

City of Coral Gables
Special City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item B-6
May 6, 2025
City Hall Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Melissa Castro (Absent)

Commissioner Ariel Fernandez

Commissioner Richard D. Lara

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Alberto Parjus

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Deputy City Attorney, Stephanie Throckmorton

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz

Jackson Rip Holmes

Agenda Item B-6 [10:18 a.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission calling a Special Election on the proposed ballot question and City Charter Amendment to be held on November 3, 2026; providing for submission to the electors for approval or disapproval of a ballot question asking whether the City Charter should be amended to require an Inspector General with certain powers (including the power to subpoena witnesses) either by the Miami-Dade County Inspector General or other City-Appointed Inspector General, provided that such office's appointment term functions, and powers shall be further established by ordinance; providing for requisite ballot language; providing for procedures for balloting; providing for notice; providing for inclusion in the City Charter; providing for related matters; providing for an effective date. (Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: B-6.

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City Attorney Suarez: B-6 is a Resolution of the City Commission calling a Special Election on the proposed ballot question and City Charter Amendment to be held on November 3, 2026; providing for submission to the electors for approval or disapproval of a ballot question asking whether the City Charter should be amended to require an Inspector General with certain powers (including the power to subpoena witnesses) either by the Miami-Dade County Inspector General or other City-Appointed Inspector General, provided that such office's appointment term functions, and powers shall be further established by ordinance; providing for requisite ballot language; providing for procedures for balloting; providing for notice; providing for inclusion in the City Charter; providing for related matters; providing for an effective date.

Mayor Lago: Madam City Attorney.

Deputy City Attorney Throckmorton: Thank you again, Mr. Mayor, Vice Mayor, Commissioners. This also calls for a Special Election question to be put forward to the voters on November 3, 2026. This is the same language that we have previously considered, this body has previously considered, and I think it may be helpful if I just read the ballot question, but this resolution itself does call for all the details of the notice, etc., for the Special Election. So the question would be, "Shall the City Charter be amended to require a contract with Miami-Dade County Inspector General to provide Inspector General services to the city or appointment of a City Inspector General to investigate, audit, and oversee municipal matters in order to identify efficiencies and investigate and prevent fraud, waste, mismanagement and abuse of power, and to subpoena witnesses and require production of documents and his appointment, term, functions and powers shall be established by ordinance." As you can see from that language, the question itself is rather broad. An ordinance would be required to set forth all the details of a City Inspector General's appointment term, budget, etc.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. Mr. Clerk, public comment.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes, Mr. Mayor. First speaker, Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. Actually, I have a question, because we keep talking about a Special Election on November 3, 2026, because that's the General Election, I would assume for Representatives, Senators, etc., so we think that we're going to have a lot of people going to vote, but on the other hand we also are trying to move the election of the Commissioners for that date. So, my question is, if changing the Commission elections to that date doesn't go through when the referendum or whatever the vote is put up, are we still going to do this on that date? That's the question.

Mayor Lago: Please complete your statement.

Mrs. Cruz: Well, I need an answer before I can tell you.

Mayor Lago: There is no back and forth between the Commission and the speaker.

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Mrs. Cruz: Okay. Not even the attorney can answer what it means?

Mayor Lago: You can have that conversation after with the attorney. Please keep going.

Mayor Lago: Okay. So, once again, let's try to confuse the voters. Let's keep talking about 101 percent and let's try to make sure that all the PACs can put out misinformation so you can get it through. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Jackson Holmes.

Mr. Holmes: I apologize for speaking so much today. I do want to explain that I'm trying to be substitute for Melissa Castro who's unavailable. She and I have been fairly close recently. Please don't think that I'm trying to make people mad. I do support this item. This is great and we need this. We've made it for a time, and I like the idea of having Miami-Dade County Inspector General, if need be, take up the reigns, but we need it. So, it's great. The best thing happen today.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

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

Maor Lago: I'll entertain a motion.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'll move it, and I did pass out to you possible language for your consideration.

Mayor Lago: Let me get a second and we'll go through.

Commissioner Fernandez: I'll second.

Mayor Lago: Madam Vice Mayor, the floor is yours.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Apologize. I was counting words earlier on my proposed language and sorry, my brain was in Inspector General mode because we are limited to 75 words exactly on a ballot language, and this is 70 words. I tried to fit three options into the prior language so that if we wanted to utilize and bring down cost by using a private entity, as opposed to having a permanent position within the city that the voters could choose that, or we would have the flexibility for doing that. I couldn't fit it in 75 words. So, here's another possibility. Essentially what it does, you have the same powers for the Inspector General, and it allows a contract with Miami-Dade County or private entity to provide Inspector General services as needed, so that we are not having a constant budgetary draw for this item. We can discuss more in the future, my thoughts on how we engage an Inspector General, because we have processes like this, even in the Florida Bar, where a complaint is just not somebody's rumor, it's a sworn affidavit under oath with penalties of perjury, things of that nature, because we don't want to be forced to chase things

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that are non-existent. So, that's the nature of the language. I'd like to hear you all's comments. I'm sorry I didn't have this a little earlier for you, but that's the best we could do.

City Attorney Suarez: I think if you're talking about the language, you just passed out to your colleagues.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes.

City Attorney Suarez: I think it would be helpful if you could read it into the record so that the public knows what your proposed revision is.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Happy to do that. Shall the City Charter be amended to authorize a contract with Miami-Dade County or a private entity to provide Inspector General services, as needed, to the city to investigate, audit and oversee municipal matters, to identify efficiencies and investigate and prevent fraud, waste, mismanagement, and abuse of power, and who can subpoena witnesses and require production of documents and who's appointment, term, functions and powers shall be established by ordinance. The material changes in this, the City Attorney added the word, authorized, in the first line; after the words Miami-Dade County, I added, or a private entity; provide Inspector General services as needed, and I deleted the language with having a permanent office within the City of Coral Gables to address the cost concerns.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner Lara.

Commissioner Lara: Thank you very much, Mr. Mayor, for bringing this item and Vice Mayor, as amended, and I'd like my comments to be focused on your amendment as well. I think it's important for the residents to understand, if I can be given just a moment, Mr. Mayor, context, right. I believe this discussion regarding the Inspector General all comes from the baseless, theatrical, bombastic comment made during a Commission meeting by former Commissioner Kirk Menendez, when he said, and I'll try and quote by memory that the City of Coral Gables Commission is adrift in a cesspool of corruption and that he, Mr. Menendez, was going to lead his beloved city out of the muck into safe harbor. When I heard that statement made, I couldn't believe my ears, because there was no context for why it was made, no identification of a particular item or instance of corruption, let alone that the city is adrift in a cesspool of corruption, and it put both this Commission, this city, and if I may say, the Mayor, unfairly, in a negative light and as the Vice Mayor will know very well, its decidedly unfair place to be to try and prove a negative. So this put us into, the Commission into a difficult place, because then, to me, that seems at best it was political grandstanding, at worst, it appeared to me to be a prepared political statement read to provide some sort of basis for the hiring immediately afterwards of a City Manager that had never undergone a formal interview with this body, had no identifiable prior experience in public works administration, indeed had been retired for almost a decade and whose prior background was in law enforcement. Hence my concern the statement was made for political expedient purposes, which does not have a place on this body. So now we are two years on, and this question arises of whether it should be put to referendum process, and I'm very pleased, Vice Mayor that you are amendment reads the way that it does, because what it does is, it provides the city with the

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mechanism, if this passed, right, to immediately and of course it depends on the ordinance language, make use of an Inspector General, whether with the City of Miami or a private entity, to be able to quickly address any such serious allegations that are well supported, not meaner allegation or inuendo, but something that would be substantiated by way of affidavit, for example. This is important, not only to actually root out and address any actual corruption, but also to maintain transparency and maintain the public trust in the Commission, to have this power available to us. In any event, I believe it's also a very good way of maintaining a handle on the cost that otherwise would have been associated, if for example, a permanent office of Inspector General was to be pursued for a city of our size. I think in my view, and I've only been on the job for a week, we have a superior legal team, police team, finance team, third party auditors, human resources team, and I've never heard before the need for an Inspector General or a scenario where one would be needed before former Commissioner Menendez statement was made, nor have I heard of any pursuit by him or any other Commission member of there being anything behind that statement in the ensuing year or so, including the campaign that he ran where among other things he said that the city has never been in better shape. So, with that long-winded, but I think it's important for the citizens, the residents of Coral Gables, to understand a bit of the history, I'm quite supportive of the agenda item, as amended.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner Fernandez.

Commissioner Fernandez: I agree. I think the amendment makes it a lot cleaner. The original language is a little more difficult to understand, I think for residents. I agree with Commissioner Lara. I think this also – the number one concern that I've heard over the last couple of years about an office of an Inspector General is the associate cost that would bring the city, if one was created internally. I think your amended language does address that point, so that it is not an issue going forward. That's why I'm supportive of this item.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. How did we get here? Why are we here today? I have to admit that the Vice Mayor and Commissioner Lara's comments are dead on. Beautiful, eloquent and to the point. Let me give you some background. I always welcome people coming to their senses, but I want to give you some background. Legistar File # 24-7740, Commissioner Fernandez is well aware of that, because that was when the Vice Mayor and myself presented an Office of the Inspector General, whether it be an actual office or we have an outside consultant. The only two votes in favor were myself and the Vice Mayor. Commissioner Fernandez, Commissioner Castro, and then Commissioner Menendez voted against. I proceeded to have our City Attorney, who's here, have a conversation to see if we can borrow, use the county Inspector General to reduce costs, but that was also not approved. This is political grandstanding at its finest. This is an effort to destroy my reputation. I knocked on doors and people accused me of corruption as a result of this. No matter how much I explained, Commissioner Fernandez' efforts to stop the Inspector General by the vote certain people did not believe it. As a professional, with a lot of employees that depend on me, these are the types of situations that cost me business, and at the end of the day hurt my family. I wholeheartedly agree with the cost, in an effort, just like we are moving the elections will save a few hundred thousand dollars. I agree with the Vice Mayor's amendment. We can't speak as a result of Sunshine, that's why we use this moment. I made a very clear statement, and I said, you

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cannot place a cost on rooting out corruption, no cost, but you're fighting ghosts when somebody says that you're corrupt. Let us always remember and the people were clear, when they voted and people say that people are not educated and we knocked on doors they said, November elections, Inspector General, and stop the politics. We need a voice of reason on the Commission, and we need to return to civility. So, I'm excited that Commissioner Fernandez is stopping the politics, but let us never forget who ran Commissioner Menendez' campaign, which smeared my family and smeared employees. Call a question.

Commissioner Fernandez: Point of order.

Mayor Lago: Call a question.

Commissioner Fernandez: Point of order. I...

Mayor Lago: Madam City Attorney.

Commissioner Fernandez: You are making an accusation that's baseless. I did not run Commissioner Menendez' campaign.

Mayor Lago: Madam City Attorney.

City Attorney Suarez: So that isn't a point of order. The point of order is a procedural issue and so...

Mayor Lago: I call the question, Mr. Clerk.

Commissioner Lara: Yes, as amended.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes, as amended.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes, as amended.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

(Vote: 4-0)

Mayor Lago: Moving onto item B-7. Thank you very much.

Deputy City Attorney Throckmorton: Mayor, just to clarify that there will be a small change to Exhibit 1 of the resolution with the amended language, so I just want to clarify that the City Attorney will amend that proposed Charter language to comport with the approved amended language.

Mayor Lago: Madam Vice Mayor.

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Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes.

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