

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting**  
**Agenda Item 2-2**  
**October 26, 2021**  
**City Commission Chambers**  
**405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL**

**City Commission**

**Mayor Vince Lago**

**Vice Mayor Michael Mena**

**Commissioner Rhonda Anderson**

**Commissioner Jorge Fors**

**Commissioner Kirk Menendez**

**City Staff**

**City Manager, Peter Iglesias**

**City Attorney, Miriam Ramos**

**City Clerk, Billy Urquia**

**Assistant City Attorney and Governmental Affairs, Naomi Levi-Garcia**

**Public Speaker(s)**

**Ariel Fernandez, Chair, SCRC**

**Samuel Joseph**

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Agenda Item 2-2 [Start: 9:47 a.m.]

A Resolution of the School Community Relations Committee urging the City Commission to request that the Miami-Dade County School Board include the entire City in a single school district.

Mayor Lago: Let's move onto item 2-2.

City Attorney Ramos: 2-2 is a Resolution of the School Community Relations Committee urging the City Commission to request that the Miami-Dade County School Board include the entire City in a single school district.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Good morning, Mayor and Commissioners, Naomi Levi-Garcia, Assistant City Attorney and Intergovernmental Affairs Manager. While the Chair is attempting to unmute, I'll just give you a little bit of context. This came up because the school district is in the process of redistricting. The vast majority of the City of Coral Gables falls within District 6. There is a small corner in the northwest that falls within District 8, and then the community of Pine Bay Estates falls within District 9. So, the committee felt that it would be beneficial for the city, for the entire

city to fall within a single district so that the community could have equal representation across the board.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Garcia are there any other communities that have one member representing them on the School Board that you're aware of?

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Not that I'm aware of. I'm sure the very small cities likely fall within a single district.

Mayor Lago: My only concern with that is, and I have no issues with the resolution is, that would push out potentially one of our School Board members that lives in the city.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: So according to Florida Statute, you know, if an incumbent gets displaced because of a change in district, that person is permitted to serve out their term, but yes, in a subsequent election that person would no longer represent the city.

Vice Mayor Mena: Do we know that the second person lives in the city?

Mayor Lago: I know.

Vice Mayor Mena: Okay.

Chair Fernandez: They do.

Mayor Lago: And I know that because I've walked door-to-door and I knocked on their door in the North Gables. That was my only concern as an elected official, I think that kind of a courtesy.

Vice Mayor Mena: My only concern, because I think this is a logical idea and I appreciate what the proposal is. My only other concern is that I just don't know, we may have residents who feel that this board member is fantastic and really represents their needs and is being very responsive to their needs as their current, and I wouldn't want to without sort of assessing what her constituents think about this, make a decision just because it sort of makes logical sense from a districting perspective. Ideally, I think it would be nice to have one person for the whole city, again, I understand that, just want to be careful because there is somebody currently occupying that seat, that's all.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Correct. Yes.

Vice Mayor Mena: I think the board is able to, the Chair...

Commissioner Menendez: I'd like to hear from the Chair.

Chair Fernandez: I am here. Can you hear me now?

Mayor Lago: Mr. Chair, the floor is yours, good morning.

Chair Fernandez: Thank you very much. Sorry about the technical difficulties before. So, this issue came up at the last SCRC meeting. Redistricting has already started for Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the maps are put out for public comment as of October 15<sup>th</sup>. We have had issues communicating with that School Board member for a while, but I don't think that this issue is really about the School Board member that represent that small portion of the city. I think its about ensuring that Coral Gables has representation, not only for the residents, but the residents represented in the schools. That School Board member does not represent a single school within Coral Gables feeder pattern. All those schools are encompassed into the district that is represented by School Board Member Rojas, which encompasses the almost the entirety of Coral Gables. There are two pockets just west of Old Cutler down south that are being excluded from this district. I would say there is probably no more than 20 or 30 residents that live in those two pockets; and then you have the larger portion which is just in the northwest portion of the city, which would be north of Alhambra between 57<sup>th</sup> Avenue and approximately Cortez. So that's the area that we are talking about right now. And again, the reason this came up, we have had numerous issues that the Commission has been involved in, School Board Member Rojas has been involved in finding solutions and I think that our city is best represented with one representative that encompasses the entire city. And I think that was the unanimous consensus of the SCRC, and we have members in the SCRC, at least three of us live in that zone which is what I would consider the disenfranchised zone right now. And as far as the question that was asked, there are other municipalities that are entirely encompassed in specific districts. In fact, in Professor Dario Moreno's presentation to the School Board with the new district map recommendations, he led off each district by saying, this city or this municipality or this area is now entirely encompassed in this district. I just wanted to give you some background as to why this came up.

Commissioner Menendez: For me to better understand and I understand my colleague's position and it makes a lot of sense, we need to know the consequences of going in one direction versus the other. But is there a real-life example where having two School Board members for the city where that created conflicting resolutions or – I'm just trying to get my arms around this issue. How is it a problem? Is there a real-world example where something happened?

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Sure. I can answer that question based on my perception of what the board members think, but I don't know if perhaps you want to hear directly from the Chair on that.

Vice Mayor Mena: We can hear from both of you.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: What I think the issue is, is that because the board members who don't represent a majority of the city do not have schools within that segment of the city that they do represent. There is kind of a lack of engagement, because usually board members are travelling to a specific part of their district because there are schools, there are teachers, there are parents who are their constituents that they need to serve, and if that's not the case then it's difficult to get access and to get engagement from those individuals.

Vice Mayor Mena: Are the individuals...

Chair Fernandez: And adding to that, if I can, sorry about that. I just wanted to add, part of that the change to that district in particular, that district has been expanded west and further south out into almost the Everglades.

Vice Mayor Mena: But the residents that live in this district do fall within the district of schools that are in the city?

Ms. Levi-Garcia: If they attend a public school in the district.

Vice Mayor Mena: Right, that's what we're talking about, right.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Yes. So, it may not be a public school in the Gables, but they attend a public school elsewhere.

Vice Mayor Mena: Are any of the people in her district zoned for schools that are in the Gables, whether or not that school itself is within her district?

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Yes.

Vice Mayor Mena: You understand what I'm saying?

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Yes. Yes. They are.

Vice Mayor Mena: Right.

Mayor Lago: What are you thinking about?

Vice Mayor Mena: I just have a tough time saying that these people are disenfranchised. It sounds like there's an issue with the individual who is serving in that district being responsive to these individuals in her district. That's the complaint, whether or not that's true, I don't know. For example, I presume that if Commissioner Rojas was in that district, she would probably visit these other schools and be responsive because that's who she is, right. She's very responsive. This is a tough one. And by the way, I can also see some logic in if the city really needs something for schools, doesn't having two people on the board that technically respond to Coral Gables voters, hypothetically a better situation than one?

Ms. Levi-Garcia: If there are city issues, yes.

Vice Mayor Mena: So, these are the issues. Again, I do understand the logic and convenience of having one person. I don't think this is a crazy idea in any way, but I do think it's a complicated decision to make.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: And just so you have all of the information. The public workshops continue through the end of the week, so if individuals want to take the initiative and express their personal concerns with any particular representative there still is an opportunity to do that. It doesn't necessarily need to go through the city or the City Commission.

Vice Mayor Mena: Is Commissioner Rojas pushing for this?

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Not that I'm aware.

Vice Mayor Mena: Does she want this in her district?

Ms. Levi-Garcia: I don't think we've asked that question.

Vice Mayor Mena: Do we know what she thinks? – because that's another factor, right.

Mayor Lago: We attended the last School Community Relations Committee; we are trying to get to every single board. We've gone to about a handful already, and I think its an opportunity to really kind of put our thumbprint and really listen in regard to what the boards are trying to achieve and their involvement, and I went to this board last week, very engaged, very robust discussion on multiple fronts. Why don't we go back with Naomi's help, and we have a conversation to really understand this, because what I'm most nervous about is stepping on somebody's toes and then going back to the Vice Mayor's comments, is two better than one. Again, I speak to School Board Member Rojas weekly. She's calling me, texting me, sending me e-mails. I also have a very good relationship with Marta Perez also, in the sense, if I needed something I can call her. So, I just want to make sure that we are careful and that if we do move on this item that we don't put ourselves in a position as a city that we could box ourselves in. Naomi, can we have a discussion offline and maybe we can have another conversation through the Manager with the members of this committee to really understand what are the pros and cons in regard to moving in this direction.

Vice Mayor Mena: It may also be regardless of what decision is made on this, there may be an opportunity to reach out to Mrs. Perez' office and say look, this is the City of Coral Gables School Community Relations Committee, and they are so disappointed with the responsiveness they are getting, frankly. That this is the ask. It's a pretty strong ask, and I would think that her office would say, probably not be too happy about that and would want – maybe it would improve the level of engagement. It might be an opportunity to improve that regardless of what we do on this, because frankly, even if we do something on this, they may or may not change the district. She may still be the representative.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: It's a major change, right, because she lives in that area.

Vice Mayor Mena: Bottom line, I think its an opportunity to get her engaged regardless, and I'm hopeful that maybe she would like to attend the next meeting of the School Community Relations Committee of Coral Gables and start having a dialogue and hopefully getting to a place where maybe this committee feels like, now she's engaged and maybe this isn't necessary anymore. So, I don't know who the right person is, Naomi, if its you or somebody on staff that deals with them more regularly, but let's reach out to her office and have a discussion about this.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Sure. We can do that.

Mayor Lago: If I may just add to your comments. At the last committee meeting which I attended, like always that I'm aware of, School Board Member Rojas was in attendance also virtually, so she makes her presence known, and also another issue that goes to the Vice Mayor's comments. This Commission is going to be a lot more active in regard to engaging. Case in point, Tallahassee. We are not going to take one trip and leave it up to chance. We are doing the leg work before session even starts, three months before. We are going to have multiple trips there to make sure when session starts, we are not behind the 8 ball. I also met with Dr. Cavallo last week and I had a breakfast with him after the committee meeting, because there are certain issues that I want to see addressed in regard to the School Board and I want to make sure that you understand that we support him and that we're here to work collaboratively. So, we are going to take a more hands-on approach in regard to different forms of leadership here in Miami-Dade County and throughout the State of Florida, and if I can at the federal level, to ensure that our residents are represented to the best of our ability. So, I want to maybe, have that conversation, like the Vice Mayor was saying. Let's have a conversation. Maybe it's time to invite Dr. Perez to come to one of these committee meetings, so she can understand what this board is requesting and what their needs are. You and I can have a discussion offline with the Manager, to see what's the best way to navigate these waters, because the last thing I want to do is step on anybody's toes, right now we have two representatives who could potentially be advocating on behalf of all the kids in our schools.

City Manager Iglesias: Mayor, Vice Mayor, we can facilitate that.

Mayor Lago: Just want to be careful. Thank you.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: I'd also like to thank the Chair.

City Clerk Urquia: Before you move forward, we have Sam Joseph who also wanted to make a comment on this.

Mayor Lago: Okay. I just want to thank the Chair for bringing this to our attention, obviously, and also his commitment in regard to the Chair of the committee. It's a thankless job, everybody who serves on 30 boards, and I want to thank you for being so diligent and active in representing this community.

Vice Mayor Mena: And I'm glad the committee brought it up, because it's important regardless of what direction we go, we should address the issue one way or another.

Commissioner Anderson: Facilitate the communication.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Joseph the floor is yours. Good morning.

Mr. Fernandez: And I want to thank the Commission because the Commission has done a great job of addressing a lot of the needs of the School Community Relations Committee has brought up, and you guys have taken initiative to ensure that all the needs that we brought to your attention are addressed. So, we appreciate that from our end as well.

Mayor Lago: Thank you sir. Mr. Sam Joseph, the floor is yours.

Mr. Joseph: Thank you very much. Hello, can you hear me?

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Mr. Joseph: Sorry about that Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Mr. Joseph: Thank you very much. Good morning. I wanted to echo what the Chair said. We appreciate the Commission taking seriously all of our proposals that we sent in. I did want to make a couple of comments since I was at another meeting, and I did hear a little bit of the discussion. First of all, you should know the city is not represented by two School Board members. Although that carveout is made for the North Gables, Dr. Perez does not represent any of the schools that in the Gables proper or schools with Coral Gables residents attending. Those are all covered by Mari Tere Rojas. Ms. Perez was invited when the committee was restructured back in 2015 to come to the meetings and has not come, and I understand why she doesn't. There really isn't anything in her portfolio as far as the Gables and Gables schools. Although the board as-a-whole will tell you that although they are separated in districts, they vote for all the children's interest as-a-whole, but to say that the city is represented by two School Board members is really not accurate in that she does not hold any portfolio assets in the Coral Gables area. I live in that North Gables area and Dr. Perez is my School Board member by district, but as I said to her when she's knocked on my door, she doesn't serve my interest or my child's interest or school's interest, because her schools are out west. And so, most of my dealings and most of Coral Gables families' dealings are with Mari Tere Rojas. I understand that the member lives in the area, but this is, and I have to say it, this is an example of gerrymandering, because it is a small, tiny carveout for the member who lives in the area. But again, it doesn't serve the constituent needs of the North Gables.

Vice Mayor Mena: Mr. Joseph, I asked Naomi the question earlier and again, I want to be clear, in an ideal world I sort of reject the notion that she doesn't represent, I understand that none of the schools in Coral Gables are in her district, but the people in her district who live in Coral Gables some of them, I believe, attend the schools that are located in Coral Gables. So, she does represent those voters, those voters don't have the option to vote for Ms. Rojas or not vote for Ms. Rojas, they do vote for Dr. Perez. So, in an ideal world, both she and Commissioner Rojas would be representing the interest of those people, because those people attend the school in Commissioner Rojas' district and live in Dr. Perez' district.

Mr. Joseph: In theory, Commissioner, yes in theory, but that's not at all how it works out. And I'll tell you again, I live in the area, I live about three blocks away from Ms. Perez and she, every election season knocks on my door and ask for my support, and as I tell her every season, its nothing personal, but the School Board member I support is the one who takes care of the issues for my daughter at Coral Gables Preparatory Academy, Ms. Rojas.

Vice Mayor Mena: But she has the ability – but that sounds like a criticism of the individual, right.

Mr. Joseph: No, no, no, no.

Vice Mayor Mena: She has the option and the ability as your School Board representative to fight for things at Coral Gables Elementary where your child who lives in her district attends, right.

Mr. Joseph: Philosophically all the School Board members do, but they are also assigned schools, specific schools, and so literally, if I have an issue at Coral Gables Prep after going through the Principal and the Region, the School Board member for that school, Ms. Rojas, is the person that you deal with. As a constituent, I don't and can't go to Ms. Perez for that, because again, I'm not attending a school at which she is in charge of. So, I mean its technical, but again, it has nothing to do with the person, except that the person lives in the area of which has been carved out.

Vice Mayor Mena: Was the area, I'm sorry, I don't want to belabor this, I understand all your points and they are all very fair. Was the area in question redrawn, do you know when it was redrawn?

Mr. Joseph: It hasn't been redrawn since she's been on the board and that's over 25 years.

Vice Mayor Mena: Right – but was it – I don't want to get too far into the weeds, but I guess the question was, did that district preexist her time as the elected representative?

Mr. Joseph: That I don't know, because it's been so long, I couldn't tell you.

Vice Mayor Mena: Okay. Understood. Look, I think again, I understand the points you're making, I think its fair. We should have a conversation with them. Listen, maybe Dr. Perez, well she is not going to be supportive of this, obviously, because it would be a problem for her as the member of the committee. Okay, let's continue this discussion. Thanks for your insight, Mr. Joseph, as always and let's continue this discussion and see what we can do.

Mayor Lago: Thank you Vice Mayor. Commissioner Menendez please.

Commissioner Menendez: Since this seems to be an issue that's important to a lot of people and obviously, like we've discussed, we need to flesh it out and gather a lot of information that's not before us. Do we have an idea of when we might want to bring it back? I know folks in the community sort of want a resolution.

Mayor Lago: I would love to bring it back at the next Commission meeting after we have formerly invited the Doctor one last time to the committee.

Commissioner Menendez: I think that's fair.

Mayor Lago: I think its important to send that message and I'd like to do it through the committee itself and maybe we can draft a letter from the Commission or from the Manager's office requesting that she come and speak and join us, join our community.



Commissioner Menendez: And by the way, with regards to the item before I mentioned having the Gables Village and Summerset dialogue, if its okay with my colleagues, I'd like to serve as the liaison between those two groups to sort of facilitate a conversation, if that's alright with everyone.

Mayor Lago: Perfect.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: I just wanted to give you some information in regard to timing, so you know what to expect. So, the next SCRC meeting, I believe is November 19<sup>th</sup>. The school districts redistricting needs to be done before the end of the year, so I don't know that this – and the public input period would be over by the end of this week. So just so you have all that information, I don't know that its going to come back with enough time to do anything about the redistricting.

Vice Mayor Mena: Do you know if this is under consideration?

Ms. Levi-Garcia: No, its not, to my knowledge its not, because I've seen the draft maps and that area remains in that district.

Commissioner Fors: And I just want to clarify for me listening, so it doesn't get lost, that at the end of the day we are just talking about here is, not a decision, but rather a resolution to simply urge those drawing the maps.

Vice Mayor Mena: Recommendation.

City Attorney Ramos: Correct. That's true for both, actually.

Commissioner Fors: May or may not get disregarded. Since it's a resolution it doesn't necessarily need to be before the close of public comment. We put a resolution out there, mail it out, we hope that somebody will read it and take it into consideration.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: So next step we'll invite her to the next SCRC meeting and just go from there.

Vice Mayor Mena: By the way, last quick point. I presume there's people, we know there's people that don't live in Coral Gables that attend schools located in Commissioner Rojas' district, right.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Yes – absolutely. Most of her schools are in magnet.

Vice Mayor Mena: Those individuals would continue to be in the exact same situation as Mr. Joseph and the people that live in this area, because the school their child attends would continue to be in Commissioner Rojas' district.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: I see your point.

Vice Mayor Mena: So, let's just kind of, at the end of the day the school districts don't line up with...

Mayor Lago: It's the simple fact that we talked about. I think our numbers are around 13 percent of Coral Gables residents send their children to Coral Gables public schools.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: To the high schools specifically.

Mayor Lago: To the high schools, that's fine, but the point is, what would be the lower schools. What do you think the number is at, 20 percent?

Ms. Levi-Garcia: I think the numbers are much higher.

Mayor Lago: Say 20 percent? You think its 25 percent, 30 percent? Still 70 percent if not more of the kids that attend public schools, and I have no issues with it at all are not Coral Gables residents. So, it goes to the Vice Mayor's point that, I just want to be very, very careful, we are talking about other elected officials here. I want to give them the opportunity to come and visit, this is the committee, have a conversation with our committee. Our committee is very thoughtful. We spent about an hour and-a-half at the meeting, and it was very fruitful. We had probably about ten points, we only covered about seven, because we ran out of time, and I think there is an opportunity to really share and have the Doctor join. She is part of the City of Coral Gables. So, I think we should formerly invite her again, Sam Joseph mentioned, and Mr. Fernandez mentioned, she's been invited before, doesn't hurt to try one more time.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Agreed.

Vice Mayor Mena: We also have Coral Gables residents that attend schools outside of the City of Coral Gables. My point is, everybody has a School Board representative and if that representative is not addressing their needs at the school where their children attend, they should take that up with that representative and they should have every right and expectation that they have responsiveness from their elected official regardless of who it is. Again, regardless of what happens with this, because I don't know frankly, that this is going to get done one way or another even regardless of what we recommend or urge, we still need to solve the issue and make sure that the people that feel that they are, the word that was used was disenfranchised, feel like they have an audience with their representative, and so, let's make sure we get that done.

Ms. Levi-Garcia: Thank you.

Vice Mayor Mena: Thank you.