

**City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item C
May 25, 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

Assistant City Manager, Ed Santamaria

City Attorney, Miriam Ramos

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Howard Berman

Martha Shiverick

Frank Corbishley

Annie Betancourt

Agenda Item C [9:19 a.m.]

Public Comments

Mayor Lago: So, let's move on to the public comment section.

City Clerk Urquia: Okay. So, just -- first speaker today is Rabbi Howard Berman. Rabbi.

City Commission Meeting

May 25, 2021

Agenda Item C - Public Comments

Mayor Lago: Rabbi, good morning. We are blessed to have you.

Howard Berman: Mr. Mayor and Commissioners, we are representing an interfaith coalition of clergy here in Coral Gables. I am Rabbi Howard Berman. My colleagues.

Martha Shiverick: I'm the Reverend Martha Shiverick, from Riviera Presbyterian Church.

Frank Corbishley: Frank Corbishley, Episcopal Chaplain at the University of Miami.

Mr. Berman: And we are here this morning to share a concern regarding an item on the agenda this morning, the resolution that Mayor Lago has introduced revisiting the question of the renaming of Dixie Highway. This is a question that we as the religious leaders of this community feel strongly about. And we have shared our concerns in letters, personal letters to each of you, and we do very much appreciate the respectful responses we have had from Mayor Lago and from Commissioners Anderson and Menendez. And we want to read the text of our letter into the public record today in preparation for your deliberations on this very important matter later in the meeting.

Ms. Shiverick: The City of Coral Gables was founded almost 100 years ago by the visionary developer, George Merrick, whose views on race were considered particularly progressive for his time. However, in the 1920s and 30s, as Coral Gables grew, many exclusionary practices were an accepted part of society in the segregationist South. Racial and religious restrictions were common throughout our community. Fortunately, forward-thinking citizens and Commissioners led the change that brought full inclusion of all people, regardless of race or religion. Today, we look back at those practices and see how far we have come.

Mr. Corbishley: We write today to advocate for another important change in our community. The historic Dixie Highway was the artery that brought people from the Midwest to the sunny South, as Carl Fisher and George Merrick were developing new communities in South Florida. The name

Dixie was meant to invoke a vision of a warm, welcoming climate and a new way of life. Unfortunately, the word "dixie" also has deeper and grimmer symbolism in American history. It evokes a romanticized celebration of cultural traditions of the Old South that included both slavery and the legacy of Jim Crow racism. It has come to represent the racist exclusionary values of a white supremacist movement that seeks to keep our country divided.

Mr. Berman: Having one of our principal highways named Dixie is particularly hurtful for many in our Coral Gables community, both white and black. Just as leaders in the past have made changes that looked toward the future, we ask you to join all the other municipalities in Miami-Dade County to change the name of Dixie Highway in tribute to the great abolitionist and leader of the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman. The proposal to rename the road in honor of Harriet Tubman, who is a heroine in the history of American democracy, led many people out of slavery is a particularly appropriate gesture. We ask you to please take this opportunity today in your deliberations to help right a wrong and help Coral Gables move forward into its second proud century as a leader of progress and a leader of civic life in South Florida. Yours faithfully, Rabbi Howard Berman of the Shalom Collaborative, Reverend Frank Corbishley, Episcopal Chaplain of the University of Miami, Rabbi Jonathan Fisch of Temple Israel -- Temple Judea, Deacon Einstein Gonzalez, St. James Lutheran Church, and the Reverend David Guss, St. Mark's Lutheran Church.

Ms. Shiverick: Also, the Reverend Dr. Laurinda Hafner, the Senior Pastor at Coral Gables Congregational United Church of Christ, the Reverend Aaron James Lauer, the Pastor for Emerging Generations at Coral Gables Congregational United Church of Christ, the Reverend Rosemary Noga Welton, Associate Pastor of Pastoral Care at Riviera Presbyterian Church, the Reverend Martha M. Shiverick, Pastor at Riviera Presbyterian Church, Rabbi Judith Siegal at Temple Judea, and Father Juan J. Sosa, Pastor at St. Joseph's Church.

Mr. Berman: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for your comments. God bless all of you.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, next we have Ms. Annie Betancourt.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, Ms. Betancourt, the floor is yours.

Annie Betancourt: Good morning. Good morning, Commissioners. Beautiful day in South Florida, isn't it? Mayor Lago and members of the City Commission, I am here today to speak in favor of Agenda Item G-9. As stated in your backup information regarding this resolution, this is an honorary designation which must be passed by each affected local government prior to the erection of the signage. Thus far, nine of the ten municipalities affected in Miami-Dade County resolution already -- Dade County resolution passed number 168-20. It passed resolution in all the cities in support of the Harriet Tubman designation. Only our city is spending. While serving in the Florida Legislature back in 1995, I sponsored naming Southwest 72nd Street, also known as Sunset Drive, or State Road 986, as Marjorie Stoneman Douglas. It was an honorary designation as well. To our average motorist, it is still Sunset Drive. And to transit engineers, it's State Road 986. Then again, in 1998, the Legislature designated the Florida Turnpike as the Ronald Reagan Turnpike, in honor of Ronald Reagan, the nation's 40th president. I respectfully request your affirmative vote and not be distracted by divisive language that tarnishes the business of government, our City Beautiful. This is a no-brainer and I appreciate your consideration. On another note, unrelated, I do want to commend City staff because each time I called any department -- be it Public Works or Solid Waste -- I always get a friendly attitude on the voice of the City staff, and that's simply on a separate note. I want to take the opportunity to thank the City Manager and the staff for being so kind. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

Vice Mayor Mena: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for being with us today.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, that's it for in-person comments. We do have one speaker on Zoom. It's Ms. Maria Cruz.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Cruz, the floor is yours. Good morning.

Maria Cruz: Can you hear me?

Mayor Lago: Yes, ma'am.

Ms. Cruz: Alright, here we go. I -- it says here start my video. What does that mean?

Vice Mayor Mena: We can't see you, Maria.

Mayor Lago: We can't see you.

Commissioner Anderson: We can't see you, but we (INAUDIBLE).

Ms. Cruz: Oh, okay. Alright, here we go. I haven't seen that before. Okay, Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. I'm here again to discuss some of the things that concern the residents, the taxpayers of Coral Gables. There are several items. There are several concerns, and they all relate to employees. We find our employees or people that are hired to work in this city to be magnificent in general, but there are some that are not. And there are some that continue doing what they think is best without any regards to what we want. That's number one. We have some of those employees that are very disrespectful to the people that live in the city, whether they are homeowners or not, whether they're taxpayers or not. They find some of these employees -- probably the same ones -- are being very disrespectful and condescending to them. Now, some of the stuff that I've been bringing up several times continue to happen. So, thinking last night, some of us gather and thought that perhaps if the employees are doing what we do not want them to do

and we keep complaining about it -- and we send emails, we send texts. We talk to elected officials. We talk to Administration and they keep doing it, there could only be one reason -- or maybe two reasons. Number one, the Administration lets them do whatever they want because they are -- in the words of some of the people that were sitting with me -- protected somehow, or they're doing what the Administration tells them to do and they're caught between a rock and a hard place because we're saying something and the Administration is telling them to do something else. The bottom line is, when we contact City employees, we do expect them to answer in a timely manner. We do not expect to hear excuses. "I was too busy." "There were so many things going." "I'm not working at the City Hall, you know. I'm working from home." "My phone light didn't light up, so I didn't know I had a message." Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. We expect them to answer in a timely manner, and I don't think that's too much to ask. We also expect new employees to be maybe trained, educated on what City of Coral Gables residents expect, not what they bring from other places. I do realize that some municipalities are so large or so uncaring that they do not expect the employees to be transparent, that they do not expect the employees to be truthful when they are asked questions, or when they are requesting whatever information they require or they need. But in this municipality called Coral Gables, Florida, we do expect employees not to give us half-truths, but to give you -- to give us the truth, and to provide the information that we request, whether they want to or not. We're entitled to it. We're entitled to transparency, and we really -- it's getting to the point that we're getting a little concerned about whether, again, this is what the Administration expects them to do, or whether in reality, they're rogue and the Administration doesn't rein them in, whatever the reason. Employees in the City of Coral Gables work for the people that pay the taxes. And elected officials need to realize and maybe encourage the Administration to tell the employees to come through and not leave the residents hanging when they're expecting answers. And of course, we expect them to be respectful. And respectful doesn't mean only to important people. It means respectful to anyone and everyone that contacts the City. And that's my message for today.

Mayor Lago: Maria, thank you for being with us. Mr. Clerk.

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

Mayor Lago: Okay, perfect. Let's close the public comment section. I want to make sure that people are aware the public comment section is there for everyone in this community. We're willing to take as much comment as necessary. That's the reason why I placed it on the agenda a few years ago when we discussed this. If anybody has any interest, they're more than welcome to come and speak and they can speak as long as they'd like, as long as it's relevant to the City of Coral Gables.