

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-1
January 24, 2023
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Michael Mena

Commissioner Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Jim Cason

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suarez

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Assistant Public Works Director, Paula Rodriguez

Public Works Director, Hermes Diaz

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item G-1[11:33 a.m.]

Update on green matter in trash pits and Leon County's pilot program. (Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: Moving onto G-1. Update on green matter in trash pits and Leon County's pilot program. Again, for the record, for the one-hundredth time, we are not removing trash pits, but we are going to save the city millions of dollars one way or another. How are we doing today? Good. First off, thank you in advance for all your hard work, we've seen a lot of progress. Let's talk trash pits. Where are we right now with this entity and by the way, there's another company that came to see me. I sent them your way that does something very similar. They are also going through some test runs also with different municipalities. I'd like to have an update in regard to where Recap is and what they're doing.

Assistant Director Rodriguez: So Recap, we've been communicating with them to understand what it is that their system does. Essentially, they would need the facility in order to locate what I'm going to describe as a shipping container and an operation where they would reduce clean yard waste into bio-char, which is reusable in many different ways. So in our conversations with Recap, what we've identified is that in order for a pilot with their program, they would need about 5,000

City Commission Meeting

January 24, 2023

square feet. And so, we have been working with them to see if there's a location within the city. They came out to see our Public Works yard. We were able to identify that there's not currently that square footage, but we have been working with them to follow their current pilot program within Leon County and understand how that's working. Leon County started their pilot in December, so they've been about a month and-a-half just under two months now working on their pilot. We are waiting on their sustainability office to share their results with us. They are getting ready to put out, to publish some information on the pilot and exactly what they're doing, how its going. We've also been working with Miami-Dade County who has also been working, discussing with the company how they can bring a pilot program into the county. So we've been in contact with the Economic Development Department and the County to discuss how we can partner with them. Maybe the county can locate a facility and how we can participate in any program that Miami-Dade County would pilot. So, we're continuing those discussions. One of the things that's underway is, they are also looking from an environmental perspective at Leon County's pilot to understand environmentally whether its something that can be permitted. They've had some good discussions about the air quality seems to be within levels that could be acceptable; and so, we are continuing to follow Leon County and discussions with Miami-Dade County to see how we can participate.

Mayor Lago: In regard to finding a location – so I want to address two points finding a location. We have our facility on 72nd Avenue, which is pretty large, and then we have almost two acres adjacent to that, is that correct? - that is currently contaminated but is not being used.

City Manager Iglesias: 1.6 acres.

Public Works Director Diaz: Correct.

Mayor Lago: I've been to that facility on multiple occasions. In our parking area we have a rather large area that we use right now where there is a lot of debris, abandoned cars, a lot of things going all the way in the back. We could potentially clean that area up and use it, if we have to use it, or clean up that acreage, which is contaminated and use that to be able to move this pilot program. Let me tell you why I'm saying. Saying that because while I have faith and confidence in Miami-Dade County, I don't have faith and confidence in how long its going to take to get this done. And the whole point is to divert green matter from disposal through the county, which cost us millions of dollars a year. Am I correct on that?

Assistant Director Rodriguez: Yes, about \$1.2 million dollars.

Mayor Lago: Every year and its only getting worse, only getting worse. So, if we could somehow, someway divert from the county; number one, we'll recycle that, it won't go into the trash, which cost us a significant amount of money and it's also more sustainable because that can be reused into something which, again, could serve the community. So, I have faith that the county is going to do something, but I don't want to be on their timeline. I want to find out what Leon County their findings are, and I want to move forward with doing something, either with this company or another company. We just can't sit idly and wait for the county to come and provide us with guidance. They are not going to come, that's why I'm writing a letter to the county this week,
City Commission Meeting
January 24, 2023

saying I need your action on multiple fronts. We need to push the county. That's what I told the Mayor when I met with her. We need to have some sort of action so that we get some payback – how much do we pay the county every single year in taxes?

City Manager Iglesias: We pay them 32 percent of our tax bill of our taxes go to Dade County and 36 percent goes to the School Board.

Mayor Lago: And how much is that 32 percent? - \$100 million?

City Manager Iglesias: Probably – yes, over \$100 million; the School Board is 130.

Mayor Lago: So we have to be less dependent on the county, that's why we pick up our own garbage, our own recycling, we have our own police, own firefighters, they're the best. So, we do have a piece of land, we do have our Public Works Department, so let's find a solution. Let's not just say, we don't have the room, we do have the room, we can find it.

City Manager Iglesias: Mayor, I think our problem is that we do have the room except when there is a hurricane.

Mayor Lago: I know.

City Manager Iglesias: And then we are using every bit of that site; we also have a two-acre site that was two blocks away that's no longer going to be available. So we were looking at restoring that 1.6 acre so we could use that in lieu of the other one. We came very, very close when we had Hurricane Irma at 72 Avenue. We had the small area in Country Club Prado near 8th Street, and then we came very close to having to stop operations. So we were able to get that two-acre site and continue operations, we still came with two days of having all the sites filled, because the county did not open up a site for mulch, and we had to take it to Pompano. Fortunately, we got them to open 24/7, and were able to take those 100 yard trucks at night. So that's our issue. I'm hoping that if we work with – the county has a lot of properties that they could use and I'm hoping that if we could work with them and move this along, then we could use one of their properties that won't have that same effect on us. We can't lease that two-acre site this year. I think you remember what that 72nd Avenue looked like during Irma. We had every piece of that site in the back; we moved all our trucks out, and we came within two days of stopping operations, either that or go to Country Club Prado, go to Lincoln, or go to Granada Golf Course, which are...in case of a major hurricane.

Commissioner Cason: I'd like to get more information about this Leon County project, because it seems to me that, that or this other company, I haven't spoken to either of them, but I'd like to hear from them, but these are commercial operations, right, private companies presumably feel that the market will buy whatever it is, the ash they are going to produce from grinding up the green stuff in order to make some type of material that the market wants, is that correct?

Assistant Director Rodriguez: Yes. So this is a company that the way that they explained it to us would co-locate the equipment unto a facility, and so, by co-locate a city would identify a facility.

*City Commission Meeting
January 24, 2023*

And they would manage the entire operation and then it would reduce, the discussions that we had is that it would reduce our cost of disposal. So by our estimations and our initial conversation, they would save us approximately \$200,000 a year in disposal cost; and then, they would then take that product and sell it or use it whatever manner.

Commissioner Cason: What happens if the market decides they don't like their product or if the economy changes, they've got this ash that comes from grinding this stuff up or processing it, what happens then? It seems to me this – you really have to look carefully at the business model. This is very conceptual at this stage, right. Have they actually built anything, have they actually done it anywhere.

Assistant Director Rodriguez: My understanding is they have two pilots; I know that they're definitely doing one in Leon County and that's who we've been in communication with. I haven't researched further to find out the second state that they're working in.

Commissioner Cason: Are they actually taking the green stuff, producing this ash, selling it?

Assistant Director Rodriguez: I don't know what they're doing with the product, but I do know that Leon County is delivering to them their yard debris. Currently, the county's operation, they chip their yard debris. The company hasn't told us that its necessary to chip it, but that's Leon County's operation. So currently, Leon County is taking their yard debris to the facility and they are placing it into these containers and turning it into the bio-char. What's happening with the biochar at this moment, I'm not sure. I know that they've only been doing the Leon County pilot for about a month and-a-half.

Commissioner Cason: Do you know who they're selling it to? We have any information about that?

City Manager Iglesias: Commissioner Cason, ash is something that can be used in concrete, it lowers the cement ratio, helps the environment quite a bit from that perspective, so it's something that can be used for sidewalks, curbs and all kinds of concrete like that.

Mayor Lago: So Mayor, the point is, you bring up great points, but the need for concrete right now is immense and the fact that this aggregate would be much cheaper than other aggregates that are used to make concrete. So, there's always going to be a need for aggregates, especially now. If you look at yards, if you look at a yard of concrete right now, you're talking about \$150-\$160 a yard of concrete right now. It is through the roof, the cost right now. So, there will always be need for aggregates, that's why they are constantly dredging, they are dredging out there where white rock is. So, I'm not concerned about whether there's going to be a need or not. My issue is, trying to find a sustainable approach to not just dump this yard debris into an ever-growing landfill, which is never-ending. The landfill is just getting higher and higher and higher; and also, taking that \$200,000 a year, which is a pretty significant penny and say, okay, let's hire more police, let's hire more garbage individuals to pick up, let's refine our approach, let's pay down debt, whatever it may be. The status quo, in my opinion is not working. We cannot continue to allow what's happening here in this community. We have to attack the amount of landscaping debris that we're

*City Commission Meeting
January 24, 2023*

seeing. Let me ask you a question Paula. We've already gone through this before on the record, I'm going to put it on the record again, the second time I mention, we're not removing trash pits. Please, don't write about it, don't talk about it, don't spread rumors, don't do it. Yearly, give me an average of what our yard debris is going up percentage-wise.

Assistant Director Rodriguez: So we have actually maintained a tonnage of about 30,000 tons for the last few years. We had a slight increase to 31,000 tons, almost 32,000 in the Covid years, but that's come back down. So we're averaging again about 30,000 tons, we came slightly lower, I believe partially because some of the efforts that we've put in place, so the cardboard ordinance removing cardboard from the trash pits, as well as the increase monitoring of excess trash debris and billing that, that's created some self-policing on the part of the residents, but we have been maintaining about 30,000 tons.

Mayor Lago: When you look at our city, look at our city versus other cities, we have a lot more yard debris than any other city.

Assistant Director Rodriguez: We do have a significant percentage; the ratio would be higher for Coral Gables.

Mayor Lago: Even areas like Coconut Grove, let me tell you why that's happening and I'm going to put it on the record again, because I've shown the videos here. There's an extensive amount of illegal dumping that's happening here in the city. Our landscapers, I know nobody wants to believe it, we love our landscapers, they are great people, but at the end of the day, will dump their yard debris collected throughout Coral Gables, they'll dump it here in the city because its easy. It saves them money from having to go to the landfill, it also saves gas and in manpower, just by dumping here. So what I'm trying to do here is find a solution so that we can not have to pay the county to dispose of this yard debris and actually recycle it and make some money back. Anybody else has any other ideas, because I think the status quo is not working and by the way, just one last thing, something that we forget to mention, got to put it on the record. How are we doing year over year in regard to tipping fees from the county? This year, by the way, I promise you, I will be voting next year very differently than I voted this year, okay, and I think the Vice Mayor brought it up a very good point. I will be voting in favor of raising, of passing through, of passing through the yard debris cost increase from the county. This year we ate how much? - \$300,000.

City Manager Iglesias: Yes.

Mayor Lago: \$300,000 increase from the county. Next year they are going to increase garbage again, correct?

Assistant Director Rodriguez: Yes. So, our yard debris is primarily disposed at a Waste Management facility and that is one of the reasons that we're able to pay less, so we pay about \$44 a ton, as opposed to \$66 or \$80 a ton at the county. We do anticipate that both Waste Management and Miami-Dade County will continue to increase their rates this year. The solution of this recap is a very interesting system, and so, we are following the progress along with the pilot program, as well as discussions at Miami-Dade County is having, because they are also challenged with

*City Commission Meeting
January 24, 2023*

landfill, and so watching what the county is doing will help us to understand what we need to do in order to move forward as a city with our disposal costs. Now, there's a couple of...

Mayor Lago: Can I ask you a quick question. How much do we subsidize garbage, the city subsidize garbage from what the residents pay every year.

Assistant Director Rodriguez: I don't have that number with me, but if...

Mayor Lago: About \$3.5 million dollars, correct.

Assistant Director Rodriguez: Yes - \$2.8, I believe.

Mayor Lago: \$2.8 (million), \$2.8, thank you for that.

City Manager Iglesias: Its under 3.

Mayor Lago: So we can either continue to put our head in the sand like ostriches and avoid the problem that we're facing, we are talking about \$3 million dollars of overruns or we can just pass it on and give the true cost what it cost to pay for garbage here. That's \$3 million dollars that we're not addressing, and its only going to go up next year and continue to go up. So, if anybody has any solutions that are going to bring down prices and are going to be more sustainable, I'm all ears.

City Manager Iglesias: Mayor, just to clarify. Our current contract, we take garbage to Dade County because we have to because of the bond issue. Dade County can charge up to the CPI if the CPI is more than 4 or 5 percent, and they can charge, if the CPI is 8, for instance and they can charge that surcharge in the following year. So we're going to get hit with those CPI increases. We take trash and recycling to Waste Management. Recycling right now, we are under 10 percent contamination, so we don't have a tipping fee for recycling. The trash tipping fee is slightly above \$40, I think its \$48, \$47-something.

Assistant Director Rodriguez: \$44.

City Manager Iglesias: \$44 – and its almost \$70 for garbage to take to Dade County. We will get hit with increases next year, because whatever increase they couldn't have this year based on our contract with Dade County, they can take that CPI increase and increase for that portion that wasn't increased the following year. So, we will have increases for sure. However, we are trying to manage our waste as cheaply as possible by using the county for garbage, Waste Management or trash and for recycling. So, I think what we can do Mayor, is since they started this pilot program some time in mid-December, what we can do is look at it, manage it, look at what this pilot program produces, work it with DERM and all we need from Dade County is to help us a little bit with a piece of property, and they've got a lot of it, that we don't, and I can't see why we can't approach them. We can approach them Mayor, and say, we need your help, for everything we give you, give us back.

Mayor Lago: Listen, and I'm with you.
City Commission Meeting
January 24, 2023

City Manager Iglesias: 10,000 feet that's all we need.

Mayor Lago: I'm with you 110 percent.

Commissioner Cason: That sounds like the solution.

Mayor Lago: I'm with you. I'm with you. I just want to make sure that the county understands that we want to move forward. We want to be autonomous. We do things much better than the county does and we already spend a lot of money with very limited returns in regards to the county. This is not a jab at the county, its just the facts, the facts are there. I know that we're in the middle waiting for this response from Leon County. I would like to have, when do you think we'll have some sort of more tangible.

City Manager Iglesias: We can start looking for Dade County and work with recyclable, we'll be happy to manage the pilot program just give us a site that we can use. I'd like to get just a little more information, Mayor, just give us a few months to get some information from Leon County and make sure this thing is really truly has potential.

Mayor Lago: Agree.

City Manager Iglesias: If we feel it has potential, we can contact Dade County now. We need about half an acre, an acre.

Mayor Lago: Maybe we can buy something, if we see something that's worth it.

City Manager Iglesias: To make this work from a pilot program perspective that we can manage. If we manage it – what we need is for them to help us with a site because our concern is the fact that we're running out of land as far as getting a potential hurricane.

Mayor Lago: And by the way, this could be the wave of the future, because as waste disposal get more and more expensive, smaller cities that we're surrounded by may actually subcontract us to be able to not only be more sustainable, but also to have a significant cost savings in regards to the waste.

Commissioner Cason: Does the second company that you talked to have the same basic concept of what they do?

Mayor Lago: They do. They came to see me on Friday, visited me at open office hours.

Commissioner Anderson: They came and saw me at an earlier point. Our...is actually a commodity and we're wasting it. The second company's concept is they grind it up and they reuse it and sell it to the farmers, they resell it to the nurseries, they need potting soil and things of that nature and it can be made into that.

*City Commission Meeting
January 24, 2023*

Mayor Lago: We're just throwing it away; we're paying to throw it away.

Commissioner Anderson: My understanding is it takes less space, so I think we need to look at both of these things in tandem and if DERM is a problem with the other one, then maybe this is a better option.

City Manager Iglesias: We looked at these things, Commissioner, when we had the problem with Irma. The problem is that they are small producers; we have 30,000 tons of it, and so there is a lot of tonnage involved, and so, we could not find anybody in Dade County that would take the mulch because we just had too much of it, especially after a storm, but even when we don't have a storm its 30,000 tons, so its quite a bit, its quite a bit, and so there is no one that can really take that kind of volume.

Commissioner Anderson: Understand. This is new. I think staff needs to have time to look at both options, maybe both options need to be run, because there are some things that don't grind up well.

Vice Mayor Mena: I wouldn't foreclose any idea. I think I commend the Mayor for bringing up this idea. I think its innovative and God knows what else is out there. So anything that we think makes sense for us and that addresses the problems we know we have, I'm open.

Public Works Director Diaz: So the pilot program at Leon County is for six months with a three-month extension, that's what they have on the books right now.

City Manager Iglesias: We will monitor that and Vice Mayor, I think you are correct, we can use a hybrid program too.

Vice Mayor Mena: I would also have the vendors at the appropriate time come here and explain to us exactly how it works and we can ask them.

Commissioner Cason: I think it's a great thing to look at. We're not the only city that has this problem...there must be other solutions to find a way to take this commodity and make money off of it, to get rid of this particular problem we have. This sounds like really worth exploring. If it works and the volumes are right and there is no downside in terms of ash or pollution or that sort of thing.

City Manager Iglesias: Since they started their program mid-December, it could take two months to look at their program, they have a six-month program, two months to look at this program, come back and at the same time we can be looking towards Dade County to see if we can get a site, about an acre, half an acre, which I think they have a number of sites that we can potentially use, and we can come back to the Commission in two months with an evaluation of Leon County and also come back with some information as far as the assistance we get from Dade County for a site. We'll be happy to run the pilot program ourselves.

Commissioner Cason: You might also be able to find another city that would want to partner with us...

*City Commission Meeting
January 24, 2023*

Mayor Lago: Oh, there is. There's a bunch of cities that are going to do that.

Commissioner Cason: They have a lot of green matter they have the same problem.

Mayor Lago: And by the way, you have to truck this all the way to the facility, if you're on 72nd Avenue, a short hop and a skip, instead of driving and being even more efficient, being less efficient and really hurting the environment even more with more CO₂, a short drive. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir.

Mayor Lago: At the request of the Manager, can we please put this on the March agenda, whichever agenda the Manager would like. We are going to review to see what we can find in Dade County, we are going to review Leon County and the progress of that and I'd like to see a real report from Leon County, I'd like to see something – videos, how they're doing, maybe some staff member can go visit through the Manager, can go visit the actual facility and see it. I'll drive up there.

Public Works Director Diaz: And I believe...[Inaudible]

Mayor Lago: We're going to be there in two weeks, so I'll be up there probably in March again, advocating on behalf of the city.

City Manager Iglesias: We can have the company come here and present also.

Mayor Lago: Yes, you can have the company, they are represented by Senator Oscar____, he can come and speak, he's the one that met with us, so let's put it on the March agenda, we'll address these issues: the proposed land to house the project, an update from Leon County, actual tangible videos, more insight, and I'll take a visit up there on my own dime. I'll drive up there or I'll be up there advocating on behalf of the city multiple times during this Session. I'll make a stop to see it. Just give me the information and where I can do that, okay.

Assistant Director Rodriguez: Certainly.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

Assistant Director Rodriguez: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for the update.