

Vice Mayor Mena: I'd also like to understand how far this is from the newer dog parks that we've had come online or are coming online.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Well, that park is directly across the street from the country club, so it's...

Commissioner Menendez: It's Alhambra.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yeah, but like the...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: It's right on...

Vice Mayor Mena: New dog park...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: The corner of Alhambra and Granada.

Vice Mayor Mena: The new dog park we have coming is east of there. I just -- I'd have to like...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Salvadore.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yeah.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: The one we have on Salvadore is...

Commissioner Anderson: That's -- yeah, that's a little west.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Yeah. It's...

Commissioner Menendez: And you got to cross Coral Way and...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: You do...

Commissioner Menendez: Yeah.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Have to cross.

Commissioner Anderson: Yeah, Coral Way is (INAUDIBLE).

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Yeah, you have to cross Granada, and you have to cross Coral Way to get to Salvadore.

Commissioner Menendez: This is a large property relatively in terms of...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Sure, in comparison to Catalonia. Yeah, it's bigger.

Commissioner Menendez: Yeah.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: And yeah, if you -- you do have a demarked -- because of that ledge wall that was built there, there is a proposed barrier that you could make if you want to extend it and you want to make the east side for use for dogs, then that park lends itself beautifully to that if you extend that wall up. We can either -- you either take that bench -- that rock bench out, or you add a wall, either one. And you can do that and then it works for both -- for both purposes.

Vice Mayor Mena: But are we talking about -- one thing is fencing off the playground area as a matter of fencing it off, right, which I understand, and we do -- some parks, we kind of have that setup or, you know...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: We don't normally -- I mean, unless it's a really big park...

Vice Mayor Mena: Because the hedge is -- the ledge is around the playground, no? Sort of?

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: It's on the inside of the playground, so it's in the middle of the park. The ledge doesn't -- isn't -- doesn't go out to the street. It's towards the center. It's to the east of the playground. So, there is a perimeter fencing on the east perimeter -- on the west perimeter of the park and on the south perimeter of the park. And then, you know, on the north side and on the east side are homes, so it's a corner. And the perimeter fencing, which we made sure we had because there is a play area, that's where we put it. Now, we did put that -- the community wanted that playground where it is, which is on the west side because it was under the tree, and that's -- you know, so this was one of those parks that we had several community meetings because there was a lot of back and forth on what kind of play equipment to put in...

Vice Mayor Mena: Right.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: And what kind of use it was, so we met with them multiple times to look at -- to choose how we were doing all the features that were in the park. Now, if the use looks like it has changed where we need to have maybe a standalone dog area, yes, the design lends itself to that because you have that dividing demarcation right now, and you can just either build on it or remove it and build something new, and then you have what you need, if that's what you want to do.

Vice Mayor Mena: At the time of those discussions, was there any discussion of a dog park at all or...?

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: No. You know, when we had those discussions was a few years back, and that was one of our five parks. There wasn't a lot of discussion on having these small parks be dog parks, but I think the nature of the use of parks has changed in the last three or four years. I think there's a lot more demand for it, and it just seems to be something at the forefront. It's something that now we consider. Every time I'm going for a new park design, I'm looking at whether we're going to use it as dogs, and we have to delineate from day one whether we're going to allow dogs in there off leash. We don't even want to talk about dog friendly anymore. It's either is it going to be a place where dogs can go in or where they can't. And...

Vice Mayor Mena: Right.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: So, that's -- in the future, that's what we're going to look at.

City Manager Iglesias: And today...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: But back then, it wasn't -- there wasn't that much of a need for it, we thought. And people were okay with the impression that you can bring the dog on a leash, but the use has changed.

Vice Mayor Mena: Right, and I just -- that's what I wanted to look at, like proposed plans and really understand how much space it leaves on either side. Because one thing is the play area for little kids, but you know, at some point -- you also want to have park space, open space that kids can put some cones out and play football or kick the soccer ball or, you know, whatever. And so, like what does it leave as...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: No, yeah, you would have to look at that. If you use that -- if you used that rock wall and made that the barrier -- yeah, and the rest was -- if it was an unleashed dog park, then that -- there wouldn't be any other open space. That would be -- that's the line because the line is playground to the west...

Vice Mayor Mena: Right.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: And then field to the right.

Commissioner Menendez: But the problem we face is the same problem we faced with Catalonia.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Correct.

Commissioner Menendez: Once we opened it, you had people bringing their dogs where the kids are playing.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: We've actually had -- we've actually had them in the playground.

Commissioner Menendez: Yeah, in the playground.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: They were doing obedience class one day. I had to go in there and be nice.

Commissioner Menendez: So, in order to...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: On the playground.

Commissioner Menendez: Maximize the use or at least the feeling from families that they can safely take their kids to play there, it's almost -- that's why these residents are asking can you do something so...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Sure.

Commissioner Menendez: The dogs are already there, can be doing their thing...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Right.

Commissioner Menendez: And the kids can -- the parents can be, you know...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: And there's different proposals. If you want, you can remove that rock wall, or you can leave it as a bench, or you can do something to it, but you can move the actual divider further over to the east if you want to reduce the space and have more space for the kids' area. I mean, there's a lot of things you can do. It just depends on what the will of the Commission is.

Mayor Lago: So, why don't we do this? We got a lot of items on the agenda. Why don't we ask the Manager, with the support of the Commission, to reach out to the residents, survey them, have a meeting, have a discussion, and bring this in the next agenda or the following agenda, if we need a little bit more time to get this done.

Commissioner Menendez: With an image of the, you know, a picture of the park. And another thing I want to bring up, not now, but in the future, I want to review what our fines are for people having unleashed dogs in our parks where kids are. And if we need to add more teeth to those fines, I think we should. I'd rather have the teeth in the fine than the teeth in the people so...

Vice Mayor Mena: I'm glad to hear you say that just because like it's a decision to create an off-leash dog park here, right, which it's not currently, and that's fine. Maybe we should.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Correct.

Vice Mayor Mena: But maybe we shouldn't. You know, I -- that's...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Yeah, in terms of clarification, do you want us to survey, or do you want us to have an actual public meeting? Because if you have a -- if we have a public meeting, the timeline's going to be pushed a little further.

Commissioner Menendez: That -- in my opinion, just let them know that the next Commission meeting we're having...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Okay.

Commissioner Menendez: This discussion.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: We can do that.

Commissioner Menendez: And if they want to participate, they can participate. You'll have, you know, pictures of the park and we have...

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Absolutely.

Commissioner Menendez: Just like Catalonia. We had them...

City Manager Iglesias: I do think...

Commissioner Menendez: (INAUDIBLE) here.

City Manager Iglesias: I do think, Commissioner, we have to have some renderings of what we're proposing, and we'll try to bring that sometime in March because I think we need to have some renderings as to...

Commissioner Menendez: Yes.

City Manager Iglesias: What we're proposing instead of...

Mayor Lago: So, we'll have it in the first meeting in March.

Vice Mayor Mena: Alright.

Commissioner Menendez: Okay.

Commissioner Anderson: That absolutely makes sense, you know.

City Manager Iglesias: But maybe try -- Mayor, we'll try to get it first meeting in March, for sure, the second meeting in March, depending on...

Mayor Lago: Is that fine?

City Manager Iglesias: How we get...

Mayor Lago: Sponsors, is that okay?

City Manager Iglesias: Renderings -- on how we get renderings.

Commissioner Anderson: Yeah, no, that's fine.

City Manager Iglesias: Simply because we need to get some landscape architecture work done.

Commissioner Menendez: That's perfect.

Assistant City Attorney Throckmorton: Okay.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Assistant City Attorney Throckmorton: So, as amended, bringing back in March a proposal with renderings to the Commission, proposal and cost, and notify a certain area determined by the City Manager of residents about that meeting.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Assistant City Attorney Throckmorton: Okay.

Mayor Lago: Great.

Vice Mayor Mena: And I would be -- you know, make sure that you cast a wide enough net to really get community input. It's not just the houses right around the park.

Commissioner Menendez: And I also don't want misinformation that we're converting that park into a dog park because that was misinformation going with Catalonia. Dogs are already there. We're just trying to find a way how dogs and children can coexist.

Vice Mayor Mena: No, but you are converting it to an off-leash dog park. It's not that now.

Commissioner Anderson: Well, I -- you know, if we're doing things like this...

Commissioner Menendez: Some dogs (INAUDIBLE).

Commissioner Anderson: -- the children -- yeah, they're already off leash.

Vice Mayor Mena: To your point, like that -- like -- that's my -- that's -- I hear you loud and clear. But if -- just because people are not following the rules for the park as it currently exists is not necessarily a reason to change the nature of the park to something else. It may be that it's just an enforcement issue. I'm not here to adjudicate that today...

Commissioner Menendez: No, no.

Vice Mayor Mena: Because I don't have enough information. But I don't want to just every time people are not listening and not...

Commissioner Menendez: No, no, but this is just to me a...

Vice Mayor Mena: Changing the dynamic of the park.

Commissioner Menendez: No-brainer because we've already spent the whole morning talking about enforcement...

Vice Mayor Mena: Yeah.

Commissioner Menendez: Or lack of enforcement.

Vice Mayor Mena: That part, yes.

Commissioner Menendez: No, no, but garbage and trash pits is one thing, and then safety of kids because folks don't want to follow the rules, that's why I bumped this up to the top of the list because you're dealing with safety of kids. And at some point, we need to take action, whether it's logical or not logical, but you have -- at the end of the day, you just have to do what you have to do.

Vice Mayor Mena: Right. I just want to -- and I want a real analysis when we talk about it of -- because, again, we have a whole park system with a lot of different features and a lot of different places. And we have these pocket parks, where you have a little bit of space. It's more like, you know, the immediate neighborhood, which are terrific. But you want to have enough sizable parks, again, where kids can run around, and throw the football, and maybe even bring out a baseball and hit some pop flies. And you know, like you -- if you keep segregating off every park, like you end up with no significant open space other than the Youth Center and Philips Park.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Right, understood.

Vice Mayor Mena: So, I just want to be thoughtful.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Understood.

Mayor Lago: By the way, by the way, you know, dogs are important, very important, man's best friend. But once we do this, we're going to have about four...

Vice Mayor Mena: It's going to keep coming.

Mayor Lago: Four or five or six or seven or eight...

Vice Mayor Mena: We already did one and here we are.

Mayor Lago: Okay. This is not going to end.

Commissioner Anderson: Well, I think the rock ledge was part of the impetus for, you know, bringing this separation up because it was a danger for the children. We can look at the options, whether it's take the rock wall out. I mean, the rock wall -- the rocks inside Catalonia Park are also an issue. If we want open space to be able to play ball, having decorative rocks in areas where children will be running, or dogs running, or anything running is not useful. It looks pretty...

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Commissioner Anderson: But it's not practical.

Vice Mayor Mena: Alright.

Mayor Lago: Let's...

Vice Mayor Mena: We understand.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Yeah, understood.

Mayor Lago: We have the marching orders.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Yeah.

Mayor Lago: Alright, perfect.

Parks and Recreation Director Couceyro: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Moving on to the next item.

Commissioner Cason: Did we have a motion?

Assistant City Attorney Throckmorton: Mayor, I believe we need a motion.

Mayor Lago: Can I have a motion?

Commissioner Cason: Make a motion.

Commissioner Menendez: I'll make it.

Commissioner Anderson: We already have a motion and a second.

City Clerk Urquia: We already have a motion.

Assistant City Attorney Throckmorton: Okay.

Commissioner Cason: Yes.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yes.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes.

Commissioner Anderson: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Yes, Solange.

Assistant City Attorney Throckmorton: Thank you, Mayor.