

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting**  
**Agenda Item F-3**  
**May 20, 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**

**Acting City Manager, Joe L. Gomez**  
**City Attorney, Cristina Suárez**  
**City Clerk, Billy Urquia**

**Public Speaker(s)**

**Maria Cruz**

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**Agenda Item F-3 [6:04 p.m.]**

A Resolution of the City Commission rescinding Resolution No. 2025-29 which directed the City Manager to develop an “Expedited Permit Review Services Program” for a maximum twelve-month trial period, providing for an effective date.  
(Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

City Attorney Suárez: F-3 is a resolution of the City Commission rescinding resolution number 2025-29, which directed the City Manager to develop an expedited permit review services program for a maximum 12-month trial period; providing for an effective date.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. I put this on the agenda because I think it's critically important, and I wanted to talk a little bit about what's happening here in the City and really have a conversation about truly moving the City forward, and there's only one way. And that is by doing it holistically. So, I'm moving to rescind the proposed expedited permit program before it is implemented in order to uphold the values of equity, fairness, and integrity in our City's permitting process. While the intention may have been to improve turnaround times, the approach of allowing applicants to pay premium for faster service undermines the principles of equal access to essential City services. Residents should not have to pay for VIP treatment from their own government. Let's be clear, if permits are taking too long, then the real solution is to address the root cause, the inefficiencies within the system, not to create a workaround that only those with the financial means can access. We should be focused on treating the disease, not the symptom. Fixing internal delays for everyone, not just for those who can pay more, ensures a stronger, more entrusted public process. There is also a risk of creating perverse incentives. By tying revenues to faster service, we inadvertently incentivize the slowing down of standard service in order to drive more applicants into the higher fee, expedited lane. We've seen a real-world example of this with Disney's introduction of the paid Genie system, which promised shorter waits for those who paid more. But in practice, actually increased the wait times for standard guests. We cannot allow the same inequitable logic to take root in our City operations. The City of Coral Gables already assesses permitting fees that support the operational cost of reviewing and processing applications. Adding an expedited tier introduces a two-tiered system where the speed of service is determined not by need or compliance, but by purchasing power. That is fundamentally inconsistent with our obligation to serve all residents equally. In addition, it is important to note that the proposed expediting program is not free. I want to repeat that again. Polito Cortadito said it was free. It's not free. The consultants working on expediting services will be paid an hourly rate plus an additional 12.5 percent surcharge for processing. Instead, our focus should be to remain on improving overall service delivery for everyone. That work is already underway. I want to be clear. I want everyone to listen to this. That work is already underway. The City contracted consultants to conduct a comprehensive customer feedback initiative including on-site intercepts, surveys, and focus groups to assess how well the Building Division is meeting expectations. That feedback is feeding directly into a three-phase operational and staffing analysis that will guide improvements in staffing, resource allocation, and policy changes. Once completed, this analysis will allow us to streamline operations, establish clear performance benchmarks, and issue permits more efficiently without the need for a pay-to-play model. Based on Phase 2 findings, we'll also reassess the current permit fee structure to ensure it supports these important -- without creating inequity. Rescinding the

expedited permit program now demonstrates our commitment to a thoughtful, data-driven approach that centers around fairness, efficiency, and long-term improvement over quick fixes. Let's get this right for everyone. So, that is my intent. And now, with Peter Iglesias, who led us through the digitizing of our entire city and also going paperless in our permit review process, I think it's the right time to finish this three-phase study, which should be done in a few months, and get to work -- and get to work on hiring more people, finding efficiencies, and addressing our needs in a way that is holistic and addresses the root of the problem, not creates more problems. Before we start, do we have any public comment?

City Clerk Urquia: Yes, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: All right.

City Clerk Urquia: Ms. Maria Cruz.

Maria Cruz: Maria -- Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. Something is really wrong. I thought, according to Robert's Rules, the people that could bring back something were the ones that voted in favor of it, not the people that voted against it. I may be a little off because I haven't opened the book, but I will when I get home. I think this is another attempt to be vindictive and to try to erase history. The only problem is that everybody knows it was proposed, everybody knows that it sounded very good, everybody knows that it was going to start, everybody knows that everybody involved thought it was a great idea, and the way it was presented, it was absolutely great because the people who were participating in that would get the benefit of an outside expeditor, like other people use, like Suramy Cabrera does for some people, like Manny does for some people, and the others will benefit because there will be less people in the queue, and they will get there faster than they're getting in now. We want to claim transparency; we want to make sure that we're explaining for everybody. Just read what it was proposed. It was passed here. It's part of the minutes. All you have to do is read it, and you will see that if it had come from some other person, maybe it would have been a good project. But since it came from Melissa Castro, it was not good.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

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

Mayor Lago: All right. We'll close for the comment. You'll move it?

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'll move it.

Mayor Lago: Anyone have a second?

Commissioner Lara: Second.

Mayor Lago: All right. Madam Vice Mayor?

Vice Mayor Anderson: Quickly, just on the point of Robert's Rules, I did do the quick research, and the rules do allow a new board that wishes to rescind a prior board's motion to do so. So, I'm not concerned about that issue. Now, of the folks that have written, all of us, and I've responded to everyone except for maybe someone that emailed me this morning, over 95 percent of the people did not know it was going to cost an additional fee. Over 95 percent of the people did not know that this is not the expedited permit program that the City currently provides for residents for emergency issues at no additional cost or fee. Over 95 percent of the people didn't realize that it's not the mobile permitting service that this Commission provides for individuals that need that service, whether disabled, or whether they're elderly, or other circumstances. On every single one of them that responded back to me of that 95 percent did not want to pay an extra fee. They would like the City Manager to identify the issues that currently exists in our Development Services Department. We know that things went from -- we're going from basically crayons to perfume in there, from going from paper to computer. It takes some time to do that. Then we had an election, and we had a lot of morale drop after a city manager was summarily fired, after the hostile work environment resulted in a situation where many of our best and our brightest left. We need time to rebuild the team. That's what I asked of the residents, to give us time to rebuild this team. In my process of knocking doors, I was able to identify issues that existed. I passed that on to the City Manager's Office, and adding it to the list of the items that the consultant is addressing where we have deficiencies in service, so that we can improve upon the system from within without charging residents more. And the plan itself, the expediting permitting program is limited in scope. It's not every -- every item a homeowner can have looked at. Those are my comments. And for that, I'm in favor of rescinding the extra fee program and improving our existing programs.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Commissioner Lara?

Commissioner Lara: Yes. So, while I applaud Commissioner Castro for coming up with what she believed was a solution to a problem, and she has unique expertise, right, in permitting, I don't believe that we've identified the root of the problem. So, it's like taking a guess in a medicine cabinet and we have a headache, which colored pill makes sense to take as opposed to identifying the one that identifies the solution. So, I mean, it sounds very good, but like at one point, I remember not long ago, we thought it sounded pretty good to socially distance during COVID or wearing a cloth mask was going to make sense during COVID, right? But then in retrospect, it really wasn't such a good idea. I believe -- and I'm not going to take up the time because it's late in the day -- that what Vice Mayor and the Mayor said make a lot of sense to me, that we have to focus on identifying what the problem is. And it feels like a no-brainer too, because we already have a study underway, right? I mean, we talked about this yesterday, right? You said there's a study underway that focuses on this. So, it sounds, it feels premature before we actually -- we get a feedback or a reading from the diagnostic tool that we're using, right? So, that's one. And then number two, you know, where we are is kind of mind scrambling that we know at one point we had Iglesias as the Manager, then Parjus as the Acting, then Rojas as the new Manager, then Parjus again as another Manager, and then Mr. Gomez here as the Acting, and then now we're coming all the way back to Peter Iglesias again. You see, this was a keystone pulled and like an avalanche is coming down of problems over the last two years. It is time to stabilize it at the top. I think we have accomplished that today. And then allowing the new Manager in conjunction with the anticipated receipt of a report identifying what the problems are at the permitting site, right, is the most prudent and efficient way to go about getting it done right. At least give the person who's coming back an opportunity to focus on it with the benefit of somebody that's been hired specifically to find out what the problems are. And in the end, right, this -- I still think this is consistent with the will of the people, because a lot of this at the time, a lot of ideas that went into play over the last several years were -- yeah, they were enacted by this Commission, but like one of the Commissioners is -- was resoundingly defeated at the ballot box because the residents rejected the manner in which and the basis on which he voted for things that we have been -- at least I have -- been taking the time to undo and put it back into where it should be, which is the way that the residents wanted it, as they've spoken at the ballot box. Some have referred to me as a swing vote. Well, I'm swinging today. So, I'm not supportive of this pilot program for the reasons stated.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Yes, ma'am.

Commissioner Castro: Commissioner Lara, you campaigned on being an independent voice, and I completely believe that. So, I'm going to plead with you that after presenting my presentation, maybe you will open your eyes to information maybe you are not aware of, and how this program is really going to function. Because there's a lot of misconception out there. I am an expert in this field. I've worked on this very hard for a year and a half in the best interest of the City. I have 50 emails right here in support. I think everybody in the Commission has gotten it. Billy, can you please put the presentation? Okay. Expedited Permit Review Service Program. Making permitting faster, smarter, and more efficient by me. Can you move to the next page? Oh. Okay. This is -- this program is not a program to go ahead and fix the Building Department. This is a parallel program and it's a pilot program to prove a concept that we can go ahead and do it. Addressing a real problem, permit delays are one of the top complaints from residents and contractors. Staffing shortages and turnovers have worsened backlogs. Residents deserve options, especially when time is of essence. A simple, optional solution. It's a voluntary program for residents in commercial interior remodels. Offers faster turnaround times through a dedicated expedited queue. The turnaround time is five days. Powered by City-approved partner reviewers, not City employees. What does that mean? That means that while our partners are reviewing the plans, the City has less plans to review, which means that the people who -- the residents who are applying for permits and are not paying a fee, their service is getting better and faster without paying anything. Which also means that the people who opt in to pay the 15 percent -- and it's not hourly, it's 15 percent. It's not hourly plus 12 percent; it's 15 percent of the permit cost. Those people are -- it's a win-win, both the City and the people who opt in are getting faster service. This is not a substitute to fix the Building Department. This is just an option to have, and it's a pilot program. If it doesn't work in three months, in five months, we take it off. But why would you kill it from the beginning without even giving it a chance? It's funded by an optional 15 percent on top of the regular permit fee. This is optional. We're not imposing this on anyone. And besides the fact that it's optional, it's already improving the queue of our normal building process, which again, it's a win-win for the Building Department and for the people who pay the 15 percent. Let's clear up some misconceptions. I've received some emails saying from Vice Mayor that they were copied and the Mayor saying that it's politically -- this is not political, it's policy driven, service focused and professionally vetted. It is not mandatory. We're not imposing this fee on anyone. It's an option you get to choose, not a replacement for standard permitting at all, and it's not privatization or outsourcing. How it works, step-by-step. You apply for the permit, the applicant selects the expedited review option if they qualify for it. Each review cycle is completed within

five business days, which, guys, like we would be the example of permitting in the City of Coral Gables if we are able to obtain this. This is a guaranteed five business day turnaround. This doesn't only benefit our residents, but it also benefits the small businesses on Miracle Mile and Giralda that are trying to get a permit and sometimes go out of business when they put all their life savings into a building, and the permit takes two to three years, and they can't do anything. This is interior. Those are all those build outs. People can move people -- companies can move -- or the business owner can move in faster by having a five-day turnaround. This really, really helps the City and our constituents and our business owners. Permit is routed to our partner reviewers, not City staff. In other words, we're not putting these expedited reviews before residents that are not paying. This is why I built this system this way, to be able to separate it so that nobody goes in front of the people that are not paying. And in return, their permits are being reviewed a lot faster. City staff remains focused on standard permits, which now move faster too. Applicant receives faster feedback and quicker approval. For 15 percent -- if you ask anybody in this industry, for 15 percent, a lot of people are going to opt in for this. This is really good for our city. Please give me a chance to prove my theory, to prove that this program works. This is not a replacement for anything else. Everything else can continue. This is an option that could really, really improve our local businesses and residents. Everybody wins. Residents who choose expedited review get permits faster so projects can start sooner. Residents who stick with the standard review benefit from shorter wait times since expedited permits go to a separate team. City staff have fewer permits to handle so they can focus and provide a better service. I think that's something that we all want. The City overall gets more efficient without hiring more staff or increasing taxes. Bottom line, this program helps everyone, not just the ones that opt in. Build with safeguards. Partner reviews are pre-approved professionals already working within the City. They work along -- parallel to us. We already use these people. They went through the procurement process. They were picked. I didn't choose them. Same code, same standards, same quality as internal City reviews. I voluntarily sacrificed doing permitting in Coral Gables. I voluntarily stopped permitting in Coral Gables a little less than a year ago, not because I had to, but because I chose to, to avoid the conflict of interest or the appearance of an interest. What has been approved? The pilot program was approved in the Commission on 4/11/2025. This program was already approved. The fee schedule is 15 percent. It is the final step for implementation. The program is ready to launch once the fee schedule is approved. We're ready to go. What you may have heard versus the facts, misconceptions. The program doesn't exist. The Commission already approved the pilot. It's only awaiting the fee schedule. It forces residents to pay more. It's 100 percent optional. Standard permitting remains unchanged and available. It benefits a few at the expense of others. It



actually improves turnaround times for everyone by offloading work. It's a private company takeover. It's a City managed partnership using professionals already contracted. Commissioner Castro profits from this. I haven't done Coral Gables -- I haven't done business in Coral Gables for nearly a year by choice. This is political, not policy. This is a resident focused solution created to fix a broken process and restore the trust in City services. Okay. We promised to listen. Now we must deliver. We have voices from across Coral Gables. Make it easier. From Michael, "Appalled that you're trying to recall the new permit process. What are you thinking?" Brenda, "There are no downsides to this program. I hope all Commissioners support it." Jane, "As an elderly resident, I am horrified in the deficiency of this current system." Valerie, "One of the best citizen-centric ideas the City has had in years." Steven -- real voices. Again, this is not politics. This is about helping residents. Concerned resident letter. "I cannot think of one reason why Mayor Lago would want to block this." Diana, "We need a better system. Make the expedited permit program a reality." Memo, "I built my house over 30 years ago, permitting was broken then and it's worse now." Joseph, "The time to act is now." This program doesn't take anything away from its residents. It adds a faster optional path for those who need it. It's designed to ease the burden on City staff and speed up process for everyone. Delaying or rescinding it means going back to the same broken system, one that frustrates residents and strains staff. Coral Gables is known for its innovation and excellence in this chance by -- in this chance to lead by example. Let's approve the fee schedule and launch the solution our residents have been waiting for. This program didn't come from politics. It came from listening to residents. And they've made it clear, do not rescind the program. Let it launch. Let it work. Let it help. This is a pilot program. And I'm really pleading to all the members of this Commission. I have worked so, so, so hard. Can I take this off? No? You can...

City Clerk Urquia: Cable TV can remove the PowerPoint.

Commissioner Castro: I really have worked so, so hard. I've gave up and sacrificed a lot of my life to be and do things that have to do with permitting for this Commission. And I know that for some people it's personal, but for me, this is what our constituents really, really need. And if not, I would have not sacrificed so much of it to do it. And it breaks my heart that we're in this situation right now. Because I almost feel like this is targeted. But this is so, so good. So good for businesses, for Coral Gables, for residents, and for me to be right here basically begging the Commission. Please do not make this decision. Please, this is in the best interest of our residents.



Mayor Lago: Thank you. Thank you very much. Commissioner, have you spoken already?

Vice Mayor Anderson: I did. I'll just do...

Mayor Lago: All right. Hold on.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'll do a quick moment.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner Fernandez? Or did you speak already?

Commissioner Fernandez: No, I haven't. I haven't spoken. I'll be brief. What I've heard from residents is we need something, and we need something now. I understand there may be a process in place to do a study, get results. That's still months away. I think this is something that can deliver quick results for residents right now. There was a comment about the Genie Pass at Disney and how this compares to that. It really doesn't because you're not in the same line, you're not riding the same ride, you basically have a different ride that you're riding. So, you have less people in the line. And if it is something that somebody wants to pay for an expedited process, I'll be honest, when I was canvassing, one of the things people would tell me was, tell me if I can pay more to make sure the process gets done quicker. And that's -- that's an issue that they've had for a long time. So, I will not be supportive of rescinding the program. I'm supportive of finding a solution that is a permanent solution that is internal, but I think we need a solution now that offers a solution for the residents who are currently applying or in the queue and are just hitting a wall.

Mayor Lago: So, let me respond to a few things. Again, great presentation. I'm going to tell you how I feel, and you know, again, this is not personal. When I negotiated -- when I was tasked to negotiate the contract of the severance for Mr. Parjus, you said something very clearly. Vince, I don't trust you to negotiate. And the Mayor, who was entitled, as per the Charter, and the City Attorney will tell you, you stepped over and you had Kirk Menendez do that because you didn't trust me. I don't trust you to have a permitting company, an outside consulting company, and to be in control of this. I know how many times you've been involved in the Permitting Department, and I think that it's, again, incumbent of me to ensure that this doesn't move forward. I think what we need to do is do it the right way. And doing it the right way is completing the study that we paid money for, finishing it, seeing what our needs are, and offering a service that raises all ships, not

just raises the ships for a few people. And I think that, to me, is what's in the best interest of the City Coral Gables, and that's why I'm going to be voting to rescind it and do it the right way. Because at the end of the day, we need to cure and address the issue that we're facing here in the Building Department, not just provide a fast lane for people to hop on and say, all right, well, I paid an extra 15 percent, and I resolved my issues, but everybody else is still in the back. So, Vice Mayor?

Vice Mayor Anderson: Just I understand that some of the email messages that was were received was put up; some of the replies were not.

Mayor Lago: And by the way, I forgot to mention -- I'm sorry to interrupt you. All those emails, I responded to every single one, and I received from many, many, many, many, many. It said, thank you for clarifying. I didn't know there was a cost. I didn't know what was -- what was the actual intent. I didn't know there was a study ongoing that, again, would provide, you know, real guidance for our Permitting Department and to make sure that we can hopefully address this issue soon enough. Sorry about that, Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, I'll just read verbatim a couple of the replies. "Thanks for clarifying that. It was not knowledge," speaking of specifically about the fees. There's another one of the individuals that you put up on the board, or put up in your display. "Thank you for this reply. I agree the residents should not have to pay extra for the expedited services. I trust you will monitor the improvements in the permit services and revisit the proposed option, if necessary." It's early on. We just had an election. The Manager's Office has been working diligently on this. Let's give them a chance to make it work. I know they can do it.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor, as you just stated, you don't trust me. In other words, you're saying this is personal?

Mayor Lago: It's not.

Commissioner Castro: This is personal. This is personal, you just stated it. I mean, if you go back a couple seconds when you were talking, this is personal. You know, I don't have...

Mayor Lago: So, you're saying you wouldn't let me negotiate the contract with the manager because it's personal back then?

Commissioner Castro: No, no, no. But why would you mention?

Mayor Lago: (INAUDIBLE).

Commissioner Castro: You're interrupting me, but okay. Why would you mention that?

Mayor Lago: Because I don't. Because you make money in the permitting business.

Commissioner Castro: I don't work in the City of Coral Gables.

Mayor Lago: I know you don't because you started a separate company called the ME Expeditors of Coral Gables, and you moved everything underneath that.

Commissioner Castro: That is not -- that is -- no. I don't -- it doesn't belong to me. I have nothing to do with it, okay. This person right here has integrity and dignity. When I say I'm going to do something, I do it. I have no record, no history of any wrongdoing. Most of my life I've spent serving the public and serving my patients and serving my family, okay? Never have I been caught up in anything to even say that I would be lying about that.

Mayor Lago: So, moving on, we have a motion and a second. I call for a vote.

Commissioner Castro: No.

Commissioner Fernandez: No.

Commissioner Lara: Yes.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

(Vote: 3-2)