

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item C
September 25, 2025
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago
Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson
Commissioner Melissa Castro
Commissioner Ariel Fernandez
Commissioner Richard D. Lara

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez
City Manager, Peter Iglesias
City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Jay Shehadeh
Katherine Shehadeh
Noel Cleland
Martha Schulman
Thomas Carney
Edward Daboub
Joseph Fadel
Maria Cruz
Mahmud Shihadeh
Jackson Holmes

Agenda Item C [Start: 9:57 a.m.]

Public Comment

Mayor Lago: Moving on to Public Comment. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes, Mr. Mayor. The first speaker this morning is Jay Shehadeh.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Mr. Shehadeh: Good morning, Commissioners. Thank you again for the time. My name is Jalal Shehadeh, I live at 1133 North Greenway Drive in the Meedy-Merrick House. I'm here to give comments about the Mayor's proposal to raise the Israeli flag, to only honor Israeli victims, and to ignore the over 60,000 Palestinians that have been slaughtered. I'm here to speak to you for a second time in two weeks, a totally unnecessary endeavor. I'm here to speak to you about a proposal that wasn't even written by the Mayor. I'm just going to quickly say, and a vote for this is an endorsement of genocide, it would be a public statement from this city that it differentiates among its residents based on their ethnic and religious background, and it would say that you don't actually care about the residents of this city. So please, don't do it.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir. I appreciate you being here.

Mr. Shehadeh: Okay.

City Clerk Urquia: Katherine Shehadeh.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Ms. Shehadeh: Good morning.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

City Clerk Urquia: Ma'am, can you please speak into one of the microphones?

Ms. Shehadeh: I live at 1133 North Greenway Drive. My name is Katherine Shehadeh. I just wanted to note how last time when this came up for a vote, with the exact same language that caused the community so much pain and division, which the Mayor now sponsored for a second time, despite dozens of emails, meetings, and calls for residents to reconsider. Here we are again. The last time we heard from the other side in support only from Javier Fernandez, the elected official, the supposedly anti-gun violence South Miami Mayor, who lauded Israel based on his recent sponsored trip to the genocidal state. Last week, the brave Ohio State Senator Beth Liston shared her personal account of participation in a sponsored trip to Israel, saying that she hoped to ask tough questions, and in preparation for the trip, she studied history books, news articles, publications, and what she decided was that she didn't just need to guard against propaganda. She said, "I was the propaganda on the sponsored trip. I did not want to be used as a tool in support of the Israeli government actions, and I canceled the trip. And that's really the point of these trips, isn't it? To capture public officials in the U.S. at all levels of government, from the federal judiciary all the way to state legislators and local commissioners, and officials who take part in these trips, they're then asked to go spread the message of the carefully manicured so-called democracy and equality of the state of Israel, where mixed religion marriages and same-sex marriages are not legal, where a nation-state law gives priority status to Jews over non-Jews, who make up 20% of the country's population, and that's not counting the West Bank and Gaza,

who are effectively controlled by Israel, but subjected to its brutal military law and occupation, people who do not have the benefit of civil law in this so-called democracy. These talking points and the people who come to our city to share them are paid propagandists and just know that your constituents see through this. We know better. We ask you to consider our words and the impact that this has on Coral Gables residents and Florida residents, like Mohammed Zahir Ibrahim, a boy and Florida resident that I emailed all of you about, who's currently being held hostage by Israel, one of hundreds of children and thousands of hostages who are currently being held against their will, indefinitely, without due process, the key marker of democracy. If you support victims and that's what you actually want to do here, do it in a way that does not promote genocide or racism and division in Coral Gables. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

City Clerk Urquia: Noel Cleland.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir.

Mr. Cleland: Good morning. Good morning, Mayor, Mayor, Commissioners. Thank you for allowing me to be here. My name is Noel Cleland. I live at 5990 Southwest 50th Street, and I wanted to start off by thanking you for acknowledging Mr. Merrick and his contribution to our city. I go to Coral Gables Congregational Church. It was the first public building in our city, and he's obviously had an important impact on our city, so thank you for that. I also wanted to acknowledge the difficult situation and the fact that you're willing to try to jump into the waters of controversial issues. That's not an easy thing to do, but, you know, sometimes it's a question of whether we want to address the color of the crosswalks, maybe we want to decide where to put bike lanes on Alhambra, maybe it's the impact of an incinerator on our community or transitioning away from fossil fuels. There's plenty of things that are important to our neighbors here, and it's the fact that you're willing to step up and try to make a decision about this is important, so I thank you for that. However, the issue with the flag over City Hall is the wrong issue to attack. There's a lot of people that appreciate it, but there's plenty of people that are not going to appreciate it, so it doesn't really serve a purpose of bringing people together, which I think is the intent. We all acknowledge October 7th was a horrific day, as it's just tragedy that sounds on par with 9-11, but the conflict didn't start on October 7th, and it didn't end on October 7th, so if we wanted to turn this into something more generic, maybe we need to just honor all the affected individuals of conflicts around the world, because it continues, and we haven't seen very much to stop that. So maybe reconsidering something a little more appropriate that would be more inclusive, I think, would be appropriate. And then lastly, in the spirit of trying to get involved in issues, I invite you to come out to Alligator Alcatraz on Sunday. Our Coral Gables Congregational Church is going to be leading a prayer vigil out there at 5 p.m., and we need more people to support the issue of unfair detentions. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir. Mr. Clerk?

City Clerk Urquia: Martha Schulman.

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

Ms. Schulman: Everyone, good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak. So, my name is Martha Schulman. I live at 851 Anastasia in Coral Gables. I'm also here to speak against item F-9, which is the proposal to raise the Israeli flag over the City of Coral Gables on October 7th. I'm speaking as a Coral Gables resident and as a member of the Jewish community. I assume that the people I'm speaking before today are all either Christians or non-believers, with very limited interactions with Jewish residents of this city. If I'm not mistaken, there is no official acknowledgment of Rosh Hashanah, which ended yesterday on the part of the city, and I believe only one Commissioner, thank you Commissioner Fernandez, posted a message wishing the Jewish residents of this community a Happy New Year on social media. So let me tell you a little bit about myself before you decide to dismiss my comments as coming from a bad Jew or a self-hating Jew or just the wrong kind of Jew by your non-Jewish judgment. I am Jewish by every measure of lineage and practice. My father's parents were brought to New York around 1900 as young children by parents who sought refuge from European anti-Semitism. My father is a Rabbi who was ordained in the Reform tradition in 1963. My mother's parents were both born to Jewish families who immigrated from Lithuania and the region once called Galicia on the Polish-Ukrainian border. They were sent to Texas in a period in the early 20th century when Jewish philanthropists feared that keeping too many Jews in New York would cause anti-Semitic backlash. My mother's family were distinguished Jewish institution builders in Texas, Rabbis, teachers, and synagogue presidents. Her great uncle founded the Campus Hillel organizations at both UT Austin and Texas A&M. Our families collectively continued to produce Rabbis, educators, and Jewish leaders with every new generation. My grandmother was the temple choir director, my cousin is also a Rabbi, and my own teenage daughter teaches Sunday school at the synagogue where we are dues-paying members. So as someone who cares about Israel and Judaism a lot, I find the proposal to raise the Israeli flag in Coral Gables to be an act of deeply offensive warmongering out of touch with the views of many in this community. This war, deeply unpopular both locally and globally, is tearing apart Jewish families, with some Jewish elders insisting that this is a war for survival, while many of their children and grandchildren tend to view the consensus in the international human rights community that this is a genocide, and a nearly completed one at that. As we saw recently in the Herald, this divide describes the family of county mayor Daniella Levine-Cava, who is in public disagreement with her own adult son. Who is his Commission to rub salt in our community's wounds, and to score a few political points, and with whom exactly? I don't know if any of you have traveled to Israel and Palestine. Oh, crap. I think my time is up. Okay, so please, Mayor Lago, keep the peace, leave the Israeli flag to fly over Israeli territory, and please honor the hostages and the events of October 7th if you wish, but please under your own flag, in your own city, not under the Israeli flag.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

Ms. Schulman: Do I actually have 19 seconds? No, I don't. Okay.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Thomas Carney.

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

Mr. Carney: Good morning, Mayor, Vice Mayor, Commissioners. My name is Tom Carney. I live at 824 Cortez Street, Coral Gables, and I'm here to speak in opposition to the resolution to raise the Israeli flag. It's my understanding that a foreign flag has never been raised at City Hall, and while the attacks, the unprovoked attacks by Hamas on October 7, 2023, were horrific, and the loss of over 1,200 individuals tragic, the number of deaths pales in comparison to the over 65,000 Palestinians, mostly civilians, who have been killed in Israel's brutal and indiscriminate retaliation. There are currently 17 wars being waged across the globe right now, eight major wars with the loss of over 10,000 people in the past year, and nine minor wars with between 1,000 and 10,000 casualties in the past year. I do not impugn the intent of the resolution to honor and commemorate the lost lives of the attack by Hamas. However, raising the flag of just one nation of the many nations who have lost innocent lives over the past year, the perception is far different and divisive, and I ask you not to raise the flag on October 7th. Thank you.

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

City Clerk Urquia: Jeanette Copeland. Edward Daboub.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir. Welcome back. Good to see you again.

Mr. Daboub: Good morning. Good morning. Thank you for having me. Edward Daboud. I reside at 2517 Granada Boulevard, and I'd like to introduce myself. I am of Palestinian descent, Roman Catholic. My family hails from Bethlehem. We ended up in Jamaica around the time Israel was created. I'll spare you the details, but we go back, as a Palestinian family, centuries. If you visit the Church of the Nativity, take a look, ask for the records of my family, you will see that we can trace every member of our family tree, going back centuries to the 1600s, and we can trace back even further than that. With that in mind, and perhaps because of my Catholic upbringing, I will tell you I strongly support honoring the victims of October 7th. Mr. Mayor, I shared this with you personally. I sincerely mean that, and I think that the intent is right. I think it's the right thing to do, but I think we can do the right thing in a way that brings the community together. We are indeed a diverse community, and it was decided at the last meeting, and it was well received that we want to find common ground on how to do this. It shouldn't be a question of if, it's just how, and I don't think you'll hear from anybody here today saying we shouldn't be doing this at all, and a vigil is the way to do it. That's how you honor victims. We also heard at the meeting that it's not a political thing, and if indeed that is the case, then we must hold a vigil, because a vigil is not political. Raising a flag is inherently political. There's a second point I want to make, and I

want to raise it because, Mr. Mayor, I believe you brought this resolution out of empathy for the Jewish lives that were lost, and I think lives were lost from over 50 countries, and drawing on that empathy, I want you to imagine if the roles were reversed. Imagine if the resolution you brought was to raise the Palestinian flag to honor only innocent Palestinian victims. How would members of our Jewish community feel? Would they be upset? Would they feel excluded? Yes, and yes, and they would be justified in feeling that way, and I would be here speaking on their behalf, just as I am here speaking on the behalf of the 60,000 Palestinians who were also killed. So, I will conclude by just saying let us be inclusive and not mistakenly make it a political thing. Thank you, Mr. Mayor. Thank you, everyone.

City Clerk Urquia: Joseph Fadel.

Mayor Lago: Joseph, good morning. Good to see you.

Mr. Fadel: It's always good to see the Commission together. We need more togetherness here. I don't think it's a good idea. I sent you an email. First, I think that it's a subject that is generally not within the purview of a municipality. It's something that the federal government handles foreign affairs. I hope those hostages are returned as soon as possible. I don't know when that's going to happen, they seem to be pawns in a political game. But I think something more, less political, less divisive in remembering these people, and also the other thousands of people that have died. I mean they cite this figure of 60,000, but those are direct deaths. Those are not indirect deaths. Maybe a vigil would be a good idea. Maybe a proclamation by the city would be a good idea. But I don't think raising a foreign flag on City Hall is a good idea. I think it only is going to further divide the community, and maybe even divide the Commission, which is the last thing we need. Anyway, that's all I have to say. Good luck with your decision.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for being here.

City Clerk Urquia: Maria Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: This is Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. I'm wearing a different hat, and I hate to say it, but I'm the bearer of bad news today, again. Here we go again. Today an upper management employee is recognized because she's resigning to pursue a better job. I do not believe in coincidences. This is an employee who failed to fulfill her job duties as stated in the Coral Gables' Rules and Regulations. This book, the Human Relations Director is responsible for the proper and efficient cooperation and administration of these personal rules and regulations right here. While she did not enforce the Rule 12.48, for example, there will be no payment, regardless of circumstances, for unused sick leave in a sick leave account at a time of separation for reasons other than death or retirement. So, in fact, in this case, the employee was paid for their unused sick days by the actions of those following orders. Payroll was submitted as if he were still working for the city when he had already moved to Texas. The investigatory report of the investigation conducted not by Internal Affairs or any other external or internal body, not associated with the HR Department, but by the same people who were responsible to enforce the

rules and failed to do so. Nowhere in that report is there any mention of how the \$6,257.44 wrongfully paid will be paid back. There are no plans for restitution, and the people identified as being involved were offered resignation in lieu of termination. Of course, those who investigated were not identified as having any responsibility in what happened. Perhaps resigning is the best move for the director, instead of waiting for the results of a real investigation. Anyone who would like to confirm what I have brought up, as well as the other cases that I'm working on, just have to contact me. I will be happy to share the information. Some people talk of fiscal responsibility and transparency. As soon as I become aware of something, I act on it. I do not try to cover it up. And this is a shame, another scandal, another cover-up. And you know what? Maybe the director, before she leaves, she should look into Xavier Williams. He's worse than this case. He got paid for months of days that he didn't even was entitled to. This is a shame.

City Clerk Urquia: Mahmud Shihadeh.

Mayor Lago: Can you give me one second?

City Clerk Urquia: Yes, sir.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Manager, would you like to respond?

City Manager Iglesias: Yes, Mayor, thank you. This happened when there was a potential transition for that department to be its own department, which has been canceled. We don't need three additional departments, and the HR Director had no responsibility in this at all. It's something that was submitted. And this may be an ongoing issue, so I would like to maybe stop it at this point, because we may have some legal issues and some other things happening now. We will try to recover.

Mayor Lago: Okay. When you say we will try to recover, what do you mean by that?

City Manager Iglesias: We will be contacting that person to attempt to recover. We're working on these legal issues now. So that's why I would rather not comment on everything that we're going to be doing.

Mayor Lago: So, Madam City Attorney, would you like to provide some color?

City Attorney Suarez: Thank you, Mayor. Thank you, Mr. Manager. I think, as the Manager mentioned, there will be foreseeable, perhaps legal action or legal steps taken by the city. There's also potential administrative matters that are being handled. So, at this time, I don't think it would be prudent to have discussions publicly about this matter.

Mayor Lago: I just want to put something on the record, because as the Herald sits next to the individual who just spoke, you have to understand people have political agendas and axe to grind. It's very easy to talk about somebody who's not on this dais or not in front of us at the present moment. Everything is politically motivated, especially with the individual to your right.

So, understand that we have a responsibility to uphold a process and we have to be very careful and thoughtful to ensure that we do not put ourselves, the city, the residents, and the employees, in a position of exposure that is not appropriate. The individual to your right does not have that responsibility.

City Manager Iglesias: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Yes, sir.

City Manager Iglesias: I would like to make it perfectly clear. The HR Director acted very responsibly. She had absolutely no issue in this, zero. And what she did is bring it up and act very responsibly, and we acted immediately in response to it and appropriately. But she had absolutely nothing to do with this and to say so is just completely incorrect.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. Mr. Clerk, excuse me, I wanted to clear the air and make sure we put everything on the record.

City Clerk Urquia: Mahmud Shihadeh.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir. Thank you for being here.

Mr. Shihadeh: Good morning. My name is Mahmoud Shahad, 522 Alhambra Circle. I was here a couple weeks back, so I'm just here to reiterate literally the same thing, that I oppose raising the Israeli flag at City Hall. Again, only the flags right behind you should be raised at City Hall. And as a matter of fact, something I forgot to mention, last time I was born in Venezuela, for anything, God forbid, that would happen or is happening, if that flag were to be proposed to be raised, I would still be against it. Because for 100 years, this year marks 100 years of Coral Gables history, no foreign flag has been raised. Why today? That's all I have to say.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

City Clerk Urquia: Jackson Holmes.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir.

Mr. Holmes: Thank you very much. Jackson Holmes. I live at 35 Sedonia Avenue here in Coral Gables. I want to speak out in favor of the mobility hub and help, maybe all of us can start thinking about ways to fund it. It is expensive. It's a necessity. And I said to myself, do I have anything constructive new to say, because I've already spoken out in favor of this before. I'm thinking that maybe we could get with the Asset Manager in the Development Department's office. I met her the other day, and their responsibility is to look over all of the city's considerable assets. I think she told me there's, let's just say, 60 to 70 properties. I probably have that wrong. It's probably 90 or whatever. But if we need to come up with upwards of \$60 million

dollars, I think it's actually less, I was told 52, then there are ways to do it. And she would be the person to find out, maybe there's a less valuable property that we have, less needed property that we could sell to raise the money. And I'll go ahead and wind this up. I still got a minute and 30 seconds. Two experiences of my own. Number one, years ago, back in 1998 or 99, my family had enough property to develop. We had the footprint of 200 front feet. I met with the Allen Morris Company, and what they told me was because we're bonding, right? And they said, look, let us tell you a little secret here. We hate parking because we lose money on parking. We make money on non-parking, and we're in business to make money. So, developers really don't like parking, because it's a money loser. The second thing, which is kind of personal, but I owe it to you, so you at least understand. A couple of years ago, I said to my tenant, you know, that there's some turmoil about parking and this and that. And he said, well, then count us out. We're not going to renew the lease. And I said, but I need you to renew the lease. That's my source of income. And of course, that's embarrassing for me to tell you that. But on the other hand, how are you going to know if I don't tell you, right? And then I said, well, wait a second. No, we got the Mobility Hub coming. I said, I'll prove it to you. So don't worry. We'll have parking. We'll have a giant parking behind us. And so, I'm running out of time, but we've got to get our act together. Let's get with the Asset Manager and come up with the money.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.

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

Mayor Lago: All right, Mr. Clerk. Thank you very much. We can close the public comment.